



SELF-ASSESSMENT OPTIONS FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

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Abstract

Citizen participation is an important part of both democracy and modern public governance. Institutions of representative democracy in many countries experience decrease of citizens' confidence right now; therefore they have to think about new forms of cooperation and participation schemes in interaction with citizens.

Getting people to participate is not easy. Furthermore, in many cases it is difficult to identify the causes affecting the level of participation and the coherence, because participation is an issue both to new democracies and to the old member states during economical crisis and "golden age" periods. Hence the factors affecting participation need analysis.

Theoretical and practical aspects of the significance of participation are a topic quite widely explored both in social and political sciences. Also public and non-governmental organizations and scientific research institutes have paid great attention to the studies of this form of democracy. Less applied in studying the participation process is the self-assessment procedure.

The purpose of the paper is to introduce a participation self-assessment tool that has been developed through international collaboration, the CLEAR tool, by adapting and modifying it to study the particular situations in local governments.

Applying this methodology allows us to diagnose participation in the particular municipality. It reveals and describes the overall picture of participation, identifies problems in several research directions and enables the municipality to develop solutions to improve local democracy.

Citizen participation is an important part of both democracy and modern public governance.

There are plenty of arguments why participation is so vital to democracy: elected representatives value support of the majority of citizens to the policies and practical activities they carry out; properly organized participation not only strengthens confidence in public authorities but also develops sense of belonging to the community, and facilitates loyalty. Yet, more than ever



New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

before do democratic systems have to think about new forms of cooperation and participation schemes, structural and attitude changes – because institutions of representative democracy in many countries, including the “old democracies” of Europe, experience critical decrease in citizens’ confidence [1]. The case in Latvia is no exception – data from a 2011 poll conducted by the SKDS research centre show that only 12.4% of the population of Latvia had confidence in the parliament, and 14% in the government. Public confidence in municipality/city self-governments was comparatively higher – 46%, while 49% of the survey respondents didn’t have confidence in the local governments [2]. Such a low level of confidence places a substantial burden on the implementation of state policies and the legitimacy of decisions.

Is participation important for modern public governance? It is, unless the participation process is an imitation and has a status of a formal procedure. In recent years, sayings like “from local government to local governance” or even “governance without government” becomes increasingly popular. Apart from exaggeration, their essence clearly shows the direction of modern public governance – neither central government nor local governments can operate autonomously anymore without close cooperation with citizens, civil society organizations, other bodies, and enterprises [3]. Already now the actual situation in Europe shows that citizens ever more often use new forms of communication to express their opinions, often outside of the official framework of cooperation.

J. Breul and J. Kamensky, leading researchers in American public management, developed six most important trends of government transformation, and the two most important among these were attributed to participation: engaging citizens in government – naming citizen training and involvement in decision making as important along with the tradition of informing citizens and surveying their opinions; also using networks and partnerships – because governments at all levels ever more often have to make unconventional decisions that require cooperation with other organizations and use of information technologies [4].

There are also practical arguments in favour of the importance of participation. Properly organized democracy increases the public capacity to address fundamental social problems. Because with the rise of welfare and other public spending to between a third and a half of the wealth of nations, government is no longer an institution that can be separated off: it is de facto a part of every aspect of our lives. We need therefore a more extended capacity to debate and exchange with government than that afforded by the simple act of voting [5].

In the Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to member states on the evaluation of participation policies, it is recognized that participation “has an intrinsic value, because through various forms it gives life to democracy” [6], however, from the author’s perspective, participation is a value only if it is recognized as a value by all participants – both the governing bodies and citizens.

Theoretical and practical aspects of the significance of participation are a topic quite widely explored both in social and political sciences. Also public and non-governmental organizations and scientific research institutes have paid great attention to the studies of this form of democracy, and with good reason. Less applied in studying the participation process is the self-assessment procedure, which the author relates to its novel approach, wide scope of research, resource requirements, amount of work, doubting the objective character of the research, and political will.



New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

The purpose of the paper is to introduce a new level of citizen participation studies – assessment options for citizen participation in municipalities, drawing on a participation self-assessment tool that has been developed through international collaboration, the CLEAR tool [6], which the author has begun to adapt and modify to carry out a participation study in a particular local government. Adaptation of a particular methodology to measure participation in local governments in Latvia is the first step of the author's degree thesis.

The concept of participation within the framework of this paper is civic participation in the context of the activity of public administration, meaning involvement in state and municipal policy making, while devoting less attention to political participation and its democratic aspects.

