



SPECIFICS OF LOCAL PLANNING THROUGH THE USE OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION MECHANISMS

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Abstract

One of the reasons why Local Economic Development faces difficulties in implementing, among other things, is insufficient inclusion/participation, but also the lack of motivation of citizens in the decision-making of relevance to the local community. The deformation of the participative involvement of the citizens (politization) has led people don't want to be subject of abuse of political manipulations. They do not recognize the sincere desire to be involved with their volunteer and expert engagement to contribute much more in resolving issues of local interest. If the local government manages to build a honest relationship with the citizens and establishes transparent communication, then it will not only restore the trust of the citizens in the local, but it will also be transferred to the central government. Therefore, partnerships must be put in place, both by the local government and the citizens, with the aim of improving the mutual communication, which ultimately, among other things, will contribute to better economic development.

Key words:

Citizen Participation; Local economic development; Transparency; Effective Communication.

INTRODUCTION

“To engage effectively, citizens not only need an awareness of their roles and responsibilities but knowledge and skills on how to execute the responsibilities. Capacity building consists of developing knowledge, skills and operational capacity so that individuals and groups may achieve their purposes” (Okello et al., 2008). Citizens of each local government unit are most likely to decide on issues related to local development, with which they are actually the most affected.

In this sense, citizens can achieve their participation in this process in two ways: (i) Indirectly, through democratically elected representatives in the local self-government bodies, the right that is exercised through the electoral process; and (ii)

Directly, through various forms of citizen participation, such as civil initiative, citizen gathering, referendums, public debates, polls, citizens' forums, submitted initiatives, complaints, suggestions, etc. "Participation is important because practical experience on the ground shows that it establishes the necessary sense of ownership" (Omolo, 2011). Citizen participation, according to Devas and Grant (2003: 309), is the 'ways in which citizens exercise influence and control over the decisions that affect them.

Not only does the civic participation contribute to increasing the transparency of the local government and improving the services it delivers both the municipal administration and public enterprises that operate in the area of units of local self-government, but it also greatly affects the quality of life, i.e. the standard of the citizens themselves. Also, the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process is in favor of the principle of subsidiarity, according to which decisions should be made at the level closest to the citizens, that is, the problems are best solved where they are created. Citizens' participation brings the government closer to the people. "It enables citizens to set policy goals and priorities, oversee the actions of the politicians and administrators and hold them accountable for their actions, express points of view, share information and point to their needs and problems, get involved in the decision making processes, identify additional resources, monitor and evaluate the outcomes of implementing policy, and many other actions."(Forrester & Sunar, (2011).

However, despite the eleven years since the start of the decentralization process, the practice shows that citizens' participation in the decision-making process is not yet at the required level. Why is that so? The numerous analyzes show that the main reasons for the insufficient involvement of citizens in the decision-making process are:

- Lack of information, that is, inability to access the necessary information, which in fact means lack of information or insufficient accessibility;
- Ignorance of the competencies of the municipality and the opportunities/resources for their realization;
- Ignorance of the legal rights for their participation in the decision-making process, and above all, the lack of interest in exercising those rights for lack of sufficient awareness of the benefits;
- Feeling that their requirements will not be taken into account, or insufficient trust in the local government for the sincerity of their efforts to engage in decision-making; and
- A pre-negative experience, which practically means a faintness of the formal forms of citizen participation that are not realized through respecting the basic principles for this.

The government is responsible for ensuring that the public actively participates in the decision-making process. The participation of citizens in public life and their right to influence the decisions that affect their lives and communities are at the center of



democracy. Open and inclusive policy-making increases public participation, enhances transparency and accountability, builds civic capacity and leads to increased buy-in and better decision-making. “The main challenges of civic engagement usually stem from the complexities of management of participation; who should participate and how; and how to translate participation inputs to policies and programmes” (UN, 2008).

It is important that open and participatory systems are developed through an open and participatory engagement with interested parties. According to Andreas Klein, “The city’s Council and the Mayor, who determine the policy within the community, have an important role to play, but also the citizens who vote regularly in elections and thus determine the composition of their local council. In this smallest political unit of a democratic state political decisions are experienced directly. Even at this basic level, there is a challenge between the (political) ideas and their practical implementation. Against this background, the image of local government as the “school of democracy” becomes clear” (Klein, 2012).

