

Less is not more

Participatory budgeting



Guidelines for the implementation of the participatory governance process



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This document has been created as a result of the “Less is not more” project. The “Less is not more” is a project of the mobility of youth workers, which brought together 30 youth workers from 8 European countries – Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Spain.

The project was founded by the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020), and it was implemented in the period of April 15 until October 14, 2021. Main activities were held in Zagreb, Croatia, in the period of June 12-19, 2021.

The main objective of the project was to increase the competences of young people in the field of democracy, by their involvement in decision-making and, consequently, to increase the quality of decision-making and quality of life in their communities. The goal was to educate youth workers for the implementation of the participatory budgeting processes, so they can pass on the acquired knowledge to young people in their communities.

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Introduction

The local level of government is the level that is closest to the citizens, and at which decisions are made that are most understandable to the citizens, and with which they can identify the most. By the fact that these decisions are closest to them, the citizens have the greatest interest in these decisions, and thus the interest in getting involved in their creation.

This was also recognized by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, which in its Resolution 326 (2011) stressed the importance of involving citizens in decision-making processes at the local level.

This can be applied to the activities of civil society organizations that bring together members around a common interest, and therefore the members themselves are directly interested in how to manage these organizations.

On the other hand, a comparative analysis by Alibegović Jurlina and Slijepčević (2015) on the perception of citizen participation in local decision-making processes among elected local councilors in 16 European countries, showed that there is much room for progress in this field. However, the same survey also showed that most councilors have a positive attitude towards citizen involvement.

Based on this, we conclude that it is necessary to encourage local authorities in the form of bringing the process of citizen involvement closer through clear proposals of elements that will answer the question of how they can apply the same process in their local community.

Resolution 326 of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (2011) speaks of the importance of involving citizens in decision-making processes at all levels. The resolution emphasizes that for good governance it is necessary to hear the opinions of citizens, not only during the election of their representatives (mayor, members of the city council, etc.) but also between elections. Models of citizen involvement can be different - from referendums, local councils, youth councils, public discussions, etc. However, what is important is the statement that citizens should be involved in the process before a final decision is made.

As defined by Aragones and Sanchez-Pages (2008), participatory governance is a collective decision-making process that combines a direct and representative model. According to their definition, it is the citizens (members) who have the power to direct policies, and it is up to politicians (decision makers) to implement those policies. Based on this, they argue that citizens can monitor the work of politicians through the implementation of these policies and strategies in practice. In conclusion, they claim that the citizens themselves decide to what extent they will be involved in policy creating, i.e., decision making.

Of course, the process of participatory governance, i.e., the involvement of citizens or members in decision-making processes, has its advantages and disadvantages. The advantages and disadvantages of implementing such a process, which were pointed out by various authors, were combined by Alibegović Jurlina and Slijepčević (2015). Under the advantages, they mentioned greater education and information of both citizens/members and decision makers after the implementation of such a process, the development of mutual trust between citizens/members and decision makers and better decisions before and during the implementation of certain activities, strategies, etc. On the other hand, they pointed out that the implementation of the participatory governance process requires more time than the regular decision-making process and also accumulates certain costs. In addition, for decision-makers, disadvantage may be the eventual loss of control over decision-making, the possibility of bad decisions that cannot be ignored, and all of that can result in the development of hostility on the side of citizens or members towards decision-makers.

Based on the analysis of available theoretical treatments of participatory governance, we proposed key elements and steps in the implementation of such a process, and then we tested them with participants of the international project "Less is not more", funded by the Erasmus+ programme.

Key elements

Based on the analysis of the theoretical aspect of individual decision-making, the involvement of citizens or members in decision-making processes and the existing conclusions and results of scientists who have researched decision-making processes, we propose four elements of successful participatory governance.

These are:

- 1) Enabling participation for all
- 2) Availability of quality information
- 3) Providing feedback and transparency
- 4) Implementation

Enabling participation for all

According to Larry Diamond (2016), democracy consists of four key elements - a political system for electing and changing rulers through free and fair elections; active participation of people, as citizens, in political and civic life; protection of human rights of all citizens; and the rule of law, where laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens.

