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## **Citizens Participation**

In transitional countries, experience with democracy is relatively short, uneven and very often frustrating. For a further development of democracy in these countries, the "double democratisation" is needed in the sense of democratisation of the state and the civil society, since they sustain each other, make each other possible, and also limit each other.

Faced with a set of completely new challenges in a globalized world, governments at all levels increasingly realize that they will not be able to conduct and effectively implement policies - as good as they may be - if their citizens do not understand and support them. So, they are looking at the new or improved models and approaches for better informing and involving their citizens in the policy-making process.

The place where these processes begin is the local community. Local governments in transitional countries are confronted with problems such as decentralization, fragmentation, underdeveloped mechanisms of public participation, a lack of highly educated professionals, and many other problems. However, in today's highly complex world it is only at this lowest level of democracy and autonomy that a direct dialogue between the citizens, their interest groups and politically elected decision-makers can be held. Effective local democracy is therefore vitally important for higher levels of democracy. Each citizen in a local community should have a chance to practice active citizenship and gain the necessary experience for participation at higher levels and to develop democratic political culture.

In that process, however, they should be aware that it is sometimes impossible to achieve a compromise or consensus, because the readiness of the participants, their openness to other views, varies a great deal. But the public dialogue is also a school of democracy, where citizens through practical work learn to perform their citizenship roles.

### ***Motivation and stimulation for participation is important***

The period of transition in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe has brought severe problems to many communities and their citizens. Many local firms have gone bankrupt, so there are not enough jobs,

communal infrastructure needs improvement, public services are deteriorating, environmental problems are pressing, people are unsatisfied with the quality of life, they need jobs, better prospects for their children, etc. After the change of political and economic systems their expectations were high, but they have not been fulfilled. Gradually, they have lost enthusiasm and interest in community affairs, and now they are mainly focusing on their own well-being and struggling to ensure a decent life. Politicians, who make great promises before elections, disappoint them. They talk about democracy, the rights and welfare of citizens, but when citizens come to a city hall with a problem, they sometimes do not receive any help. From the point of view of citizens, politicians often make the situation even more complicated. Where politicians and businessmen have access to financial, political, legal, and institutional or media resources, citizens do not. So what can they do? Many fall prey to the feelings of apathy, despondency, hopelessness or helplessness, they say "nothing" and distance themselves from politics and community affairs. Citizens distrust politics, local politicians and government officials, and do not believe that politicians really care about them and their needs. Due to the legacy of the previous political regime, citizens also lack the experience of active citizenship in a democracy.

#### **Practical basis for participation of citizens in regional self-government in the Istrian County (Croatia)**

The County Executive Board of the Istrian County in 1997 adopted the conclusion on the Forms of Participation of Citizens in the Activities of Local Communities, recommending this document to all the municipalities and cities in the county. In the introduction to the text "Forms of Participation of Citizens in the Activities of Local Communities" it says that the participation of citizens is a desirable value and that it is necessary to establish various forms of citizen participation in the activities of the local community, including: civil initiatives, above all petitions (for which they believe there is a legal vacuum in the Istrian County); referendums; informative activities via the local media; centres for citizen questions (in the form of an agency within the representative bodies of local governments which would offer legal advice and inform citizens on the decisions of the bodies); monitoring and participation in the work of representative bodies and so on.

For citizens to become motivated for participation, they have to get a feeling that their voice counts, and that they can influence the situation and the course of action. They have to be provided with an opportunity to speak freely about everything that bothers them. Their opinions have to be treated with due attention. There are different forms of citizen participation, including voting, referendums, municipality or community assembly, public presentations, public exhibitions and public discussions. These forms of participation might be called traditional methods. But, due to the changed circumstances, those forms of participation are often not enough. Because they offer limited possibilities for expressing the interests and opinions of citizens, they have to be supplemented by new forms, which have evolved in the last decade.

