



Original research article

Participation of interest groups in the activities of implementing the policy of active aging in the Moravian-Silesian Region

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Abstract

Introduction: Participation is one of the principles of social policy. The participation of the elderly in civic and political life reflects democratic principles and is formed primarily within the interests of interest groups, non-political or political organizations associated with older people.

Objectives: This paper focuses on analysing the method of participation of interest groups in the activities of implementing the policy of active aging in the municipalities of the Moravian-Silesian Region, and on revealing the relationships between interest groups and municipalities.

Methods: The data obtained in semi-structured interviews with 32 representatives of municipalities was analysed according to grounded theory. As a partial method of analysis, the method of creating clusters was used.

Results: There is an important role for interest groups associating the elderly, as well as other interest groups which are not focused on only on the elderly, in the implementation of active ageing policies. Associations are one of the main organizers of social events, educational, preventive, and sports activities aimed at the elderly. They are also an important player in the field of intergenerational cooperation.

Conclusions: The implementation of the policy of active aging is an issue at all levels of social policy in the European Union. The participation of main actors in this area is important for the success of the implemented measures. Associations should be given special attention by municipalities and higher levels of government.

Keywords: Interest groups; Participation, Population aging; Qualitative research; The policy of active aging

Introduction

The concept of civil society gained prominence in the late 20th century, but there is still no one common definition of this concept (Jinia et al., 2020). In the Czech Republic, it started to develop again after the fall of the communist government. It implies both the free association and activities of citizens outside the sphere of the state, and the development of the non-profit sector as a third sector that participates in public policies – alongside the market, family and state. A general feature of civil society is the ability to mobilize the enthusiasm and resources of citizens without coercion (Pospíšilová and Šťovíčková Jantulová, 2019). It motivates citizens to participate in shaping the environment in which they live, whether that be political participation or participation in social life. In the context of an aging population, participation promotes physical and mental health (Thomas, 2012), life satisfaction of older people, and helps to reduce the risk of intergenerational conflict (Hess et al., 2017).

The space belonging to civil society includes a wide range of organizations. Civil society organizations have earned a position in the area of development (Jinia et al., 2020). This research paper approaches the issue of classification of civil society organizations according to Frič (2016). His four-element categorization allows us to clearly distinguish the functional focus and pursued interest of a civil society organization. This typology also serves as an analytical tool for structuring organizations in the analysis of the research data. In the organized civil sector, NGOs have an irreplaceable role, often referred to as indicators of social development. They also play an essential role in the economy, as they are found in areas that serve the development of society as a whole (education, schooling, social services, health care, science and research, justice). They are also active in the field of support for interest groups. They support the association of people, and the development of social and political life (Krechovská et al., 2018). The basic elements of NGOs, according to Salamon and Anheier (1992), are institutionalization (organized) and formality; privacy (private); non-profit (non-profit); self-governing and independent.

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ence (self-governing), voluntary (voluntary). “Included here are membership associations, local community groups, clubs, health care providers, educational institutions, social service agencies, advocacy groups, foundations, self-help groups, and many more.” (Salamon and Anheier, 1997: 61)

Effective democracy is associated with the notions of participation and cooperation. Citizen participation and cooperation of stakeholders in governance is the foundation of democracy. This system can be imagined as a network of regional actors from the private, public, and non-profit sectors working together and participating jointly in regional development.

A fundamental prerequisite for the emergence of cooperation and participation is a positive attitude and support from local authorities.

The literature distinguishes between two forms of participation: civic participation and political participation. Furthermore, we can encounter the concepts of formal citizen participation (which is typically membership-based) and informal citizen participation (informal participation of citizens). Civic participation includes a wide range of non-political activities. Civic participation in a municipality represents activities through which citizens can participate in or be informed about what is happening in the municipality (Haken et al., 2016). Participation is considered a civil right that contributes to increasing people's acceptance of their own responsibility, and also contributes to finding more effective solutions to problems (Croft and Beresford, 2002). Participation is classified as an enforceable civil right in the European Union. Furthermore, participation is one of the key aspects of the concept of active aging (AA). This concept plays a significant role in shaping contemporary social policy at supranational, national, and local levels. In the European context, AA has been elaborated by Walker (2002, 2009). The WHO sees AA as an opportunity for participation, and if society provides these opportunities it improves the quality of life of older people (Zaidi and Howse, 2017). Quality of life touches many areas of human life (Gurková, 2011). For example, it can be related to health, relationships, environment, or leisure. AA encompasses a wide range of activities. In particular, there is a lack of agreement on the kinds of activities that should be considered when discussing active participation in later life (Boerio et al., 2021: 2). From the above, in the context of today's aging population and the building of a strong democratic society, the participation of older people within their natural environment is crucial, i.e., civic participation needs to be strengthened at the local level.

