

ZOLTÁN JÓZSA

Public Participation: Promise and Reality

Introduction

Governments across the world, especially local level, are experimenting with different ways to engage citizens in decision-making. The nature and the purpose of these initiatives vary but they all aspire to deepen the ways in which ordinary people can effectively participate in and influence policies which directly affect their lives.

However, what works well in one place can not necessarily be repeated in other locations. Many, different local factors can shape the implementation and validity of officially sponsored participation initiatives. The CLEAR model¹ based on case studies of participation in English localities identified five factors that underpin citizens' response to participation: Can do – citizens have the resources and knowledge to participate; Like do – citizens have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation; Enabled to – citizens are provided with the opportunity for participation; Asked to – citizens are mobilized through public agencies and civil channels; Responded to – citizens see evidence that their views have been considered.

The Clear model was adapted for international use at the request of the Council of Europe's Steering Committee on Local and Regional Democracy (CDLR). Since the spring of 2006 the CDLR organized two waves of testing, with the aim of developing the most effective self-evaluation tool for local governments of the Member States of the Council of Europe. Using the CLEAR model allows each municipality to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of their own public participation index. CLEAR does not promote a blueprint or ideal type of mechanism. It recognises that participation strategies need to be sensitive to local context and dynamic over time.

Different cities in Europe face important pressures and challenges such as – to name a few – demographic change, an increasingly culturally diverse population, economic stagnation or decline, the impact of new technologies, growing income disparities, social polarisation and segregation, urban sprawl and environmental threats.

¹ The CLEAR model was invented by Vivien Lowndes, Lawrence Pratchett and Gerry Stoker. The term has a special connotation from a semantical point of view, which means that it is an open, transparent, and accountable procedure.

The following example is one of the best practice in Europe illustrating tremendous efforts to engage citizens in daily practice to overcome difficulties inherited from past and to face challenges of the present.

Milan experience with the CD program

Milan is the second biggest municipal government in terms of resident² and the ninth in terms of population density in Italy. Its economy is mainly represented by finance, domestic and international commerce, fashion, industrial design, publishing, entertainment, scientific research, biotechnology, information technology and university.

Milan is the first financial district of Italy with an average income per capita of about 35,000 Euros. It is the first metropolitan area of Italy, and attracts foreign investment with the presents of about 2,000 multinational companies. It is located in the European industrial pentagon (Milan, Munich, Paris, London, Hamburg).

According to the Economist in 2010 Milan was the twelfth most expensive city in the world. Milan will host the Expo 2015 on Feeding the Planet Energy for Life. This acted as a new driving force for its economy, with special attention on new urbanisation project and public infrastructure.

In the last few years the city of Milan has have a special socioeconomic trends which portray a unique community character.

The most significant drift is the fast ageing of the population. While the number of inhabitants has remained essentially unchanged in the last 20 years, the number of people aged over 75 has increased.³ On the other hand the composition of families has changed as well. Due to the drop of birth rate the number of traditional large families⁴ has decreased.

There has been a boost in new poverties,⁵ as income is growing at a slower rate than final expenditure. In addition, a huge number of people were forced out of their homes⁶, because the cost of living has been increasing, while purchasing power has considerably decreased.

In Milan there are high rate of unemployment compared with the national average figures. The role of women in family and society is more complex than elsewhere in Italy and Europe, since the female employment rate is 62,7% as opposed to 46,4% for the Italian average. Besides, about 30,000 divorced women live in Milan, which means that women are usually workers, dealing with their professional carriers and private lives.

Milan has eight public and private universities, attended about 160,000 students. After graduation a large part of these students remain in the metropolitan areas a young professionals employed in the tertiary sector as temporary workers. They live and commute outside of the city almost every day.

² The city had 1,341,830 inhabitants in 2011.

³ From 147,096 to 162,434 between 2006 and 2011.

⁴ In Italy usually at least three generation create a large family, which is a basic social unit in the society to take care of elderly, disabled people, youngsters and other relatives.

⁵ There was 225,000 people in state of poverty in 2011.

⁶ The number of homeless people was 6,389 in 2011.

Milan has the highest rate of immigrants in Italy (about 16%). Men are employed in the construction industry and women in in-home assistance.

Considering the diverse profile of the needs of citizens and city users, in 2006 they established a special management innovation, called Complain Desk (CD).

Although in 2006 the Ministry of Innovation and Reform issued a directive 'for the government the Quality', and the mayor of the city wanted put it into practice with the motto of 'the government approaches citizens.' The strategic aim was to simplify for citizens and business, providing more rapid and effective answers to the city's needs. The city also introduced a quality system ISO 9001 to make administrative procedures more lean, simple and transparent so as to guarantee an easy access to services.

Until the introduction of the new CD there was no central desk for gathering of complains, monitoring and reporting system, causing dissatisfaction both in terms of the management of day-to-day operation and decision-makers.

Strategy

The contextual factors were considered by the leadership of the city before the introduction of Complain Desk using SWOT analyses.