A few new forms of citizen participation:

1. Citizens organizing themselves (breast cancer survivors, environmentalists or similar) to lobby and influence public policy. This way of participation of citizens in local government has its own legitimacy, and it can consequently trigger off changes in local activities. For example, public protests can be organized based on the citizens' initiative, at the invitation of one or more political parties or trade unions, or through the combined efforts of citizens, political parties, trade unions, and other parties from the public political sphere. Also, informal communication and interaction with the representatives of local government, on the basis of which the authorities change their decisions, takes place every day in various locations (streets, markets, cafes, restaurants, neighborhoods, and alike).

### **Protests**

In the Istrian County public protests are quite frequent, especially the smaller ones, and at these protests various public demands are expressed which, although not legally binding, can trigger off some changes in the work of local authorities.

2. Forming different citizens' alliances which initiate, propose or comment on the respective new legislation. This is important because what many local councils and authorities consider to be a priority might be of only marginal importance to the citizens who may be interested in different issues that are simply not dealt with by the administration.

### **Widening the scope of participation in Romania**

The Law on Public Administration that became fully operational after the local elections in Romania in 2004 widened the range of action for local authorities and diversified the possibility of citizens to participate in local administration. Prior to that law, the only known type of citizen participation was the referendum proven to have a limited effect because of their cost, a lack of dialogue and difficult organization. The possibility to be present at the meetings of local councils merely meant that citizens were spectators - on the other side of the line. The new law allows citizens to organize into *consultative bodies* and thus become partners of local authorities. This has enabled NGOs to put some pressure on the administration and empowered citizens in an unexpected way.

3. The Internet has become a communication tool between citizens and different levels of government, or serves as a meeting point for citizens to discuss different issues. The relationship between the government and the citizens is becoming increasingly complex and multifaceted. The development of information technology is changing the context of governance. New communications technologies allow citizens to overcome the barriers of physical distance and to organize themselves more quickly and effectively. This increased access to information has a "democratizing effect" - politicizing citizens and often mobilizing them into action.
4. In order to participate in the development of their communities, citizens and other stakeholders create public spaces to discuss common projects (from the initiative to the implementation). This last form of citizen participation will be the main focus of this paper, because it expresses the citizens' motivations and enables a dialogue with numerous parties in the community.

### ***Local politicians and officials have to support citizens participation***

When local governments are struggling to improve the situation, to foster economic development and upgrade local communal infrastructure and public services, it is often necessary to hire experts to help local officials prepare the programmes. But when such experts suggest conducting a survey about the needs and views of local

populations, and organize workshops in villages and towns to discuss the problems and the needs of the local people, local administrations often doubt usefulness of this. They say it is time-consuming, expensive, and most people have nothing valuable to say since they are not competent.

### **Professionals assisting participation in Kranjska Gora (Slovenia)**

After the establishment of the Kranjska Gora municipality in Slovenia (during the 1990s), its government decided to make special effort in order to stimulate the development of the local communities that were lagging behind and not showing any initiative. The municipality selected a team of professionals to assist the local communities in preparing their development plans and projects. The team approached its work on the premise that citizens have the right and the responsibility to become informed on the development issues concerning their community, as well as the right to comment them.

The head of the development department in one town, where such activities were suggested, said it bluntly: "It is waste of time and resources. People just complicate things, they do not understand, they are selfish, they argue with each other, they just criticize what we do... it is better to do it alone, it is more efficient." The local administration in that town preferred to form working groups to which local politicians, administrators, representatives of different interests and some local experts were appointed. Within these working groups different topics were discussed, so that the expert team would get better informed about the local situation, while the elaboration of the programme was left up to them. The expert team was hired for the preparation of the plan because they were experts in this field so they were supposed to do their work. When they prepared a plan, they had the final public presentation and that was it.

But to encourage real participation, local officials and administrators also have to understand its significance, so it is useful to have workshops for them about local development and citizen participation. Such workshops can present some best-practice cases, showing that active citizen participation is a necessary precondition for an elaboration of a high quality plan and its successful implementation. While it is possible to prepare a very nice plan without consulting the public, such a plan will run into enormous problems in the implementation. Citizens will

be poorly informed about the plan; they will have to be forced to obey the decisions and they will often obstruct them, all of which makes the implementation hard if not impossible. A very comprehensive programme might be prepared, but there is a lack of people who would

### **Taking citizens seriously**

In the case of Kranjska Gora, the mayor and the head of administration agreed that the project can be carried out in accordance with the team's method and that they will also participate in it actively.