Active participation of citizens in political and civic life refers to participation in regular democratic elections where citizens elect their representatives or government, but also to the period between these regular elections. True, direct democracy is pursued constantly, without interruption. Resolution 326 of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (2011) is in line with this. One of the models for implementing such a democracy is participatory governance, i.e., the involvement of citizens in decision-making processes, although there is no legal obligation to do so and such decisions can be made by the government itself.

According to the Masters in Human Resources Degrees portal (2019), participatory governance allows all members of a community to influence decision-making, defining goals, etc. In order for the process to lie on a true democratic foundation, it is necessary to provide opportunities for all interested citizens to participate in the process. This refers to the possibility that all citizens have the opportunity to make proposals, as well as that all citizens participate in making specific decisions and/or deciding which of the proposals will be accepted. Aspects of enabling the participation of all citizens can be the availability of a place to submit proposals and decide on the acceptance of proposals in physical terms, but also in digital form if such is included.

In this part, it is extremely important that these elements of the process are as easily accessible as possible to all citizens or members. In some situations, the solution may be to combine several models that are adapted to different social and age groups, all in order to encourage as many citizens or members to participate.

Enabling participation for all citizens or members meets the basic democratic conditions, but also greatly contributes to the transparency of the whole system so as not to create the impression that only certain citizens or members have the privilege to participate in the process. Enabling participation also means enabling communication between citizens/members and decision makers.

Availability of quality information

Information is a key element in the decision-making process. The claims of Ellen Peters (2006) and Hans Rudiger Pfister (2008) are in line with this. We fully agree with their claims because in every decision making, the quality of the decisions is proportional to the amount of quality information available to those who make the decisions (Raghunathan, 1999).

Providing information is also important in defining the framework for the implementation of the participatory democracy process. Of course, it is necessary that this information be of good quality, i.e., useful for those who decide or participate in the process.

One of the most important quality information is certainly the framework and rules for implementing the process we want to implement. Implementation frameworks should be defined at the outset so that it is clear to citizens or members how the process will be implemented, who and how can submit a particular proposal, what budget is envisaged, and so on.

The sub-elements in this part of the implementation are:

- **financial framework** - what are the total funds provided for the implementation and/or for each individual proposal
- **content framework** - what kind of suggestions are acceptable
- **time framework** - in which time period the process will be carried out, elaborated according to the elements (collection of proposals, decision-making, implementation ...)

Providing feedback and transparency

The element of providing feedback and transparency of the whole system appears in all steps of the implementation of participatory governance and is based on the establishment of open communication.

Feedback and transparency of the whole system clearly show that behind the whole process are exclusively sincere intentions and give the participants of that process an insight into what is happening, what is being proposed and what, why and how the proposed can or cannot be realized.

In order to be able to provide quality feedback, it is necessary to involve relevant and professional stakeholders in all stages of the process implementation. It is important to give feedback at the stage of defining the framework for the implementation of the process, at the stage of receiving the proposals of the participants in the process, as well as at the stage of the implementation itself. In this way, conclusions based on unverified facts will be prevented and distrust in the implementation of the whole process will be reduced.

Transparency includes the transparency of the **financial part** of the implementation, such as a clearly defined and detailed budget of the planned process, received bids from potential contractors for the

implementation of selected proposals, transparency of spending funds at all times, etc.; **received proposals** so that all participants in the process can clearly see what others are proposing and what ideas they have, and at the same time, so that the proposers can see how their proposal is presented, or whether it is presented as they imagined; **process of deciding** to make it clear how and why a proposal was accepted or rejected, who participated in the vote, etc.; and **implementation** that gives an insight that the proposals were implemented, i.e., why they were not, in what stage of the implementation they are and in what way they are implemented. The implementation must be in full accordance with the decision of the participants in the process. If by any chance new elements appear that do not allow such implementation, it is necessary to communicate it with the participants, present them a new situation and ask for a modification of the decision.

Implementation

The final step of the participatory governance process is the fulfillment and implementation of those proposals and activities that emerged as conclusions and results of the implementation of such a process. This element gives the final stamp to the whole process and the results of their involvement and engagement can be seen.

By implementing the results and conclusions, the participants achieve a feeling of personal satisfaction and trust in the implementation of the whole process. Ultimate satisfaction with the implementation of the process could strongly influence involvement in future processes. That is why it is very important not to modify solutions or approaches that are not communicated to the participants of the whole process during the implementation.

