

Cittaslow International Network: An Example of a Globalization Idea?

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Abstract

The strong dynamics of the development of the International Assembly of Cittaslow Association development (which now focuses not only on European cities, but also on centers located on other continents), has led to discussions about the place of the Cittaslow concept in the modern world and the relationship between the phenomenon of globalization and the Cittaslow development. Research conducted in the cities belonging to the Polish Assembly of Cittaslow Association provided an opportunity to examine the problem not only on the overall scale but gives also an opportunity to respond to this issue on the micro level - the level of individual consciousness of city dwellers. It appears that the original idea has taken on new meanings and serves as a response to the negative effects of globalization. It has acquired a transnational character and now is setting new global trends.

Keywords: Cittaslow, Slow City, tourism, sustainable development, International Assembly of Cittaslow Association, globalization, territorial marketing.

Introduction

"Globalization can be used as a tool even if we want to become individualistic!"

Case Study Citta Slow Movement, Ludlow, UK

The presented subject of study is the result of the authors' reflections which have arisen in the course of their several years' research devoted to the dissemination of the Cittaslow idea in small towns. It is a relatively new idea based on the 'Good Life' concept which answers the need of many people seeking an alternative for a blistering pace of life in a large number of urban agglomerations. E. Grzelak-Kostulska and B. Hołowiecka (2011) consider the concept very important both for the local residents and tourists on whom the residents of Polish Cittaslow pin very high hopes. It is worth mentioning that this initiative originally stemmed from the local communities of four Italian cities which quickly gained larger membership, encompassing an enormous territory and becoming institutionalized. For that reason it is interesting to analyze Cittaslow development in the context of globalization. On the one hand we can use a sociological perspective, focusing on the place occupied by the local community in the contemporary world. On the other hand the current literature provides more information

about global tourism trends, growing awareness of recreation and its role in human health, increasing importance of ecotourism and cognitive tourism in which individual activities play a crucial role. From this point of view the conditions created for tourism development in the investigated cities seem to match these new trends. Last but not least, we also have to include an economic perspective. In this dimension it is possible to evaluate the Cittaslow concept in the context of the small-size cities adaptation to the new global conditions of competitiveness (the network effect).

The plurality of interpretations proves once again the highly complex nature of the globalization phenomenon. However, the authors' intention is not to draw attention to this simple fact. The guiding principle of this article is to analyze a new cultural phenomenon - Cittaslow - and its institutionalized form the International Assembly of Cittaslow Association. Special emphasis is given to the investigation of the three perspectives, which have been presented above, and their mutual relation; besides, the authors would like to provide a coherent framework for understanding a convergence within local activities (frequently focusing on local promotion) and the phenomenon of globalization.

An additional incentive to undertake these studies was the observation that the term 'globalization' is often used only to underline the unpredictable effects of globalization rather than global initiatives and activities (Bauman 2000: 72). With our paper, we would like to contribute to a change in emphasis within globalization studies.

International / global network of Cittaslow

According to the Cittaslow International Charter (2009), Cittaslow are 'non-profit entities and their objectives are to promote and spread the culture of good living through research, testing and application of solutions for the city organization'. The association disseminates sustainable development principles in cities and offers suggestions on how to limit the negative effects of globalization in terms of the pressure for uniformity and standardization. As it can be seen in Tab. 2, Cittaslow represents an alternative path of development. These considerations allow us to underline the fact that more often than not the philosophy of Cittaslow is treated as a base for differential actions in many cities, not only in the smallest towns (Knox 2005; Mayer and Knox 2006). It certainly proves the great potential of this concept which constantly finds new followers.