The aim of the study is to analyze the participation of interest groups in the activities of the implementation of the policy of active aging in the municipalities and districts of the Moravian-Silesian Region, and to reveal the relationships between interest groups and municipalities. The research aim was defined as follows: describe which interest associations in municipalities in the Moravian-Silesian Region are involved in the process of implementation of the policy of active aging and how they intervene in this process.

Materials and methods

The data obtained was analyzed according to constructivist grounded theory. The clustering method was used as a partial method of analysis. Clusters (groups) are formed based on the thematic overlap between the identified units. The verbatim transcripts were reread and analyzed using open coding procedures, and notes containing emerging interpretations and conceptualizations (Howard and Berg, 2016). The collected

data was analyzed using ATLAS.ti 8, a program that allows the complex hidden structure of the data and their interrelated meanings to be revealed.

Data collection was conducted using a semi-structured interview technique. The interviews were recorded and the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim (Morse et al., 2009). The selection of the research population was carried out using a simple purposive sampling method according to a set criterion (Miovský, 2006). The criterion for selecting informants was set as follows: an authorized representative of a municipality/urban district in the territory of the Moravian-Silesian Region. The collection of interviews was carried out by students of the follow-up master's degree program in social work (at the faculty of social studies of the University of Ostrava). The students gradually approached municipalities in the Moravian-Silesian Region with a request to participate in the research. Once 32 interviews were collected (10% of the total number of municipalities located in the Moravian-Silesian Region), the data were analyzed. The interviews were conducted in a safe environment so that the informant could be open. Due to the state of emergency declared by the government of the Czech Republic, some interviews were conducted online to guarantee the protection of the researcher and the informant. Prior to the start of the interview itself, the informant was informed about the purpose of the research and the possibility to interrupt or terminate his/her participation at any time. Each informant was assured that all data that could lead to the identification of the informant would be anonymized. The socio-demographic characteristics of the informants involved in the research can be seen in Table 1. One informant did not consent to the use of his/her data, so the table consists of information from 31 informants. Extracting this information formed the first part of the interviews, the second part was the core interview which focused on the research topic.

Table 1. Socio-demographic information of the research sample

Number of municipalities	31	Working position	Mayor	9
Number of women	25		Head of the Social Affairs Department	9
Number of men	6		Another representative of the municipality	3
Average age of the informants	48.9		Deputy Mayor	3
			Councilor	2
			Officer	4
Average length of work	8.23		Social worker	4
			Methodology specialist in the field of social services	1

Results

The transcribed data was then analyzed using open coding techniques in accordance with Strauss and Corbin (1999: 43) as part of an analysis that deals with labeling and categorizing concepts through careful study of the data. As part of open coding, we repeatedly and rigorously read the texts and broke them down into smaller units of meaning to which we assigned concept codes. The open coding uncovered 129 codes. The clustering method was chosen as a sub-analysis meth-

od. During analysis with the clustering method, we followed Mioviský (2006) in order to group and conceptualize certain utterances. These clusters (groups) were formed based on the thematic overlap (similarity) between the identified units. This process produces more general, inductively formed categories, whose inclusion in a given group (cluster) is associated with certain recurring features, characteristic arrangements, etc. During the analysis, the codes obtained were revised, gradually creating an index of codes that were ordered according to meaning units. In this way, we compiled 9 clusters (see Table 2) containing 129 codes obtained during open coding.

Table 2. Overview of formed clusters

Number of cluster	Name of cluster	Number of codes
1.	Associations for the elderly in municipalities	14
2.	Senior club	19
3.	Activities for the elderly offered by municipalities	15
4.	Participation of the elderly	10
5.	Cooperation of actors in the field of the policy of active aging	15
6.	Educational and leisure activities	19
7.	Barriers	4
8.	Other actors associated with the elderly	12
9.	Support of associations by the municipality	13

Cluster 1 – Associations for the elderly in municipalities

The cluster contains the types of associations that focus on the elderly and that also offer membership to them. According to the statements of the different information partners, 14 types of associations for the elderly or other interest groups were uncovered. There was a senior club in 30 out of 32 municipalities involved in the research. Thus a senior club is the most common group to bring together elderly citizens in the municipalities. Based on this finding and the number of codes uncovered, we decided to classify senior clubs in a separate cluster and describe these clusters in more detail in cluster 2. Other significant actors are various sports clubs, among which the communication partners included Sokol (traditional sports and educational club), the football club, the Czech tourist club, etc. Volunteer firefighters and various women's groups also play a significant role in the villages. In addition, there are associations or clubs whose main focus is interest, leisure, and educational activities.