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Internal origin attributes of the organisation	High political support (mayor and executive committee), with the goal to improve municipality-citizens relationship, and efficiency and effectiveness levels of services.	Cultural suspicion about the concept of 'complaint' amongst organisation and elected officials Several channels already in place to receive claims Limited availability of financial, technological and human resources.
External origin attributes of the environment	Joint work with other public authorities on this project Benchmarking activities with other municipal governments Pressure by consumers' associations.	

CD proved to be an evolving and multipurpose project. After the first five years of operation a huge organisational renewal completed in 2011 changed its form from being a simple container of city user's complaints to a powerful monitoring and controlling system.

In the framework of CD a pyramidal soliciting system was created, with feedback to both managers (from junior managers to general manager), and elected officials (council members and the mayor). An essential part of the entire project were 26 contact persons distributed among the various municipal directorates, who acted as sentinels and facilitated the creation of an efficient and effective intra-organisational network for managing complaints. Also, the CD started to work closely with the Customer office, which was used to survey satisfaction in those critical areas detected by the CD.

In addition, the involvement of municipal multi-utilities, agencies and corporations (public transportation, energy distribution, trash collection and disposal, water and sewerage ect.) has been strengthened over time. This upgraded the formal prevailing 'intra-organisational network' to a more 'intra and inter-organisational network' improving the system so as to give citizens a better image of the CD's capacity.

At the beginning of the program the complaint management system software was basic. In 2010 the initial software was subjected to a radical change to enable a multiple forwarding of the same complaint in case of involvement of several directorates at the same time.

One of the most important forces against the introduction of the DC was the 'we have always done this way' syndrome. Using this cultural approach each directorate escaped from central supervision and lost its capacity to adequately monitor and managed citizens' satisfaction. With the aim of dealing with this threat, CD has adopted a strategy of raising awareness amongst all municipal managers and elected officials about the benefits of uniform and coherent complaint management for citizens and politicians.

The creation of sense of belonging and specific identity for the CD staff was the key element of the procedure. In the first year the staff was also supported by a psychologist, further improved their capacities in managing relationships with CD users. Empowering these employees through team building enabled the creation of the harmonious and long lasting group of people, which has created a special brand new set of competencies.

Achievements

The project internally made possible:

- the improvement of efficiency (simplification) and effectiveness (appropriateness) of complaints of the management procedure,
- creation of a permanent monitoring system of critical situations signalled by citizens, blueprint of each complaint, monitoring of complaint status, tacking system for assignment of managerial responsibilities,
- registration and monitoring of corrective actions put in place in response to complaints.

Briefly, these internal results led to a better capacity to manage the municipality through a more complex management control system.

External impacts of the innovation:

- simplification of the means for citizens to get in touch—they can use fax, phone, mail, website, front offices. From 2007 to 2012 the contacts processed by CD has increased from 4,300 to 9,500.
- timeliness of response to each complaint, which is now on average, less than 13 days. The legal maximum is 30 days.
- appropriateness of answers received by citizens and corrective actions taken, demonstrated by the zero deficit results reached so far during biannual audits,
- citizens' loyalty, demonstrated by the continuous use of the CD by the same citizens who then act as external sentinels at no cost,

– citizens' satisfaction, supported by the several voluntary letters, demonstrating citizens' approval and proved by good reports from consumers associations.

Innovation

The city of Milan demonstrated how the setting up of a single small scale project – the Citizens' Complaint Desk – can turn into a driver for innovation and can generate positive spill-over's and become a bottom up source of inspiration for further and wider change in the whole local government.

Differently from ad hoc projects that receive special one-time funds, this project have a low cost feature. This guarantees its sustainability for the future. In addition, the project guarantees a high cost-effective level too.

The essence of this project has no political tagging, it is not faddist; the logic of 'doing more with less' which is at the basis of any New Public Management like innovation, has guaranteed political support over the years, even if the political situation or power changing.

Empowering employees through training and team building enabled the creation of a harmonious, and long lasting group of people, which has created a specific brand new set of competencies that have not only become evident inside the municipality, but also have been disseminated outside.

A key factor has also been the idea to create a cross-organisational network which has also proved to be beneficial for overcoming cultural barriers.

The CD has proved to be successful because of the managers' and staff's creativity in facing challenges.

Central and Eastern European Scenario

Almost a decade after the political and economical transition drawing a conclusion examining the current situation of participatory democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in Hungary, we have a quite controversial and confusing picture.

At first site – no doubt – there is a huge amount legislation⁷ on different institutions of public participation such as public hearing, national and local referendum, and so on. But on the other hand the daily practice of these alternatives is a different case. They are usually underused or simply not used. What is the problem?

In talks and discussion local decision-makers widely acknowledge the importance and necessity of wider stakeholder participation in the local strategy process. However, when you scratch the surface by initiating discussion on some real life challenges or actual situations, the results are very different.

⁷ For example the new legislation on Hungarian local government (Act CLXXXIX. 2011) declared that: 'local government implementing its duties support civil society, cooperate with local community, and provide opportunities to exercises participatory practices.'