Study of the topic of participation aroused the author's interest in the presence of the following factors:

- the process of participation is extremely manifold and changing. Participation is not a static phenomenon. In different phases of democracy, degrees of economical development and particular conditions, participation as a form of expression can be very diverse and varied, therefore – a subject of continuous research and development;
- the issue of participation as an effective cooperation process between authorities and citizens is as much a subject of debate as it was 10 years ago; furthermore, as countries become incorporated in the international public administration, its supranational framework is extended;
- participation is a subject of debate both to new democracies and old member states, moreover both during times of economical crisis and during “golden eras”. It means that there is no direct correlation between high level of participation and duration of the traditions of democracy;
- the level of people's confidence in public authorities has decreased critically during the last years, therefore there is a need for rearranging public bodies and new ways of interaction with society in order to preserve the legitimacy of decision making;
- development of new technologies makes public bodies react flexibly to rapidly changing circumstances and offer up-to-date forms of governance and cooperation mechanisms;
- it is easy to talk about participation in terms of obligation, but organizing it properly is complicated;
- great attention is devoted to studying the manifold aspects of participatory democracy, but self-assessment of participatory democracy is a new research trend.

Reaching such a degree of citizen participation that wouldn't be a formal process but a cooperation mechanism appreciated both by the authorities and citizens is a complicated task. Besides, one has to consider a range of factors that are hard to change in the short term, yet they still affect the participation activity. These are:

- distrust in public authorities, largely stimulated both by irresponsible policies and clumsy, low quality public management;
- deep-rooted traditions of social passivity shaped both by the imitated participation form and government officials' formal attitude towards it;
- disbelief in changing something by collaboration and in taking people's opinions into consideration;



New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

- total lack of interest and not seeing the point of participation;
- citizens having low self-esteem, lacking belief in one's abilities, etc.

On the other hand, one may not rule out the assumption that people's everyday living and well-being is in no way endangered, therefore they have no interest in social activity, or – that they are convinced that their interests are well-protected.

It isn't easy to answer the following questions: when is a low level of participation down to contentment and when does it reflect discontentment – a poorly organized participatory democracy; is there a connection between participation indicators and citizens' satisfaction with policies implemented by the authorities; which factors contribute to participation activity and which create dislike? Besides, there is quite a popular set of beliefs that acknowledges a contradiction between democracy and efficiency [7], arguing that more effective are those decisions that are made by qualified, highly professional personnel, and use of participation procedures is just a waste of time with little result. Robert Dahl, one of the most prominent researchers of political science in the 20th century, formulated 6 different reasons why people do not become involved in politics [8]. The author found them so apt that they may also be attributed to conditions characterizing civic participation.

According to Dahl's conclusions, you are less likely to get involved:

1. ... if you place a low value on the rewards from political involvement relative to the rewards you expect from other kinds of activity,
2. ... if you think that there is no significant difference in the alternatives before you and, consequently, that what you do won't matter,
3. ... if you think that what you do won't matter because you can't significantly change the outcome anyway,
4. ... if you believe that the outcome will be relatively satisfactory to you without your involvement,
5. ... if you feel that your knowledge is too limited for you to be effective,
6. ... the greater the obstacles placed in your way, the less likely you are to become involved in politics [8].

Also measuring the efficiency of participation is a fairly complicated task from the author's perspective, because not all examples of practical politics show a connection 'the more the participation, the more effective the governance'. From it we demand quick reaction to rapidly changing conditions and highly professional competence in decision making, but participation takes time and patience, besides not always suggestions from its participants are rational and feasible. In comparison to output indicators that may be easily adapted to measure economical development, they are hard to define for the participation process; setting performance and impact indicators would be more realistic.

The local authorities in many respects is the ideal setting for engaging the public beyond the ballot box as the immediacy and closeness allow for the development of a more intense and extended exchange between governors and the governed [6]. Besides, citizens always have a greater connection to the local policies.

To encourage local governments to improve participation mechanisms, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has developed the "Recommendation to member states on the evaluation, auditing and monitoring of participation and participation policies at local and



New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

regional level” (CM/Rec(2009)2), aiming to initiate among the member states the application of a participation assessment procedure on the local level. The recommendation offers local governments or other users interested in supporting participation initiatives the concept of the CLEAR tool, allowing the user to conduct impartial assessment of the actual state of matter in the field of participation, and also to look at the results of self-assessment in the context of socioeconomic and other objective indicators, and to compare it with public opinion. The authors of the tool are a team of experts – V.Lowndes (De Montfort University, United Kingdom), L.Pratchett (De Montfort University, United Kingdom) and G.Stoker (University of Manchester, United Kingdom) – who have developed this methodology upon request from the European Committee on Local and Regional Democracy of the Council of Europe. The CLEAR self-assessment tool was first used in European local governments in 2006, initially involving 23 local authorities from 5 countries in testing this methodology [9].

The recommendation encouraged the author to examine in detail the tool that was offered and to initiate an undertaking of participation self-assessment in a given local government in Latvia.