Cluster 2 – Senior club

This cluster was the most saturated with data. For this reason, we divided the cluster into several categories: (1) Role of the senior club in the village – The senior club is the main association in the implementation of the APS; The senior club is an asset to the village and the elderly; The senior club is a traditional association in the village; (2) Existence of the senior club and membership – Positive benefits of membership in the club; Existence of more senior clubs; No senior club; Disinterest in membership; The senior club was formed at the request of the citizens; The senior club was formed at the request of the village; (3) Activity of the senior club – The senior club is very active; The club is not so active anymore because the members

are getting older; The activities of the club are organized by its members; (4) Organization of events – The senior club organizes/attends social events; The senior club organizes volunteer activities; The senior club organizes education for the elderly; The senior club organizes hiking trips and parlour games.

According to the participants, the senior club is the main actor in the implementation of the policy of active aging in the municipality and has a long tradition. The existence of the club in the municipality is considered beneficial by the communication partners, as is membership in such a group. There are also statements from informants about the lack of interest of citizens to join the senior club, for which reason the average age of the members is getting older. As a result, the activity of the senior club is declining. The category (3) Activity of the senior club was the most saturated with data within cluster number 2. Communication partners talk about high activity and involvement in social and sporting events in the community. A major activity of the senior club is the organization of its own activities. Senior clubs discuss, approve, and plan a variety of activities at their meetings. The senior clubs cooperate with the municipal administration in this planning. They either participate in the organization of activities, or events are organized under the auspices of the municipal leadership. These statements were further confirmed by statements about the high activity of these clubs.

The last category of cluster 2, Organization of events, talks about the activities of the senior club in the social, cultural, and sporting life in the village and its surroundings. The most frequent are social events. Senior clubs are also involved in volunteering in the form of handicraft products that are produced at their joint meetings. Other clubs clean up public spaces. Senior clubs also organize activities such as hiking trips, playing parlour games in clubhouses, and organizing training for their members.

Cluster 3 – Activities for the elderly offered by municipalities

This cluster includes a variety of activities offered, organized, or otherwise supported by the municipality. Communication partners talked about various opportunities in the area of safety and prevention. Other important events for the elderly are cultural, sports, and social events organized by municipalities. Events organized by municipalities are often meetings where the main part of the program is complemented by a cultural performance. Congratulating jubilarians, which often happens at social gatherings, also fall into this category. A regular activity of the municipality is the organization of sightseeing and cultural trips for the elderly. The municipality also supports the activity of the elderly in the form of financial contributions and benefits, e.g., discounts on admission to events, the swimming pool, library fees, etc. According to the communication partners, the municipality takes good care of the elderly people and tries to prevent them feeling isolated. One of the tools to prevent the isolation of the elderly is the organization of events where intergenerational meetings take place. These meetings are created through cooperation with primary schools and other organizations and institutions. They try to provide the elderly with up-to-date information about what is happening in the municipality, and opportunities for involvement through other information channels.

Cluster 4 – Participation of the elderly

According to the statements of the communication partners, the elderly are active, and participate in social, sport, and cultural events in the village. The elderly are also active in sever-

al associations at the same time. To bring together more age categories, associations organize intergenerational meetings. In doing so, they participate in the policy of active aging, strengthening intergenerational ties, and establishing new contacts. The municipality encourages the participation of the elderly in the civic sector through work agreements, for example in the senior club, senior point, municipal maintenance, etc.