### **Opening local administration to citizens**

Regardless of their function and organizational unit, all employees in the Istrian County are obliged to:

- Always and on every occasion listen to citizens
- Be friendly and efficient in the receipt or referral of initiatives, suggestions, complaints, objections, queries, messages and other proposals by citizens
- Make note of every suggestion made by a citizen, which is related to the work of the bodies of the Istrian County
- Be extra considerate in their communication with persons with special needs.

The successfulness of the communication with citizens is evaluated through public opinion polls, analysis of press-clippings and the complaints made by citizens. In their reports about their work (these are usually annual programmes and reports, and the so-called four-year mandate programmes and reports), various departments of the Istrian County prove their responsibility toward their own work and their responsibility toward the citizens of the county. In the creation of practical frameworks for the participation of citizens in local government, Istria has made great strides. But this is only part of the county's mission: to accept the system in management according to the requirements of the valid international norms ISO 9001: 2000 and ISO 14001: 1996 described as the "efforts to surpass the requirements of the regulations and to develop its own standards of good practices".

implement it. The city hall cannot do it alone. What can be done? Get people involved, do things for them - with them, not instead of them.

So the workshops that experts will organize with local people will focus on their real-life problems and search for possible solutions, identifying the opportunities for citizen action. It will also serve for motivational purposes, to make people aware that they can do many things themselves if they join forces.

Also, if the local administration, the agencies for development at the national level, or similar institutions want to encourage participation and involve citizens in the projects that concern their well-being, a good way to motivate them is to knock on their doors and talk to them personally. It is necessary to explain in those conversations what the results of the proposed projects will be, why their involvement is important, and how they can make a difference with their engagement. People are drawn to public-interest activities that produce tangible results within a reasonable period and they participate when their participation makes a difference.

### ***Professionals have to foster citizens participation***

The problems also quite often arise with professionals who participate in decision-making process as experts, since sometimes they are not willing or able to discuss their argumentation with laypersons. It is not just the problem of language and complex arguments; it is also an unwillingness to accept other modes of knowledge as legitimate. Professionals are also sometimes not aware of their broader social responsibility and do not understand that policy-making processes must also reflect the concerns of other people that are infused by value choices which cannot be made based on scientific evidence alone.

Although it is recognized both in theory and practice that the public must be more involved in public decisions, many professionals and experts dealing with public issues are, at best, ambivalent about public involvement or, at worst, they find it problematic because the complexity of modern issues cannot be attacked with common sense and ingenuity. As a result, most of them do not actively seek public involvement. They believe that the only base for decision-making should be scientific knowledge. While this is to a certain extent true for some issues, many of them cannot be resolved solely by scientific input, but increasingly require some decidedly non-technical ethical and political decisions. Citizens probably lack technical knowledge, but they possess certain

knowledge about their community and locality, which can be very valuable, and as citizens, they have a right to participate in ethical and political decisions. But even though citizens do care about the issues facing their communities, they are often "pushed out" of the public process, because the local political and administrative systems, presumably based upon expertise and professionalism, leave little room for the participatory processes.

The real citizen participation in the decision-making process requires a broader concept of knowledge. It is not only the scientific expertise that counts, but also the intuitive, tacit knowledge of citizens. Theirs is practical knowledge stemming from learning-by-doing, learning by experimentation, from supporting continual innovation and adaptation. Both the expert and the layperson knowledge have a legitimate place within the decision-making process.

It is extremely important for citizen participation that professionals are open to citizens and accept them as partners in the areas of public interest. Even more, professionals can foster public participation because they can convince local officials that it is worthwhile and at the same time show them some positive practical results through the projects they conduct.

### ***Citizens participate when they feel that their participation counts***

#### **Participation through a survey**

In Kranjska Gora, the expert team persuaded the local officials that a high level of citizen involvement is crucial and worth money and time. The team prepared a questionnaire and sent it to every household. Where a household consisted of two or three generations, additional questionnaires were provided, and every generation was asked to answer the questionnaire separately. In a covering letter giving some information about the project, they were also informed that the team members would collect the questionnaire on a certain day (Sunday), when most residents should be at home. The team opted for this personal collection of the questionnaires to establish a closer contact with the community members and to use the occasion to discuss the project with them and answer all the questions or concerns they would probably have.