To this end all moves/actions towards making decision-making more participative are useful and welcome. It is important to ensure that local people and other stakeholders are genuinely engaged in shaping the decisions that affect them. The proposals contained in this paper are simply a step towards that goal. Whatever structures and processes are finally put in place should be monitored on an on-going basis and reviewed annually to identify how they might be improved in light of experience and specific capacity of each municipality. The intention of the paper is to give structure and guidance that will assist both, the local authorities and the stakeholders/citizens’ representatives as well, through open, extensive and diverse mutual consultation processes related to creating open, transparent and democratic local governance.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this paper is to provide an overview and recommendations about the existing forms, challenges and perspectives of citizen participation in the municipal decision making processes in Macedonia. The findings in the paper are gathered through the needs assessment, informative-consultation meetings with respective municipal officials and stakeholders’ representatives as well as conducted desktop research about current situation on citizen engagement in municipal decision making processes in 9 Macedonian municipalities: Bitola, Brvenica, Bosilovo, Cair, Centar, Caska, Debar, Lipkovo and Stip.

At the meetings the following questions have been discussed with the municipal officials and stakeholders’ representatives:

- Are citizens participating?
- Does legislation enable/encourage them to participate?

- Are there institutional arrangements for participation?
- Are public data available, reliable, and timely upgraded/published?
- Could one compare actual with planned figures and facts?
- Is it clear who is accountable for what?
- How to maximize applicable techniques to enhance effective citizens' communication, considering municipal specifics and resources?
- How to encourage citizens' involvement?
- What barriers to citizen participation in Macedonian municipalities exist?
- What methods/forms/channels used by municipalities to involve citizens are least and most effective?

During the meetings emphasis has been put on the role of municipal officials in ensuring that participation takes place. Prior the meetings, additional review (desk research) of the existing available municipal documents and analysis of the current data on citizen participation methods, approaches and existing tools in project's partner municipalities have been done.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION - RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The meetings with the above-mentioned nine municipalities went according the following order: firstly, the participants were reminded that the basis of any democratic government is certainly the citizen participation. The Macedonian Constitution endorses this by granting citizens the right to exercise their authority through democratically elected representatives, referendum and other forms of expression (Article 2) and by supporting participation in local government decision-making, either directly or through their representatives (Article 115). Then, the participants were informed about what they need to do in order to properly facilitate participation and what the legal rights of the public/municipal stakeholders are.

Representatives from municipality present at the workshops were reminded that they are responsible for encouraging public awareness and participation by making information available and accessible. The Constitution supports this by guaranteeing access to and reception/transmission of information, as well as the establishment of institutions for public information (Article 16). The Law on Local Self-Government further guarantees this by granting citizens access to basic information about municipal services and informing them of its activities, plans, and programs (Article 8). Access to information not only increases public understanding of municipal decisions, but also leads to a clearer awareness of government responsibilities, activities, resources, and constraints.

The focus then went on how the municipal officials and ordinary citizens can take an active role in building the required framework for citizen interaction, cooperation, and input. The participants were reminded what is meant by participation and the benefits it provides, as well as about the means by which effective participation can occur. Involving citizens and truly listening to their concerns is an integral part of the



process. Municipalities must therefore involve the public at all phases of the process, using whatever appropriate means possible to reach to the people concerned in order to solicit input. Mobilizing and engaging the public may be a difficult and challenging task, yet decision-makers must make a conscientious effort to do so to ensure greater sustainability and enthusiasm for the decision-making process. Attention should be paid to ensuring public involvement at the beginning of the process (planning and prioritizing activities) to avoid later criticism and rejection of decisions. Likewise, allowances should be made for objections to and disagreements with municipal solutions after decisions have been made. The result will be a municipal administration that delivers more targeted and effective services, and a public that has a greater sense of trust, confidence, and support for local government efforts.

When leaders show a sincere and consistent interest in addressing concerns of the public, citizens begin to have more trust and confidence in their government. This sincerity is demonstrated through the active acknowledgement of public opinion. If the public feels that its opinions are being listened to and considered, it will be more inclined to participate and to take responsibility for outcomes and measures. Therefore, municipal officials must provide regular feedback to the public on its concerns and reassure citizens that their needs and opinions are valid.