Cluster 5 – Cooperation of actors in the policy of active aging field

According to the statements of the communication partners, the most significant cooperation takes place between municipalities and associations. These two actors jointly coordinate events in the municipality, organizing social and cultural events for both older people and citizens of other age categories. The statements show a positive evaluation and a positive attitude of the municipality towards cooperation with local associations. The municipalities strengthen this cooperation through meetings and communication with other actors and citizens of the municipalities. These meetings are also informative. The associations provide positive feedback to the municipality as part of their cooperation. The municipality organizes meetings with citizens to pass on and obtain information. The communication partners report that the municipalities positively evaluate the suggestions from the citizens. Based on the requests, municipalities try to accommodate citizens of all age groups. There is also strong cooperation between different associations, organizations, and possibly emergency services. In their statements, the communication partners evaluate this cooperation positively and state that it is a good tool leading to non-institutionalization. Municipalities try to support the elderly to live as long as possible in their natural environment with the support of family, associations or outreach services. Municipalities located in the Moravian-Silesian Region often cooperate with municipalities located across the border with Poland. This extends the network of contacts and strengthens foreign cooperation between nearby regions.

Cluster 6 – Educational leisure activities

According to the informants, the associations offer various activities for the elderly, provide leisure activities, go on trips, and organize courses. At the same time, they support the elderly in the framework of the University of the Third Age.

Cluster 7 – Barriers

There are also obstacles to the implementation of active ageing policy, increased civic participation and the development of civil society. These barriers can be divided into structural and human barriers. Human barriers are the lack of interest of the elderly themselves to participate in any way in the village, and the lack of interest in joining local groups. According to the statements of the communication partners, the main problem is low financial support directed toward this area.

Cluster 8 – Other actors involving the elderly

In this cluster, the authors grouped other actors involved in the policy of active aging on the territory of the municipalities/city districts of the Moravian-Silesian Region. According to the statements of the communication partners, this is a whole list of organizations and services. According to the testimonies, the actors include the municipal police, the library, and NGOs providing social services. The municipal police take a role in education, prevention, and safety. Libraries organize educational events, facilitate the University of the Third Age,

lectures, handicraft workshops, etc. According to the statements of the communication partners, the library is mostly used by the elderly. The local churches, parishes, and other religious groups provide a space for meetings and events. If there is a senior point in the village, this is also an important actor. The elderly can receive a lot of information there; the staff provide advice, organize various events, etc.

Cluster 9 – Support of associations by the municipality

The result of the analysis showed that municipalities support registered social services and other associations, mainly financially. Communication partners report a high level of awareness among the elderly. Municipalities use many different methods, because they are aware that often seniors do not use the internet. The municipality spreads awareness about the activities of associations and social services via radio, the internet, Facebook, leaflets, and posters. The municipality applies for a subsidy for the operation of associations from the Moravian-Silesian Region. The municipality significantly cooperates with associations in the implementation of activities. The municipality provides the senior club with free premises if such premises are available in the municipality.

Diagram 1 shows the interdependence of the identified actors involved in the implementation of the active aging policy activities. Municipalities represent actors in the process of implementation of this policy at the lowest (local) level, which is influenced by European, national, and regional aging policies. The scheme highlights the important role of the municipality, elderly citizens, and associations. The Senior Citizens' Club is one of the most important actors of the active ageing policy and an important partner of the municipality in the implementation of the active ageing policy. Especially the senior club, these groups are the most important actors and partners of the municipality in the implementation of the APS. Financial support and citizens' interest in participation is also of significant importance. These two barriers are a challenge for further development in the implementation of APS at the local level. The analysis shows that sufficient financial support and active participation of citizens leads to an increase in the effectiveness of the implemented activities within the APS.

Discussion

The analysis of the data points to the important role of senior citizens' clubs and other interest groups in the process of implementing active ageing policy activities at the local level and the important position of these organisations in civil society. These associations are one of the main organizers of social events, educational, preventive, and sporting activities aimed at older people, as well as activities where intergenerational meetings take place. In this way, they significantly promote the participation of older people in society. The support for grassroots associations identified in this study includes tools defined to achieve a better quality of life for all (society as a whole). These include: optimizing opportunities in health, social participation, and safety (Sidorenko and Zaidi, 2013). Furthermore, it can be said that promoting and developing civil society is an effective way of fulfilling one of the objectives of the policy of active aging, which is to improve the quality of life of older people.

