

THE WAYS TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT BASED ON PARTICULAR COMMUNITY NEEDS (CASE STUDY)

G. Ciuladiene, I. Kipsaite

Mykolas Romeris University (LITHUANIA)

Abstract

Citizen engagement is a process and refers to an active form of involvement in the public domain in which citizens are to a greater or lesser degree involved in tasks and services of the government. It is generally held that citizen engagement enhances the quality of democracy and is valuable for generating input and support, and finding solutions for governmental challenges [1].

Study aims at investigating the needs of Joniskis district residents in terms of active participation. The survey included questions about variables both motivating and demotivating their engagement. 213 adult respondents living in the municipality of Joniskis district participated. Encouragement to examine citizens' needs in order to find ways strengthening the engagement was given by the project "*Higher Education Institutions as Innovative Triggers of Sustainable Development in European Cities in Post Covid-19 Era*" (KA220-HED-96EB51E1). The project is intended to influence urban policy and practice towards improvement the quality of collaboration between decision-makers and citizens. Thus, a key objective is sharing of decision-making power via better information, communication and dialogue.

Data revealed the issues such as lack of trust (84 percent of respondents), and lack of knowledge in terms of engagement ways (21 percent of respondents) are the main engagement obstacles in the district. Respondents also blamed the formal communication of municipality administration indicating its problematic aspects (time, forms, topics). It was found that in order to promote citizen engagement improving the quality of information and communication provided by local government is important. Citizens would like to receive more structured information at meetings about the issues that are addressed. They would also like to receive the exact date, time, place and expected duration of the meetings organized. Engagement would benefit from education to help citizens understand the ways in which they can participate in public decision-making processes.

Keywords: Community, community engagement, municipality, Lithuania.

1 INTRODUCTION

The term "community engagement" refers to activities to work collaboratively with and through groups of people to address issues affecting the social well-being of those people [2]. Thus, citizen participation entails both interactions and changes. Interactions carried out in cooperation between public and private actors promote good governance and reduce the gap between the government and citizens. Sustained involvement from diverse participants in community-led decision-making corresponds to participatory process and adherence to standards of democracy [3]. Changes address issues and correspond to collective goals of improvement the social conditions in a particular territory [4], [5]. Therefore, citizen participation is regarded as a factor to maximize the efficiency of public policy [4], as it leads to services responding to citizens' needs [6]. The overall purpose of citizen participation is to enhance the quality and legitimacy of policy decisions, move from a service-focused approach to a citizen-oriented strategy [7]. Citizen participation is assumed to result in decisions that are better than could have been made with no involvement of community member [7]. Concerningly, local government plays an important role fostering civic culture at the local level. As McDonnell put it, „democratically elected councils must be buttressed by high levels of participation as low and declining participation can place local government's legitimacy at risk“ [8].

However, creating equitable citizen participation processes, that is establishing a dialogue among heterogeneous players is not always easy. Handling participatory processes correlates with growing workload for officials, and costs much [9]. Besides, officials place little trust in the skills, intelligence and experience of ordinary people. Arnstein hold that, "in most cases the have-nots really do perceive the powerful as a monolithic 'system,' and powerholders actually do view the have-nots as a sea of 'those people'" (p. 217) [10]. Citizen involvement often centers on the needs and goals of the party doing the involving, not the citizen. Thus, encouragement to participate in decisions through the building of long-

term “partnerships” with local community groups is challenging. Partnerships remain elusive unless partners can also articulate, debate and resolve their disagreement [7].

Success of citizen engagement in policy and planning vary considerably. Engagement can be ordered along a continuum ranging from least to most involved, underlying a „continuum of community engagement“ [11]. Arnstein [10] has categorized levels of citizen participation using eight-rung ladder pattern. „Manipulation“ (1) and „Therapy“ (2) - the bottom rungs of the ladder – indicate „educare“ and „cure“ of powerholders and nonparticipation of citizens. Upper ladders are „Informing“ (3), „Consultation“ (4), and „Placation“ (5) which progress participation to levels of „tokenism“ and indicate a one-way flow of information (from officials to citizens) with no channel provided for feedback and no power for negotiation (citizens are heard, but they can’t decide). Placation is realized when certain citizens are selected to serve in isolated positions of “power,” usually following community demands for inclusion in planning processes. It is considered the first rung where citizens have some degree of agency and power to influence change. „Partnership“ (6), „Delegated Power“ (7), and „Citizen Control“ (8) - further up ladders – indicate participation where citizens are empowered at negotiating and making decisions. Conception of partnership indicates collective bargaining power.