Table 1: Main characteristics of Cittaslow (Slow City) towns (Imbroscio 2003)
Comparing Corporate-Centered to Alternative Urban Development Agendas

Agendas	Corporate-centered mainstream	Alternative
Characteristics	Homogenized	Idiosyncratic/asset specific
	Single imperative	Multiple imperatives
	Inequitable	Equitable
	Industrial	Craft
	Standardized	Customized
	Corporate	Grassroots
	Unsustainable	Sustainable
	Copied	Authentic
	Low quality	High quality
	Replicable	Asset specific
	Intensive to local history, culture	Sensitive to local history, culture
	Fast	Slow
Examples	Urban mega projects	Community economic development
	Smokestack chasing	Slow City

It is also useful to have a look at the dynamic nature of the International Assembly of Cittaslow Association development. It embraces a growing number of cities not only in Europe but also on other continents. The Cittaslow movement was initiated in 1999 by Paolo Saturnini who was the mayor of Greve di Chianti in Italy. Therefore it explains the large number of Italian cities participating in the project (68 to be precise). During the course of the last three years the number of cities involved in the network has increased by half (to 147 cities in June 2011), and several hundred other cities from all around the world asked the organization about the conditions of accession. The territorial span of the association now encompasses Europe, Australia, New Zealand, South America, South Korea, Canada and the United States. In Poland, the Cittaslow concept is relatively new. This concept is being implemented by several Polish cities. On the 12th of July 2004, the International Association of Cittaslow Cities was joined by the first Polish city (town) - Reszel, the next were Bisztynek, Biskupiec and Lidzbark Warmiński (2007), all located in the Warmia and Mazury voivodeship. Murowana Goślina (the Wielkopolska voivodeship) and Nowe Miasto Lubawskie (the Warmia and Mazury voivodeship) were the last ones to join the network (in 2010).

The Network chooses towns with less than 50 thousand people who are committed to work on the improvement of the quality of life for its residents. Nevertheless, joining a group of Cittaslow cities is only possible when candidate cities meet several other requirements. They relate to different areas, from environmental to infrastructural issues and those associated with people's consciousness. To achieve the appropriate state of the natural environment, an environmental policy (as indicated in the criteria for acceptance) is designed to include a system of evaluation of the quality of air, water and soil, which would support the development of alternative energy sources. The desire to create public green spaces, the restoration of the original conditions of the historical urban development, the urban infrastructure development conducive to comfort and functionality of living and the creation of architectural space for disabled people are required in the field of urban infrastructure. The requirements associated with the production and promotion of the local products are related to the following activities: the certification of quality of artisan and handicraft products, the development of programs aimed at the protection of artisans and/or endangered handicraft products, the protection of traditional methods of work and professions, the promotion and preservation of the local cultural events, or the compilation of annual inventories of the typical local products (Cittaslow International Charter 2009).

The promotion of tourism is the most significant step, including properly understood hospitality (cities participating in the network require training for providing tourist information and offering hospitality), the use of international tourist signs (providing both tourist facilities as well as printed materials), and the introduction of additional elements, such as facilities policy. It is very important to assess information and services (especially during planned events), to prepare the "slow" city tours (brochures, websites, homepages, etc.), to notify of the available transparent prices and rates for external suppliers.

Moreover, cities associated in the network express their consent to continue their involvement in the development of projects in the designated areas and also in the elaboration of parameters influencing the improvement of the existing living conditions. Cittaslow proposed many mutual initiatives for the partners. These include: projects for the protection of local products and crafts, training in nutrition education, efforts undertaken in order to extend the pedestrian area, monitoring of air quality, promoting construction in accordance with ecological requirements, regulations on construction techniques, or standardization of the overhead electromagnetic installation (Cittaslow International Charter 2009).

Each of the cities belonging to the network is implementing the principles described above in the way most convenient for itself, for example, Italian Chiavenna focuses on the evolution

of a dying craft, Orvieto is a pioneer in the implementation of alternative transportation, and Hersbruck and Waldkirch in Germany have developed innovative programs for the cooperation between local farmers and restaurant owners. It is worth emphasizing this fact because this issue is certainly a crucial way to avoid the trap of homogenization of cities belonging to the network. In doing so, with the full participation of local authorities and communities, these cities have the opportunity to support and promote local crafts, restaurant owners or social initiatives without losing the unique nature of the place.

The strategy is therefore aimed towards creating a people-friendly city where 'life is calmer', primarily thanks to low crime, sufficient recreation opportunities and residents living in harmony with nature. What seems important is the fact that Slow City promotes the use of new technologies in order to transform small cities into the perfect place to live and relax. According to the initiators of the Cittaslow concept, Slow Cities satisfy real demands of the post-modern societies living in a globalizing world and tired of constant competition. As Heike and Mayer suggest, the organization 'was created as a response to globalization.'