This approach was necessary because, at the very beginning, the team recognized a high degree of apathy among the citizens and the team members wanted to animate them and persuade them to get involved.

Based on the proposals from the community, the expressed interests of the community members and the team's suggestions, the working groups were formed for different areas of interests. The team provided for a structured, facilitated and in-depth deliberation that encouraged the participants to consider each other's views in a non-confrontational manner and reach a compromise or consensus on the issues. In this way the members also learned certain rules and developed the skills necessary for the participation in public deliberation. They learned to accept the differences in opinions and interests as legitimate, and as the basis for further discussion, which could and should bring them closer.

The team members gathered additional input from the citizens and other stakeholders (business, NGOs, clubs, etc.) to sort out the main issues and form the proposals of how to effectively address them. The team members conducted interviews with the community officials and other stakeholders to give them an opportunity to express their views. Special meetings were organized for different groups (business, NGOs and other associations) to get them actively involved.

All the meetings were open to public, so that every citizen, though uninvited, could participate. The relevant information was regularly published and delivered to every household, so that the citizens could monitor the progress.

The representatives from the municipality and certain state offices were invited to attend certain meetings, so that the municipal and state aspects and views could be considered within the projects. Also, in this way, new channels of communication emerged, that can be beneficial to the implementation of the local programme and, at the same time, they give these officials an opportunity to discuss the practical consequences of their policy and the regulatory activities with the citizens and the interested parties.

## ***Decision-making structures and processes have to be open for participation***

Local authorities must find ways to include their citizens in the discussions about public questions. Participation in public discussions and other public actions should be a positive experience for citizens, opening the possibilities for active citizenship and for joint learning through debates, thus contributing to the realization of democratic principles in practice. Citizen participation should not be an obstacle for local government actions; it must be an integral part of its action, because its basic mission is to strengthen democratic institutions in a society. At the same time it increases social capital in local communities and their members' readiness to act together for the common good.

### **Public hearings in Crikvenica (Croatia)**

Enabling citizens to give suggestions concerning the decisions that have special significance for their everyday life is the basic reason why the authorities of the city of Crikvenica on the Croatian coastline decided to involve their citizens in the process of adoption of the local city budget. They believed that the most efficient methods of involving the citizens in the process of adopting the local city budget was the organization of public hearings, the conduct of surveys, the organization of discussions about topics, and the organization of discussions in committees. However, considering the size and other characteristics, they opted for a public forum as the most efficient method of involving the citizens in the process of adopting the municipal budget.

The benefits of a public forum as a method of involving citizens in the process of adopting the local budget are multiple since it improves the decision making process, enables obtaining information on various issues and problems, and makes the citizens more willing to accept certain decisions, it improves understanding between the representatives of the local authorities and the citizens of a local community, creates the local authorities' image as open and accessible, assists the local government's representatives to set the budgetary priorities. Finally, the aim of a public forum is to obtain the support of the public regarding the strategic budgetary goals and thus facilitate the adoption of the budget.

The city of Crikvenica organized two forums on the local budget; the first was in December 2001 when the Proposal of the Budget of the City of Crikvenica for 2002 was presented, and the second time in December 2002 when the Draft Proposal of the Budget of the City of Crikvenica for 2003 was presented. Involving the citizens in the budgetary process justified the expectations of the municipal bodies of Crikvenica, and enjoyed the support of the citizens. The goals that were set when planning these public discussions were almost completely realized, and the response of the citizens from almost all age- and interest groups was satisfactory, considering the fact that this method represented an innovation in the communication between the representatives of the local authorities and the public.