Botchwey et al. [12] proposed new rungs located between “placation” and “partnership” such as consent, advocacy, and incorporation expanding the participation by considering youth involvement. “Consent” refers to approval given from one person to another: leaders give citizens explicit permission to work on planning or design project for their perspectives, however they do not promise consideration or implementation of this plan or design. “Advocacy” refers to the ability to support, argue, or plead in favor of a policy, systems, or built environment change. “Incorporation” refers to united work into something already existent. In general, the smaller the distance between citizens and officials, the more likely that participants can move into a level of action that catalyzes decision-making, so that they achieve a deeper sense of empowerment [7].

In an examination of participatory processes Reed [13] established eight best practice principles. They are such as: 1) Participation must be underpinned by principles of empowerment, equity, trust and learning; 2) Communities must be engaged early and throughout the process; 3) Participation must ensure broad representation; 4) Community participants must be involved meaningfully in plan-making; 5) Engagement methods must be tailored to the community context; 6) Facilitation must be skilled and impartial; 7) Local and scientific knowledge must both be considered in decision-making; 8) Participation must be institutionalized.

Bowen and colleagues [11] developed a typology of three engagement strategies: transactional, transitional and transformational engagement. Transactional approach is implemented by pushing, one-way communication ranging from information sessions, through education to lobbying. Transactional engagement is based on ‘giving back’ through community investment and information. In contrast, transformational engagement is characterized by joint learning and sensemaking, the joint management of projects with communities and community leadership in decision-making. Transformational engagement is distinctive because (1) organizations may achieve outcomes that were unattainable without the engagement of the community and (2) the community takes a supported leadership role in framing problems and managing solutions. Thus, control over the engagement process is shared, and both process learning and benefits jointly emerge to both parties through the engagement process.

Active citizenship is facilitated by a communication infrastructure. Communication infrastructure consists of human communicative agents (everyday conversations or local meetings) and mass media (Table 1). By utilizing communicative formats at multiple levels, citizens participate in discussions and meetings to develop small changes or large transformations. In this process, communication action context agents, including demographic backgrounds or living environments, are contingent factors [5]. Communication infrastructure encourages the formation of a participatory culture. Communication infrastructure theory (CIT) states that the members of a society build connections to a feasible storytelling network in order to anticipate a successful engagement, *“storytelling networks in a communication action context are initiators of collective action. As members of a society communicate with each other, they develop a sense of togetherness within the society (p. 451)”* [5].

Table 1. Formats, channels and forms of citizens' engagement at meso-level

Format	Communication methods	Categories of engagement
Offline participation	Word-of-mouth Face-to-face Hearings / Meetings Holding public forums - public hearings and meetings Public presentations Local radio and TV Print (posters, pamphlets), Surveys to collect information on perception/ attitude surveys / Gathering input Workshops / Community capacity building and training Joint problem-solving, joint decision-making, learning and joint sense-making	Getting / Accepting information Attending meetings Engaging in a committee Advising – articulating their priorities / voting, signing petitions, etc., Serving on the committee / Being a member of committee Responding to surveys / inquiries Engaging in Community Advisory Task Groups Club gatherings Negotiating with city/community learders volunteering, donating
E-participation (online engagement)	Website / social media (internet) Publishing general information about the municipality Hearings – live-streamed through the municipality's website Calls to citizens to participate in offline/ online activities	Visiting webpages; commenting or sharing posts; completing online surveys joining social media, liking; emailing politicians, online chatting and posting/forwarding political content commenting; e-voting, e-donating

A communicative level refers to the realms of communication in terms of size. Engaging action at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels correlates accordingly with interpersonal communication agents, local organizations (ex., community social network sites), and mainstream media (e.g. national TV news, Internet news). Individuals discuss public affairs with next-door neighbors (micro-level), members of community organizations (meso-level), and global activists (macro-level). Civic action occurs when communicative formats and levels interact.

Communication strategies and social networks can either limit or empower citizen involvement. Reframing Arnstein's categorization on the involvement rungs „manipulation“ and „therapy“ consist of receiving information, „informing“, „consultation“ and „placation“ involve citizens giving information with no control over how that information is used. The highest rungs involve sharing information and decision making, with citizens gaining power as they ascent. The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2 2007) identified five levels of increasing participation with different communication methods linked to each: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, and empowering citizens. Each level corresponds to a different degree of information or knowledge sharing, from one-way information transfer, to two-way or multidirectional dialogue and collaboration [14].

Informing citizens is carried out through the use of various communication methods: face-to-face meetings (hearings), public presentations, posters, newsletters, radio, TV, Internet (website). Municipalities inform about decisions, regulations, projects, budgets, funding, e-procurements and council agendas. Announcements from local governments about important operations, services, public works, campaigns/programmes and job openings, as well as announcements made by the mayor and posts from other sources (i.e., the media) also serve informational purposes [6]. However, communicating general information about the municipality consists mainly of one-way messages aimed at representing the local government for the various audiences and increasing its visibility. One-way communication is related to passive engagement.