The Cittaslow idea from different perspectives

Economic perspective

The new phase of globalization which has been triggered by the development of information and communication technologies (primarily the development of the Internet starting with the mid-90s of the twentieth century) confirmed the predictions about the growing importance of network structures. The economic and social (cultural) processes of the network structures are a new phenomenon in the qualitative changes in the rules of the world and of the international economic competition (Błasiak 2007: 148-156). One can consider the spread of the Cittaslow network as an expression of the need to look for new incentives for economic development, including the joint marketing of the city. Its aim is both to meet the needs of local communities and to attract people to cities and businesses, ensuring the future development of the city and improving the living conditions of the population. Its importance increases with the growing concern about the depopulation of small towns. The term 'city branding' (known in the trade literature) means the ability to choose and strengthen the position of the city by creating a specific image, which is a source of both economic and symbolic value.

The reinforcement of its position and achievement of a competitive advantage through this process can be accomplished with the help of the systematic implementation of a series of events and projects affecting the development of individuals through the transformation of values and benefits and increasing the welfare of the local community. The result of this process should be the improvement of the status and prestige of the city as a tourist, residential and business location (Lutek and Szczepanski 2007).

Increasing the attractiveness of the city, not only by the Slow City concept, strengthens its brand. The attention is increasingly drawn to the necessity to maintain or build a unique and unrepeatable nature of the place. The problem of the loss of uniqueness in the globalized world, especially common in large urban centers, can also concern small towns. Thus in branding activities the cities try to come up with a unique selling proposition which differentiates the group of products in the given category from all others.

An intriguing question therefore is how international cooperation functioning on the basis of a set of rules defined in detail can guarantee the uniqueness of cities, rather than lead to their homogenization. The answer to this question is certainly not simple. It seems that many of the Cittaslow cities have a chance to find their own individual path of development, such as the Italian or German towns mentioned earlier. This path is of course determined by the Cittaslow concept. In spite of the changes, it can be assumed that there is a place for the city's

own character. Nevertheless, the main problems are connected with the commitment, creativity and innovation of the local community.

Certainly, by adopting the concept of Slow City as a ready-made, top-down project may lead to homogenizing results. In this case, the idea may not be accepted, because in all probability the involvement of the local community will reach a low level, and without it it is difficult to expect the success of the project. Therefore it is important to include the inhabitants in the process of creating their own town.

The idea of Cittaslow and global trends in tourism

As it was mentioned before, the idea of Slow City intended to increase the attractiveness of the place to reveal its unique character corresponds to the development of the tourist function of small towns. To appreciate the importance of "slow" initiatives relating to these issues, one should pay attention to the global trends shaping the modern development of tourist services and hazards that are associated with their excessive development.

In the modern world the concepts of globalization and tourism are strongly linked. 'Shrinking time and space' has caused further transformations in various aspects of life, 'mobility turns out to be the most valued and desired value' (Bauman 2000: 6). There is a certain reason for the relationship between tourism and globalization. 'People are tired of the anonymity of social life and travelling, of looking for places and communities that live according to clear rules, even where people could experience the illusory sense of community' (Dabrowska 2006b: 17). The latest trends in tourist demands indicate a growing interest in cognitive tourism aiming to explore places of historical importance where a tourist can relax from the hustle and bustle of civilization and rest in harmony with nature.

The scientific literature also pays attention to the increasing role of tourist facilities which provide specific experiences and cause the changes observed in urban and cultural tourism (Dabrowska 2006a: 26-27). Thanks to the growing importance of cultural tourism culture has become a key component of tourist programs being developed in the ethnic, alternative and urban tourism (Gaworecki 2003: 27). Therefore one may claim that the recent trends fit very well into the Cittaslow concept or that the idea is suitable to meet the needs indicated by these tendencies. The Slow City tourist can expect to arrive at a place where the restoration of historic buildings, local crafts, art and culture (festivals, fairs, etc.) are promoted. A great importance is given to the environment and Slow Cities also offer a unique atmosphere.