### **Consultative councils in Romania**

To foster the interest of the public and to fulfill the European criteria regarding accountability, Romania widened the possibilities of letting its citizens into the decision-making process at its initial stages. Local councils may, according to the law “decide on an association with Romanian or foreign juridical persons, with NGOs or other social partners, in order to finance or organize activities, services or projects of local public interest.” A breakthrough was made at the Local City Council of Timisoara, which decided to take the Proximity Consultative Councils as partners, which consisted of the citizens living in the Timisoara districts. Out of the thirteen proposed consultative councils, eight were created. At least seven citizens of full age (18 and over) from the same district must inform the city council about their intention to create a Consultative Council and must register at the city hall. Their work is voluntary (not paid), and the sessions of the council are public. Their suggestions are analyzed, developed, and further discussed by the specialized committees of the local city council.

Public participation can range from information sharing through consultation to more active forms of participation, such as partnerships, that involve strong citizen influence over public policies and services - which should be the main goal. Where participation is used only as the legitimization for the already adopted decisions, and is not meant as an active co-operation in decision-making, the co-operation is supervised, managed and, on many occasions, manipulative. This in most cases

happens by making important decisions internally or by consulting with the chosen experts, and presenting the fully elaborated proposals to the public only for comment or, sometimes, just for information. If there is no openness and readiness by politicians and administrators to respect the contributions of all participants in the debate, the public debate serves only as a smoking screen and a legitimization tool for the already accepted goals, which means that citizens do not find their participation worth it.

Effective citizen involvement is essential for good public policies and good governance. Elected officials, administrators and citizens all play important roles in governing local communities. Therefore, it is crucial for local governments to promote and sustain an environment of responsive citizens involvement. To elicit such commitment, the acceptance of some guidelines for elected officials and public administrators might help:

- Value active citizens involvement as essential for the future of the local community.
- Design the policy-making process to make room for different forms of citizens participation (of individuals and of different organizations).
- Provide adequate financial and staff support to citizens participation.
- Organize involvement activities to make best use of citizens' time and effort.
- Provide citizens with an opportunity to be involved in the process of policy development, planning and project development from the very beginning.
- Provide communications that are comprehensible, timely and broadly distributed.
- Respect and consider all citizens' input and respond to their perspectives and insights in a timely manner.
- Carry out deliberative processes according to democratic principles, so that citizens participate as equals and are ready to listen to each other's arguments and take them into account when forming decisions.
- Encourage opportunities that reflect and publicly express rich diversity of local communities.
- Support and sustain ongoing networking among citizens, local governments, local government officials and staff.
- Provide training for local government officials and professional staff in the area of citizens participation, in order to develop participatory

organizational culture and individual attitude favorable to citizens participation.

- Coordinate interdepartmental and inter-jurisdictional activities so that they support citizens participation and make it more effective and meaningful.
- Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of citizens involvement in search for possible improvements.
- Provide publicity for successful cases of citizens participation to motivate others to follow suit.
- Permanently search and encourage new forms of citizens participation.

### ***Participation gives visible results***

#### **Citizens' working groups**

Working groups were very active in Kranjska Gora. Along with the expert team they met regularly and carefully elaborated their action proposals. Based on the working groups' results, the team prepared a draft version of a development plan. Meetings were organized to check with the citizens and other stakeholders and ensure that what the team put forward as recommendations, correctly reflected the citizens' and stakeholders' views and priorities. In fact, in this phase of the process, the citizens and other stakeholders met with the professionals and experts. This allowed the differences to be identified and common ground found. Furthermore, this allowed the team to assure the decision-makers that their recommendations enjoyed the support of the community, and that the actions growing from these recommendations would be carried out or supported by the community members.

When people take part in community activities, groups should be formed based on the expressed personal interests. Groups last when made up of people who really enjoy each other's company. No one voluntarily spends a lot of time with people they do not like. At the same time, do not expect too much from people, since this is extra work for them. One person should not be involved in too many activities. Together with some serious business, there has to be time for pleasure. People are drawn to group activities that are fun, creative or educational. Groups that focus only on work drive people away.

At the beginning it is very important that professional assistance is provided for the implementation of the project ideas. People often do not have enough experience with organization and management, so they need some support, but after a while they become more skilful and they can do many things themselves. Training and counseling in different areas of expertise will help them carry out their ideas and projects. Successfully implemented projects will encourage others to engage in community activities.