Application of the particular self-assessment tool allows diagnosing participation, understanding needs of the local community and their feelings in this context. It reveals and characterizes the situation in the field of participation in general, identifies problems in several research directions and allows the local government to develop solutions to improve the local democracy. As the authors who developed the methodology declare, “the aim of the tool is to provide a greater degree of support for policy makers and practitioners trying to make positive changes to their practice of citizen consultation and engagement. The tool takes a diagnostic stance rather than a judgemental approach” [5]. The investigative approach that the authors of the self-assessment tool advocate is about identifying and finding the ways in which people’s engagement could be promoted – namely, not only offering participation options as a passive form but concerned, proactive cooperation. The local government has the opportunity to assess the participation process by itself and to search for solutions to improve it. Although the tool focuses upon officially sponsored participation methods, at the same time, however, the tool places an emphasis on understanding participation from the citizen’s perspective: what needs to be in place for citizens to participate. It is important for policy makers to understand what citizens think about their participation initiatives and how they might be developed or improved [5].

When exploring the particular studies in Latvia, the author of this paper has not managed to find application of this tool in any of the local governments. Several established researchers, among them E.Vanags, I.Vanags, O.Krastiņš, I.Vilka, M.Pūķis, in various time periods (2002-2006) have developed a methodology to determine the general index of local democracy, also including several indicators related to participation, for instance, involving citizens in budget consultations and decision making in the local governments; proportion of local non-governmental organizations involved in decision making in the local government; presence of the communication strategy, presence of local government staff who inform journalists, etc. [7]. More often the author has encountered with indicators of political participation calculated on the basis of election results.

The CLEAR self-assessment tool is much more extended, focused only on auditing the participation process, moreover in a very wide range of research, including the perspectives of



New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

both the local government and the citizens. The self-assessment methodology includes a manifold use of research methods to reach an objective characterization of the situation.

The authors have developed the CLEAR tool after a comprehensive examination of the different aspects of the participation process. The name of the tool is composed from the first letters of the words describing the most important underlying principles of participation. In line with theoretical and empirical conclusions reached as a result of studies, experts have named 5 most important factors in the participation process. Participation is most effective where citizens:

Can do – that is, have the resources and knowledge to participate;

Like to – that is, have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation;

Enabled to – that is, are provided with the opportunity for participation;

Asked to – that is, are involved by official bodies or voluntary groups;

Responded to – that is, see evidence that their views have been considered [5].

According to the CLEAR self-assessment tool, participation is assessed in five main research directions:

1. capacity framework required for citizen participation – resources, skills, knowledge;
2. how weak/strong is citizens' sense of belonging to the location/community they live in, and which factors have contributed to it;
3. what is the legal and institutional framework of the local government for the development of participatory democracy, and how active is the local civic society in interaction with the local authorities;
4. what forms of participation and how often does the local government use them to improve local policies and provided services;
5. what is the assessment of participation opportunities from citizens' perspective [6].

The first research direction is based on the assumption that the more well-informed and skilful people are and the more required resources they have available, the more actively they get involved in the participation process. Rather wide spectrum of activity is understood by knowledge and skills – from the ability to write a letter in the context of activities to the capacity to organize events and start civic initiatives. Second assumption – knowledge, skills and resources are not related only to the individual's income and social status. One of the very important factors is an individual resource – an individual's education, motivation and civic capacity. In this block of research the authors suggest to pay attention to education indicators in different aspects, including attainments; to employment and its structure; to demographical indicators and comparison with the average in the country, also to analyze the level of knowledge and the availability of resources.

The second research direction is related to the argument that the more explicit is people's sense of community, the greater interest about participation they have, and vice versa. In this block, the questions studied are related to people's sense of identity and community, people's mutual connections cooperation, communication, etc.

The third direction is determined following the observations that participation as a process is more active and easier to organize if it is implemented through civic society organizations or collective participation. Questions in this segment are related to detailed



New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

examination of the civic infrastructure – what types of civic organization exist, in what fields; which are the most active; which have the most influence on municipal decision making, etc.

The fourth direction is related to asking people to engage in local government's activities. People tend to become engaged more often and more regularly when they are asked to engage. Research shows that people's readiness to participate often depends upon whether or not they are approached and how they are approached [5]. In this block of research, it is determined, which and how manifold are forms of participation used by the local government in interaction with citizens, and which are the most popular; how up-to-date are the participation schemes used by the local government; does it try to make participation simpler and accessed more easily; which target groups are reached by the forms of participation; has the local government developed particular policy documents that regulate the participation process, etc.

The fifth research direction is related to "responding" to citizens' opinion. For people to participate, they have to believe that their involvement is making a difference and that it is achieving positive benefits. From the author's perspective, for post-socialist countries this important component of participation is one of the most difficult tasks to accomplish. Firstly, social passivity already has deep-rooted traditions that are left behind by the "imitated" form of participation of the Soviet period, secondly, it has been affected both by little interest and my formal attitude towards participation as such, and that has only widened this split.