Traditional associations, such as senior clubs, volunteer fire brigades, and various sports groups predominate in the villages. The most frequent type of association was the club for the elderly. In larger municipalities or urban districts,

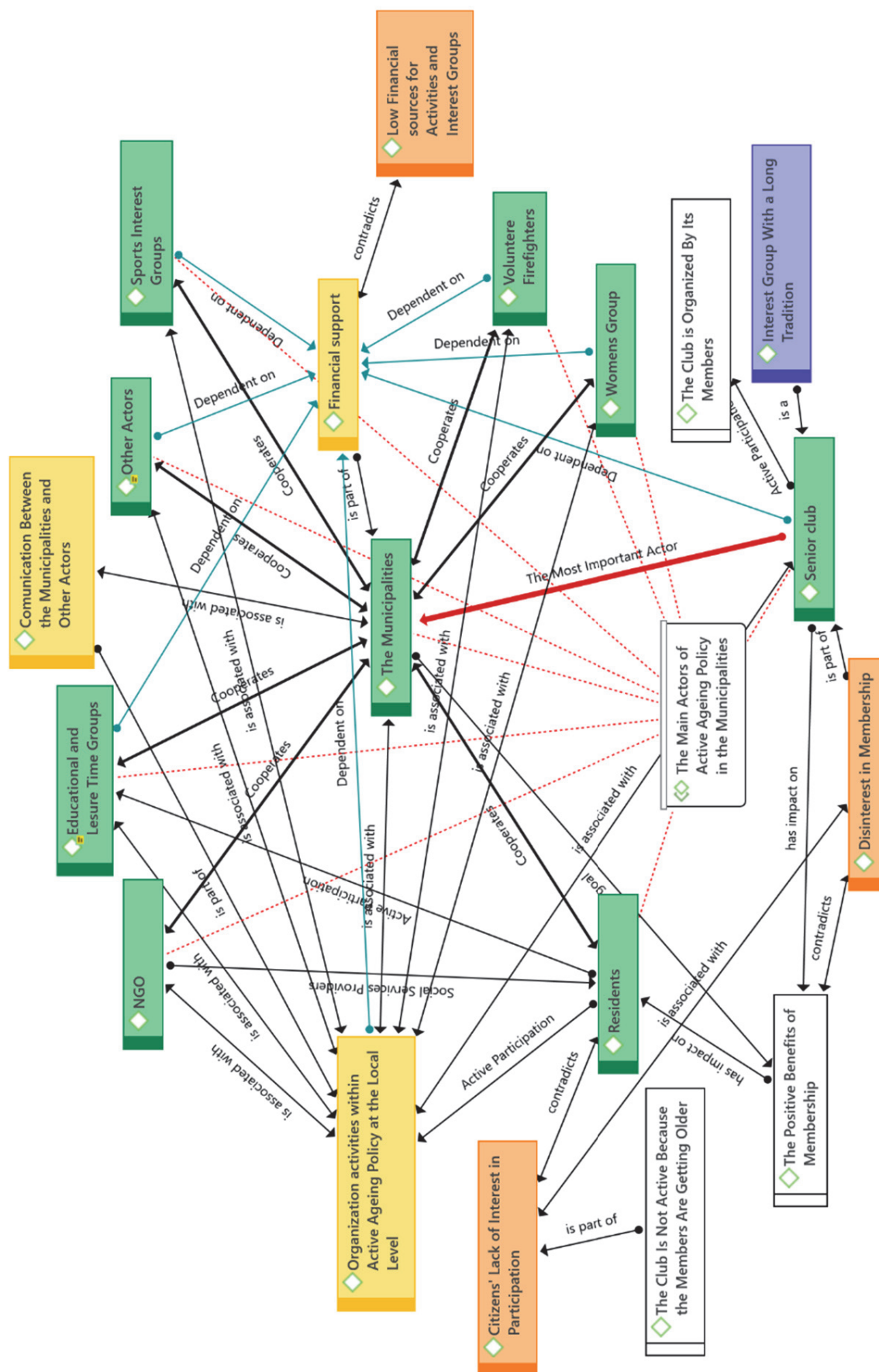


Diagram 1. Relations between actors

there are often several clubs for the elderly. According to the statements of the communication partners, these associations provide the majority of activities in and outside the municipality. Senior clubs work closely with municipal representatives to plan activities throughout the calendar year, and use this cooperation to inform the general public about their activities. This finding is consistent with the study by Binderkrantz et al. (2020), who identify interest groups as the main actor seeking media attention. Another study also confirms this, adding that through the media, interest groups seek attention for issues that matter to these groups. Further, through the media, interest groups seek to influence policy decisions, public opinion, and promote awareness of the organization (De Bruycker, 2019). Due to financial contributions and other benefits from the municipality, senior clubs are also important actors in the policy of active aging from the perspective of public administration and local government. This assertion is supported by the results of the analysis, which point to the promotion of non-institutionalization of the elderly, the promotion of living in a natural environment, as well as efforts on the part of municipalities to increase awareness, education, and engagement in civic life. Cheema (2013) highlights this role of civil society at the local level, where civil society is actively involved in community development, achieving sustainable development and access to basic social services. According to Dořičáková (2019), it is the social worker who works in a particular locality that can inform the current demand for social services. The social worker is the one who should look for ways to change the availability of social services. Due to the rapidly aging population, the need for quality health and social services will increase, especially for the elderly. The financial demands for social and health services will also increase. States will therefore have to spend more money on these services.