### ***Making public participation permanent***

While some communities produce active citizens who are able to organize themselves and require participation, others lack local civic leaders. In such communities the first impulses often come from the outside and, based on the articulated actions of its proponents, participation slowly gains momentum. However, the goal should be to make it permanent, to make it a way of life for the respective local community.

#### **Participation as a continuing activity**

Experience from the two public forums conducted in Crikvenica about the budget proposal shows that there is a need to continue such activities, and the discussions showed that the citizens were ready to perceive the general interest and give good suggestions without imposing their narrow individual interests. In order to make that method obligatory, regardless of the changes in the local authorities, a provision stipulating the obligation of conducting a public debate before finalizing the proposal of the city budget was written into the regulations of the City Board of the City of Crikvenica.

For joint action, the citizens and all other participants need to accept certain personal norms such as:

- Everyone has the right to participate and speak
- Respect the views of others; personal attacks are prohibited
- Readiness to act as a representative of particular interest but respecting broader community interest and legal rules
- Commitment to broader community interest

- Trust as obligation to act in accordance with accepted decisions
- Consensus as "general agreement" instead of unanimity for common decisions
- Openness and transparency of all activities.

Participation in joint deliberation and negotiation broadens individual horizons by exposing people to other views and opinions. It endorses cooperation and develops social capital that increases the capacity for collective action within a community. Through their practical commitment and some special training activities, citizens develop these norms and also the readiness to take responsibility for their own and their community's future. Sometimes it seems impossible to educate many, but it is often enough to find one or two locals who can lead. One or two people can make all the difference by serving as catalysts to bring many people together, who would otherwise remain apart. These leaders should be highly committed to the local community. It is this local community and a shared sense of belonging that connects the participants in a special way and enhances their responsibility for the results and the successful resolution of local issues.

It is impossible to list or regulate all of the ways and forms (especially external) of citizen participation in local government. For this reason, some ways and forms of participation of citizens take place outside the existing legal and practical framework, but not contrary to it. In some of them there are legal or operative gaps, so that citizens who wish to participate in these new ways in local government lose out on legal or institutional security, but gain on spontaneity.

### ***Best practice example: The cooperation of the city of Osijek, the USAID and the Urban Institute in the local government reform project***

**Project: communication via the Internet between the citizens and the city administration - WCA Internet Portal**

In the city of Osijek, the Urban Institute in 2001 implemented the Web Connected Application - WCA model in the area of information management - which enabled the system of information exchange in the city administration among the administrative departments, and between the citizens and the city board.

The new WCA model has opened new possibilities for Osijek:

- for internal work and communication from a distance for the city councilors, city board and city administration (access to databases, direct and indirect multi-purpose communication)
- providing services to the citizens from a distance (direct and indirect communication, documents, applications, etc.)
- the participation of citizens in the work, development and setting of priorities of the city administration (via a defined Permanent City Conference, permanent surveys, direct communication, etc.).

This model is supposed to improve efficiency of the city administration, and the democratization through citizen participation in cooperating and communicating with the city administration. The local government, city districts, neighborhood councils and the city-owned companies have been integrated into an interactive information system. The integration has raised the internal efficiency of the local self-government to a higher level. In this way, in addition to increasing work efficiency, the cost for the material has also been reduced.

The business communication using these new possibilities supporting direct, indirect and multi-purpose communication has enabled the optimization of the working processes and the allocation of the available resources. The possibility of service delivery to the citizens and investors at a distance, and without the need for a specialized training, has opened up the process of assigning of working and communication channels from higher instances to the lower, operative ones. The number of clients coming personally to the departments is much lower now.

Many published documents and their topics increased the quality and support to all external users, investors, etc. The transparent legal framework, business conditions, databases, clear market possibilities, the timely promotion of local government programmes and projects, all directly affect the functioning of the local government economic development. A constant presentation of functions, responsibilities, legal framework, budget, projects, regulations and ordinances of the local government, and the transparent input of needs, ideas, projects, ordinances and the orientations of development, have *directly increased citizens participation in the functioning of the local government.*



The citizens express their ideas about the evaluation of the performance and efficiency of the local government, and they also generate ideas, which increase the local government's efficiency. The regular structured conferences and open working channels for the local government councilors contribute to the development of democracy.