As noted earlier, the government is responsible for ensuring that the public actively participates in the decision-making process. This comes not only through provision of information, but also through a vigorous campaign to gain citizen input. Gaining this input can be through informal methods (such as face-to-face communication with citizens) or through formal means (such as meetings, referenda, or forums). Some are already practiced in the municipalities; others should be developed in response to varied municipal needs. The method chosen will, of course, depend on the municipal capacities, problems identified, and political concerns. In many cases, one will find that not all members of a municipality are eager to be actively involved. However, once positive outcomes start flowing from participation, people will see the benefits and want to get more involved. The following section briefly discussed and gave examples of the most commonly practiced forms of participation. It will be up to municipal objective discretion to determine which method works.

DISCUSSION

Today, in Macedonia, the process of involving citizens in decision making concerning local interests, is well underway, but there is much yet to be accomplished. Both, local government and citizens are increasing rapidly their understanding of the power and potential of citizen participation, i.e. democracy. Regardless of the opportunities for participation; of the availability, reliability, and timeliness of data; and the

accountability of governments to citizens; all partner municipalities show different level of participation.

Some of the municipalities face huge democratic deficits, somewhere large and entangled governments, somewhere in adequate levels of public services, all accompanied by relatively passive population. During the post-communist transition period, it was expected that governments at the local level most likely would become more influential and that citizens would become more aware of the issues and the decentralized competences, participating actively in the forms of municipal decision making to advance their quality of life at the local level. This has yet to happen.

In connection with the above set of problems, the municipal officials and the citizens should raise awareness of the importance of the transparency of the public work, interactive municipal planning and developing strategic documents, participatory budgeting, allocation and distribution of the usually scarce resources. That would be certainly be enabled more effectively by partnering between the both sides.

Real partnership between the people and government depends upon citizens having access to information that affects their lives. The citizens should be involved in all the local politics and policies. They should be aware of what their role is and have an opportunity to influence the local development through official and unofficial forms, such as: public meetings, debates, hearings, and citizen advisory committees. Local authorities should monitor regularly people's satisfaction with essential local government services and service delivery through professionally conducted surveys, interviews, focus groups, public meetings and other techniques of evaluation of the citizen participation.

In conclusion, citizen participation and public involvement results in better decisions. Municipal decisions that involve citizens are more likely to be acceptable to the local people. Better municipal decisions are more likely beneficial to the average citizen. For this to happen, in municipalities that were object of this observation and analysis, sometimes it takes political will, persistence and a disposition to educate both officials and citizens about their responsibilities in a democracy to make it happen.

FINDINGS

Municipalities have a legal obligation to involve and to communicate with citizens, since they make decisions for and act on behalf of the public. Citizen participation is alive and functioning in the project's partner municipalities. Most of them do not have formal plans for citizens' involvement in an organized and structured way, and the citizen participation is still embraced in the daily operation of the municipalities, but the municipal officials understand well the importance of citizen participation and have had some experience with it. The approaches to involving citizens in municipal programs and projects vary from municipality to municipality, depends of understanding, interest, political will and mainly by the existing capacities.



CONCLUSION

To have an effective and democratic local government, is essential for public participation to be properly included into the decision making processes. If the public has not enough voice in resolving the issues any local government faces and how to deal with them, the distance between the citizens and its government increases. When people are asked to contribute to something that involves them, they are far more likely to be interested in its outcomes. Open dialogue broadens knowledge for both the local government and citizens, increases the interest and effective participation of the public in decision-making process. Municipal officials, in consultation with citizens, must look for better ways to provide meaningful services. Once the citizens/municipal stakeholders become confident that its government is honestly committed to improve the service delivery to enhance the quality of life and that municipal representatives are accessible, transparent and professional, then the citizens will be more willing to participate.

There is still a culture of passivity in the country as far as citizen involvement at the local level is concerned. Citizens are reticent to react against the lack, insufficient, or low quality of public services, the abuse of constitutional rights and a low participation in developing and defining public policies. Further, it is not in the prevailing culture of national and local public agencies to enforce consultation and involvement of the stakeholders, mainly citizens and citizens' groups, in policy-making.

However, in many cases, the municipalities, sometimes in co-operation with local NGOs and with international community as well, have encouraged and often pushed citizens to get involved in policy making, priority settings and legislation development. Still a lot of people see the local government officials as powerful/inaccessible people with whom is hard to deal and municipal officials see themselves as owners of their public positions and not as appointed employees who are paid by public tax money to provide the requested services.

However, this situation usually creates citizens passivity. Still the citizens/municipal stakeholders are likely to react mostly when their direct interests are threatened/affected. In only few cases is noted that the citizens react when wide/general municipal issues are raised.