Senior clubs have their own organizational structures, thus strengthening and supporting civic engagement and participation in public affairs in the community. These associations have a chairperson, or several elected representatives, who communicate with organizations, associations, and municipalities. Another important contribution of the senior club is the activation of senior citizens who do not want to be directly involved but are interested in participating in the activities organized by the senior club. The analyzed data also shows the ability of cooperation between different units within and outside the municipality. This cooperation can take the form of organizing social, cultural, or sporting activities.

The Moravian-Silesian Region, due to its geographical location, is specific for cross-border cooperation, which is also implemented with the cooperation of associations and representatives of the municipalities concerned. According to the data

obtained, the cooperation of actors in the field of implementation of positive aging policy is at a good level. The cooperation is often long-term, working on the basis of an identified need on the part of the inhabitants of the municipality. According to the communication partners, the most limiting factor is the low financial support from the region and municipalities. Most of the associations do not generate any money, so they depend on membership fees, payment of individual activities by the participants themselves, and support from the municipality (financial contributions, provided premises, etc.).

While our study has covered 10% of all municipalities of the Moravian-Silesian region, we acknowledge some limitations of our research. Further research is needed to test and develop the findings of this study in other regions – to describe the situation throughout the Czech Republic. Another limitation of the research is the method of data collection. For many of the students who collected the data, this was their first contact with the field, which may have affected the quality of the data collected. The last identified limitation is that expert sources were only searched in English and Czech. Knowledge of other world languages could provide additional relevant studies on the topic.

Conclusions

The implementation of the policy of active aging is a topical issue at all levels of social policy within the European Union. The participation of key actors in this field is important for the success of the measures implemented. Special attention should be paid to associations of interest by municipalities and higher levels of government. According to the results of the analysis, the attention of the municipalities towards organizations of the elderly is at a good level. This cooperation is based on the existence of traditional associations and the changing post-modern society. The municipalities themselves are proactive, trying to find appropriate solutions to current problems and to prevent possible problems in the future. However, limited financial support is a restraint. Smaller municipalities/boroughs may allocate less money from their budgets to the changing needs of older people than the area requires. The results of the analysis show the need for increased or established cooperation between municipalities, institutional facilities for the elderly, and social services.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

Participace zájmových skupin na aktivitách realizace politiky aktivního stárnutí v Moravskoslezském kraji

Souhrn

Úvod: Participace je jedním z principů sociální politiky. Participace starších osob na občanském a politickém životě odráží demokratické principy a formuje se především v rámci zájmových skupin, nepolitických či politických organizací sdružujících osoby vyššího věku.

Cíl: Předkládaný příspěvek se zaměřuje na analýzu způsobu participace zájmových skupin na aktivitách v rámci politiky aktivního stárnutí v obcích Moravskoslezského kraje, resp. na odhalení vztahů mezi zájmovými skupinami a obcemi.

Metody: Data získaná v polostrukturovaných rozhovorech s 32 zástupci obcí byla analyzována metodou zakotvené teorie. Jako dílčí metoda analýzy byla použita metoda vytváření klastrů.

Výsledky: Významnou roli hrají zájmové skupiny sdružující seniory a sdružení, jež se primárně nezaměřují na osoby vyššího věku. Spolky jsou jedním z hlavních organizátorů společenských akcí, vzdělávacích, preventivních a sportovních aktivit zaměřených na tyto osoby vyššího věku. Jsou také důležitým aktérem v oblasti mezigenerační spolupráce.

Závěr: Realizace politiky aktivního stárnutí je aktuální otázkou na všech úrovních sociální politiky Evropské unie. Pro úspěch realizovaných opatření je důležitá účast jednotlivých hlavních aktérů v této oblasti. Zájmovým sdružením by měla být věnována zvláštní pozornost ze strany obcí a vyšších úrovní státní správy.

Klíčová slova: kvalitativní výzkum; participace; politika aktivního stárnutí; stárnutí populace; zájmové skupiny

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