The implementation sends a message to those who did not participate in the whole process, and had the opportunity to do so. They may have a feeling of regret for missing the opportunity, especially if the conclusions and decisions are not in line with their wishes and thoughts. Feelings of regret, and the fact that their involvement could have influenced different outcomes, could motivate them to get involved in future processes, even starting new processes.

On the other hand, the absence of implementation or implementation that is not in accordance with the conclusions and decisions of all participants in the process, can cause a feeling of disappointment. This feeling can completely destroy trust and jeopardize the implementation of future such and similar processes.

In this section, we build on the claims of Pfister (2008) who argues that regret and disappointment are two emotions that vividly show the relevance of a particular situation or information to an individual, both of which relate to the space between what an individual has accomplished and what he or she could accomplish by a certain activity. Pfister defines the result of regret as the desire to change an individual's own decisions and strive for another opportunity, and the result of disappointment as the desire to give up and abandon a certain process.

Implementation of the participatory governance process through the seven basic steps

1) Defining the frameworks and rules

The organizer of participatory budgeting process (NGO, local government etc.) must, at the very beginning, very clearly and unambiguously define the framework and rules of the process itself so that it is clear to all stakeholders how decisions will be made, who will be responsible for which step and what kind of proposals are acceptable.

In addition, the frameworks and rules combine items such as finances (total budget and budget for individual proposals), the time required for implementation, competence, benefits for the community, etc.

2) Presentation of the process to the citizens/members

Although this step is self-evident, we have singled it out to emphasize the importance of communicating all the details to citizens or members. By communicating with the direct participants in the process, we provide the participants with quality information on the basis of which they can make better decisions. It also increases trust and transparency.

3) Collection of proposals from the citizens/members

Once frameworks and rules have been defined and presented, a step follows in which citizens or members make suggestions that they believe should be implemented. Proposals are given according to previously defined rules and frameworks.

4) Analysis of the received proposals

The organizer of the participatory budgeting process analyzes all received proposals and, in this step, only evaluates the individual proposal in the context of whether the proposal is within the defined framework and rules or not. For proposals that are not assessed as acceptable, it is necessary to write an explanation why they are unacceptable.

The evaluation of each individual proposal is made public by the process organizer so that all citizens or members can see them.

5) Citizens/members decide

The organizer of the process presents all received proposals and evaluations from the analysis of each individual proposal, and then the citizens or members decide which of the acceptable proposals will be implemented.

In this step, it is important to emphasize that the participants in the process choose only between acceptable proposals (according to the analysis), and within the framework and rules defined at the beginning. Most often, this refers to the total budget and the time required for implementation.

6) Implementation

The organizer of the process is responsible for the selected proposals to be implemented in the form in which they were chosen by the citizens or members and at the same time and financial framework.

If for any reason it is not possible to implement the proposal in the form in which it was chosen, the organizer is obliged to communicate the changes with citizens or members.

7) Evaluation

Upon completion of the process, the process organizer in collaboration with citizens or members conducts an evaluation of the entire process in order to improve the process and prepare it for the next cycle.

It is recommended that the evaluation be carried out by external evaluators in order to achieve as much objectivity as possible.

Conclusion

After analyzing the existing literature on participatory governance and group decision-making, we proposed key elements and steps in implementing such a process with the citizens in some community or members of some organization.

We tested this during the main activities of the project "Less is not more", which brought together 30 youth workers from a total of 8 European countries – Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Spain.

Participants in project activities are active in civil society organizations and based on the proposed elements and steps have developed pilot ideas for implementation in their organizations or local communities.

During the implementation of project activities and the development of ideas, there were small modifications of the proposed elements and steps, and the final version can be found in this document.

We are aware of the fact that each local environment or organization has its own characteristics and that one model may not be fully suitable for all of them, but we are convinced that this document can be of great help to anyone who wants to implement such a process.

Participating organizations:

- Youth Mobility Institute, Croatia
- PRISMS, Malta
- Europejskie Forum Młodzieży "FRATERNITAS", Poland
- Asociația GEYC, Romania
- Associació Finestra d'Oportunitat, Spain
- PlanBe Plan It Be It, Cyprus
- Mladinski center Krško, Slovenia
- New Wellness Education, Italy

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