Many decision-makers blame citizen's apathy for the lack of participation. They claim that when public forums are organised, citizens do not show up, or if they do, they only complain about their narrow problems and do not understand the scope of the meeting. The dominant view is that people would participate in consultations on the issue that mattered. The issues the most often mentioned were: environmental (litter, graffiti, dog fouling), open spaces and children's play areas, crime, and housing maintenance ect. The issues highlighted varied among citizens, relating to people's own experiences and priorities. People's real experiences of participation were more likely to relate to the protection of their own or their community's interests, rather than to the wider issues that they related to in the abstract.

The other type of bad experience of decision-makers report is that some loud voices, representing only a fragment of stakeholders, capture the event and distort the results. In our transitional society where civil society and organised mechanism for representing people's interests are weak and sporadic, rapid processes that only reach out to the already organized interest groups logically lead to the representation only a fragment of the stakeholder.

Both scenarios can obviously be the result of the weak professional skills in mobilizing, organizing and managing participation.

Why people do not participate?

To initiate, help and extend participation requires that local authorities understand the reasons behind the current level of non-participation.

– People, especially young ones have negative view of their local council: its services, its officers and its members. Such views are sometimes based on personal experiences but are often delivered simply as 'common sense', based at least in part on prejudice. It is felt that the although council tax is too high, services are usually poor. Council officers are seen as polite but likely to pass the case someone else or promise to respond and than not delivered. At worst the citizen's comments echoes the traditional mantra of complaints against bureaucrats: they fob off you—they keep you waiting.

– Citizens also have negative view of councillors too; sometimes there is a complete absence of positive comment about councillors. The dominant view is that they say good things at election times, but they do not do it. There is a clear view that councillors are 'in it for themselves' or 'even for the money'. Common view is that councillors should live in the areas they represent in order to really understand local issues.

Not only decision makers, but civil servants often equally lack the skills and experience for organising participatory process. They complain about bad local politicians who are involved in short-sighted, competitive political games. Communication for them is a tool to make deals or to sell ideas in order to win support. They do not waste time and energy or money to establish and sustain a democratic dialog.

– Among ordinary citizens there is very little awareness about opportunities to participate or influence somehow the council. Few people know that they could attend council meetings and other events too. A problem of access is seen as a deterrent to having your say, particularly among the full time work. There is a considerable support for

the one stop shop concept—both in theory and among those who used such facilities or heard about them. The key advantages are seen in terms of opening hours, local access, and capacity to deal with a range of services and issues. Good customer care is a precondition for meaningful citizen's participation.

– Many people are deterred from participation because of perception that the council would not do anything. Such view is based on experience as well as prejudice and hearsay. According to different local survey only one-third of local governments felt that public participation has a significant outcome on final decision making. Effective public consultation requires that council's internal decision-making processes are redesigned to take account of public opinion. Clearer statements of the scope and limitation of participation, and better feedback on outcomes – whether positive or negative – are necessary to challenge citizen's cynicism and their resultant reluctance to participate.

– There is a strong sense among individuals that participation is for 'other people'. A stronger version of this argument is that: same people dominate everything. Others express a clear sense of exclusion on the basis of who they are.

It is necessary to see clearly that more participation is not the same as more democracy. Participation initiatives may reinforce existing patterns of social exclusion and disadvantage. Different participation methods are necessary to reach different citizens.

The main problem is that it is tremendously difficult to break this cycle as the people who are involved in are solidly knit together. On the one side is located the groups of unaware, uninformed, ignorant citizens who do not realize they could and should hold local and national politicians accountable. On the other side there are the politicians who think they know what people need and who are not obliged by the system to find the time, energy, and courage to initiate more democratic process. Without changing the condition, participatory project remain only short episodes in the daily practice of local authorities.

What could be done?

As Pratchett⁸ wrote: 'National democracy can flourish only if it is underpinned by strong democratic foundations within localities.' If democracy is to thrive within localities, it requires autonomy not only as freedom from higher authorities, but also as freedom to undertake particular initiatives and for communities to be able to reflect or express their own political identity.

Without a good standard of living, reliable and decent housing, useful, profitable profession and strong cultural background there is no urgent need⁹ in the society – regardless of its form and tradition – to initiate and use participatory mechanism as an integral part of the daily life.

⁸ PRATCHETT, LAWRENCE: Local Autonomy, Local Democracy and the 'New Localism', *Political Studies* (52) 2004, p. 371.

⁹ It is true that in spite of the fact that in the modern society people usually asks more democracy, and their voice to be heard, but on the other hand the same people quite often reluctant to use different participatory alternatives. In other words people may like the idea rather than the reality of participation.

This is particularly the case in Central and Eastern European countries where the tradition of historical paternalism is still alive in the different strata of the society. Some promising steps have been taken ahead but the journey is still quite long and challenging considering the nature of human beings, and the development of civil society. *Homo politicos*' is still far away.