Unfortunately, there are also concerns about the excessive and uncontrolled influx of tourists. Certainly, the management of the historic city center which is a leading tourist destination can pose a big challenge. Fernandez writes (2007) that this city type suffers from losing their residents that leave the center. Their houses are turned into hotels and guesthouses, thus their functionality is put in the forefront. As a result, it loosens social ties and the place loses its former character. Therefore it is necessary to highlight a sustainable development in these cities.

The concept of Cittaslow from the local community perspective

The concept of globalization is often contrasted with the concept of locality. Generally we have to agree with Bauman who argues that "in the global world the locality is a sign of backwardness and degradation because more frequently it seems to be a senso-creative and interpretative activity as the control of this activity is limited" (Bauman 2000: 7). On the other hand "globalization and mass culture have launched - paradoxically - the demand for various local and individual identities on an unprecedented scale" (Golka 1999: 156).

Undoubtedly the emergence and the rapid evolution of the Slow City movement present a valuable evidence for the above claim but it is also difficult to disagree with Bauman's thesis. What is then the actual role of the local community in shaping the idea of Slow City?

However, before we come back to this question it is worth quoting some results of the research conducted by the authors in the Polish cities associated with the International Network of Cities (in-depth description of methodology and obtained results are presented in the paper entitled: 'The influence of branding activities on the tourist function development of the selected towns belonging to the polish Cittaslow network'. Its purpose was the following: to understand the local resident's perception of Slow City, assuming that this is an important objective indicator of the success of the efforts to create a new image of cities. The surveys conducted among the population of four cities (Lidzbark Warmiński, Reszel, Biskupiec and Bisztynek) revealed that almost half of the respondents (46.1 %) identify with the idea of Slow City (57 % of those who had a prior knowledge about Slow City and 30 % of those who had never heard about it). About 15% accept the idea, but do not identify with it. A large group of respondents (approximately 30%) is constituted by those whose attitude to the concept is neutral (22% of those who had heard earlier about Slow City and 41% of those who had no previous information on this subject). Approximately 10% of the respondents have a negative attitude to the idea; particularly those who did not know the Cittaslow term. In this group, 9% regarded this concept as able to cause more harm than good. These answers and general knowledge of the idea are frequently correlated with some demographic characteristics of the respondents. Young people (less than 30 years old) much more often declare their acceptance of this idea (although there was a relatively high percentage of people - 20% - claiming that this was not an idea for them) than the respondents aged 60 years and more. Age also positively correlates with a negative evaluation of the project, with the exception of the oldest age category (60 years and more) where the lack of acceptance makes up a relatively small proportion of the population at a level close to the one established among younger respondents.

Declared views also largely depend on the level of respondents' education. A number of people identifying with this idea is presented in all categories of education, while the share of those indifferent to the idea varies substantially. Among the respondents with primary education, up to 17% are concerned about the negative effects of this concept. People with higher education more often declared that they accepted the idea.

The presented results indicate a rather low degree of community involvement in the concept of Slow City. Acceptance is accompanied in many cases with passivity or a demanding attitude - the request of the economic benefits with minimal involvement. Therefore is it possible to claim that we are dealing with the answer to the negative global effects or rather with the next global trend, more or less corresponding with the expectations of the local community?

Summary

Summarizing the above considerations we should return to the paradox mentioned at the beginning. First of all the Slow City idea may be certainly interpreted as an alternative vision of development, aimed towards preserving the precious local values. Looking at the genesis of the Cittaslow movement and its bottom-up nature we confirm this observation. Some doubts arise concerning the development of the observation networks, building its institutional forms, and its dynamics. There is no doubt that a global network is emerging through the growing information technology, which fits perfectly both in the global trends in tourism, marketing, territorial and transnational communities. It is worth raising the question of the future of this idea and its network. It seems that two paths of development can be distinguished: the first is the success of individual places, characterized by a competitive advantage based on their uniqueness; the second, the creation of distinctive places only in comparison with other places in the country. Still they will be very similar to the rest of the many 'other' cities in the

network which bear more resemblance to each other and were absorbed by the global trend. It is therefore dubious if it is possible to escape globalization.

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