Media, especially the local media, in a number of cases, is playing an active role in voicing the concerns and problems of various municipalities. It has been the media which has made public the municipal issues, which rural municipalities especially have faced with, but they have found hard to get the necessary access to the information for the wider public.

Despite the legal framework and the capacity building efforts done by various national and international programs, the capability of NGOs in the municipalities for initiatives which benefit the whole community (citizens/stakeholders) still needs to be developed. The willingness to involve various stakeholders and their readiness to participate is increasing, which in turn assists in developing and formulating better public policies at local level.

Currently, local government officials should be leaders in promoting citizen participation. This requires real understanding, high level awareness and a strong commitment to citizen participation from local government leaders/authorities, starting with the mayor and other senior officials. The mayor and those who work with him/her should express their professional dedication to practice citizen participation regularly, clearly, sincerely and frequently. Municipal officials who are appointed to deal directly with the public – such as public relations officers have to be properly trained to practice citizen participation according to the advance democratic practices/standards.

Due to different objective and subjunctive reasons, the most of the citizens/vulnerable citizens groups especially are only partially involved in a particular municipal interest area. They often feel incompetent to organize a citizens' response unless the reasons are compelling to their own interest. Thus, citizens will voluntarily participate in a municipal activity when they have an appropriate organizational structure available to them for expressing their interests. If they view the organization as cumbersome, time consuming, dictatorial, or grossly inefficient, they will not join, will withdraw after joining, or their dissatisfaction may be evidenced by high absenteeism, or a general unwillingness to be supportive or cooperative.

People are reluctant to participate in community activity when they do not have enough information to act responsibly. Issues such as municipal budget or developing a strategy on local economic development require knowledge that many people lack. They simply do not know how to act. Thus, they will avoid participation as long as possible or until they have what they believe to be sufficient, clear and understandable information. If forced, they will usually act negatively. This participatory action may be generalized as follows: Citizens will voluntarily participate in a municipal activity when they have better knowledge of an issue or situation and when they become confident that their opinion is considered.

Budget issue, i.e. its developing and public hearings about it, was a point emphasized several times during the meetings. In order to de-alienate citizens and to demystify the budget and bring it closer to the populations concerned, it should raise awareness of the importance of the transparency of the budget, for example to present the draft by user-friendly approach.

The number of the computer literate citizens with access to the Internet is relatively high, but those who use Internet to check the municipal data is still very limited,



though this number is growing up rapidly. Still, many municipalities have web sites/portals/social media channels to post important information, but they are not updating the content regularly or not maintaining efficiently (not trained enough to use advance professional standards for electronic media maintenance). Other noted remark about the municipal web portals is that they are available usually (with few exceptions only) in one (local) language/s.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the research findings, the list of the recommendations follows:

- Provide better access to the information and upgrade the electronic communication channels/web portals preferably and translate the content on other local or foreign languages to reach more different targeted public groups; make the web user friendly and enriched with all official contacts.
- Implement specific capacity building for the neighborhood sub-units council' members especially as well as provide municipal technical assistance to support their activities.
- Recruit volunteers and youth (delegate specific task or even municipal competence) in order to enhance municipal services cost-effectively.
- Strengthen the relations between the local and central government to strengthen the project implementation and to ensure better overview of the needs of the rural municipalities especially (due to scarce resources) equalizing the citizens' living standards.
- Establish practice of publishing municipal informatory tool regularly (newsletter/magazine/bulletin, it can be in electronic version as well).
- Use professionally the social network and Internet for advance communication with citizens/municipal stakeholders.
- Encourage the citizens to attend the budget public hearings by simplifying the presentation and terminology, adjusting it to the specific target group as much as possible.
- After each meeting, gathering, informal forum, panel, discussion, make records/meeting notes and make it available for the participants (follow up activity).
- Establish practice of regular communication with the NGOs, DPOs, youth council, businessmen, neighborhood sub-units, schools, actually with all the stakeholders in the decision making processes.

- Establish/following up a procedure how to properly prepare a public hearing/meeting, public forum, poll, forum, in order to maximizes the input of the participants.
- Establish good relations with the media.
- Strengthen the links between local and central authorities.
- Provide preconditions for municipal council session to be open to the public/citizens and their proceedings to be made a matter of public record.
- Encourage public access and sharing information with the public through all available channels: newspapers, e-bulletin, public meetings, press conferences, press releases, web sites, social media, etc.
- Install computer following/tracking/archiving the correspondence with the citizens.

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