In this research direction, researchers suggest assessing what procedures are implemented by the local government for citizens' opinions to be taken into consideration, how do the local authorities act in situations when citizens' opinions are different than those of the local government officials; what activities/methods are used for citizens to understand the decisions made by the local government as best as possible, etc.

An important feature of the CLEAR tool is that its five research directions are neither hierarchical nor sequential. Besides, participation assessment does not necessarily depend on all five research components. Furthermore, the model does not attach importance to any particular research direction, and there is no assumed interaction between them. Thus, the diagnostic tool basically serves 2 purposes:

1. to help to identify and understand the factors affecting participation in the particular administrative territory or local community;
2. to provide an opportunity to reflect upon the relative strengths and gaps in participation in the particular local governments and to consider strategies for addressing these gaps [6].

When using the self-assessment tool in local governments, following positions of methodology are important: the self-assessment process is not an audit – operation control or inspection, a method that has proliferated in the public sector in the recent years; rather it is an objective view of themselves, clearly recognizing their attainments and shortcomings. Authors who have developed the tool repeatedly stress the diagnostic stance rather than the judgmental approach [5].

The CLEAR model does not attempt to standardize the acquired data. Its initial goal is not to compare but to stimulate reflection within the framework of municipal activity. The results of an analysis with CLEAR do not provide a statistical basis from which to compare localities or reach some kind of ranking or classification of different municipalities. The tool does not provide a benchmark which judges a particular area. However, where local authorities



New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

would be interested in comparing results between themselves, the methodology can be adapted, especially when local authorities decide to work together from the very beginning of the self-assessment. Even though CLEAR proposes to focus on the particularities of each municipality, experience has shown that it can be very helpful for municipalities to work together and to exchange experiences. Co-operation enhances learning and has been judged most helpful by local authorities having tested the tool [6].

The target group of users of the self-assessment tool is not local governments only. Potential users of the tool may be other public bodies that have an interest in sponsoring participation initiatives; civil society organisations within a locality or individual citizens interested in enhancing or improving the participation opportunities within their communities.

In applying the CLEAR tool, experts point out 5 important stages:

1. defining the aims of the self-assessment. They largely determine the choice and structure of research strategy and the decision about which stakeholders to involve in the research process;
2. preparation stage and resource planning – a stage when answers to all important questions of the research process should be prepared, starting with who will be in charge of the project and ending with a detailed work plan developed for the research;
3. choosing the most appropriate research methods to conduct the self-assessment, on one hand, adjusting them to the goals of the particular study and to the particular specific circumstances; on the other hand, complying with the standard and requirements of the self-assessment tool;
4. analyzing the obtained results – Identifying strengths and weaknesses, interpreting results. The tool does not provide a fixed benchmark, as it is suggested that it is inadequate and even misleading to provide criteria developed without considering the specific features of participation in particular administrative territories;
5. developing proposals to improve the participation process [6].

Along with the most important research directions, the authors of the self-assessment tool suggest exploring the contextual information of the local government that, on one hand, provides statistical characteristics of the local government and, on the other hand, allows analyzing citizen participation in certain interconnections [6].

What benefits does the author see in the self-assessment of participation?

1. Conduction of self-assessment of the participation process is an attestation to local government's political will to understand the significance of participation and to its genuine desire to improve it.
2. Participation process is diagnosed in a very large amplitude, moreover the specific features and circumstances of the particular community are taken into consideration, allowing very wide variations.
3. An objective view on the managerial and decision making structures and procedures developed by the administration, their efficiency, by identifying strengths and weaknesses.
4. Use of manifold research methods, allowing not only to diagnose the overall situation in participatory democracy but to identify problems and search for their solutions.
5. Analysis of self-assessment results in the context of local government's socioeconomic indicators.



New Challenges of Economic and Business Development – 2012

May 10 - 12, 2012, Riga, University of Latvia

6. Direct communication, forums with municipality citizens about assessing the participation process, asking them questions about different aspects of cooperation.
7. Opportunity to repeat the self-assessment in one or several research directions, thus monitoring the development in certain areas and comparing it over time.
8. Self-assessment not only provides for participation diagnosis but also for exploration of mutual partnerships, networking and communication mechanisms of the local community, thus more precisely identifying citizens concerns, needs and forms of cooperation.

When applying the particular methodology to diagnose participation, the author concludes that with certain additions it may be put into practice in Latvian local governments, and its results are subject to analysis. Initially it may be used as a pilot project for several local governments, though in the future such diagnosis of local democracy may take place regularly – at least once during the term.

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