Consulting and involving manifest by conducting a survey (publicity examined of citizens on the subject of civic engagement). Social media initiatives increase public engagement through liking, commenting or sharing posts; completing online surveys, providing feedback and input. Public engagement level is tend to be indicated through popularity (the median number of „likes“), commitment (the median number of „comments“), and virality (the number of „shares“) [15]. However, studies show that social media tend to be mostly one way communication tools for governments rather than means for establishing a symmetrical interaction with citizens. Findings on public engagement on municipalities' social media indicates that the mere exposure to more information does not account for more public engagement: the information abundance does not mean that citizens become more active. Citizens cannot absorb

and/or engage in all the post published by the municipality, therefore they tend to consider only the newest posts and older posts, which they have missed, do not receive comments, likes or sharing. Moreover, the type of post (status, photo, link or video) again does not affect the level of public engagement [15].

Collaborating and empowering citizens indicate a local government's dialogic orientation and willingness to facilitate two-way communication with its citizenry. (Lappas et al, 2022). To harness the power of social media, local governments need to be responsive to their citizens by creating dialogic loops with them. The social media responsiveness of local governments is related to the degree to which local governments respond and reply to citizens' online comments and questions [6].

Different forms of participation are appropriate in different circumstances [12]. Multiple involvement methods are to be used to achieve better results. The decision to employ any technique, or combination of techniques, must be accompanied by an appraisal of the context where participation is going to take place and the underlying system of power relations that permeate roles and practices within a community. Engagement processes must combine 'exploration', that is, the search for new ideas and solutions from citizens, and 'exploitation', that is, the refinement of existing ideas and solutions [7].

The factors driving citizens engagement have been of keen interest among scholars. Variances in socioeconomic background - such as gender, age, income, social castes, ethnicity, immigration duration, and religion - are action factors of civic engagement. Previous work on community engagement strategies has also illustrated how context matters: factors related to the national, organizational, and community context in which engagement strategies are pursued affect the choice of engagement strategy as well as the outcomes [2] [11].

The study aimed to investigate the citizen participation at one district (Joniskis) in Lithuania. Specifically, the research questions were: 1) what is the characteristic of current involvement of citizens at Joniskis district? 2) What variables might encourage ordinary people to effectively participate in and influence policies which directly affect their lives?

2 METHODOLOGY

The study aimed to explore the attitudes of the residents of Joniskis district municipality towards community engagement. The research method used was a questionnaire survey. This method can be used to interview a large number of respondents in order to collect data that can be used to extract an objective opinion. There were 15 closed-ended and 1 open-ended question in the questionnaire. In the introductory part, respondents are introduced to the purpose and ethical principles of the study, and the person conducting the study. The socio-demographic part contains 5 questions to get to know the respondent better (gender, age, education, place of residence and employment). The diagnostic part questions are to find out the opinion of the local population about participation in public decision-making processes (questions 6-8), and find out the local population's participation needs (questions 9-15). The questionnaire in this study included five 5-point Likert scale questions with 1 indicating 'not at all' / "almost never" and 5 indicating 'to a great extent' / "very often". The questionnaire was analyzed by the following steps. First, descriptive statistics were computed. Second, the qualitative data analysis was applied for written comments. Researchers paid attention to patterns and themes through identification, categorizing the various elements, and establishing the relationship among them.

213 adult respondents living in the municipality of Joniskis district participated. Out of all of the respondents, 41% (n=88) of them were men, 59% (n=125) were women. Almost half of the respondents (47%) are aged between 18 and 29. Respondents in the 30-39 age group accounted for 19% of respondents, while those aged 40-49 (16%) accounted for slightly less. The least active age groups were those aged 50-59 (8%) and 60+ (10%). Two thirds of the respondents (62%) live within the boundaries of the Joniskis district and ap. one third (38%) live in the city of Joniskis. It is notable that as many as half (51%) of the respondents have completed higher education. The majority of the respondents reported themselves to be employed (70%). 15% of the respondents disclosed that they were students. People of retirement age accounted for 7% of all respondents, and 4% of respondents indicated that they were unemployed. 3% of respondents to this survey question chose the option "other" and indicated their response option ("person with a disability", "on parental leave").

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the ethical principles of the study. The survey took place in 2024 (April and May) and was conducted by one of the authors.

There are 60 local government areas / municipalities (savivaldybė) in Lithuania. Joniskis district municipality is located in northern Lithuania, on the border with Latvia (Fig. 1). 4 towns, 274 villages, and a total of 45 communities have been recorded in the district. With an area of 1152 km² (1.8% of the area of Lithuania), the population of the municipality on 1 January 2022 was 20 898 (<https://geodata.lt>).

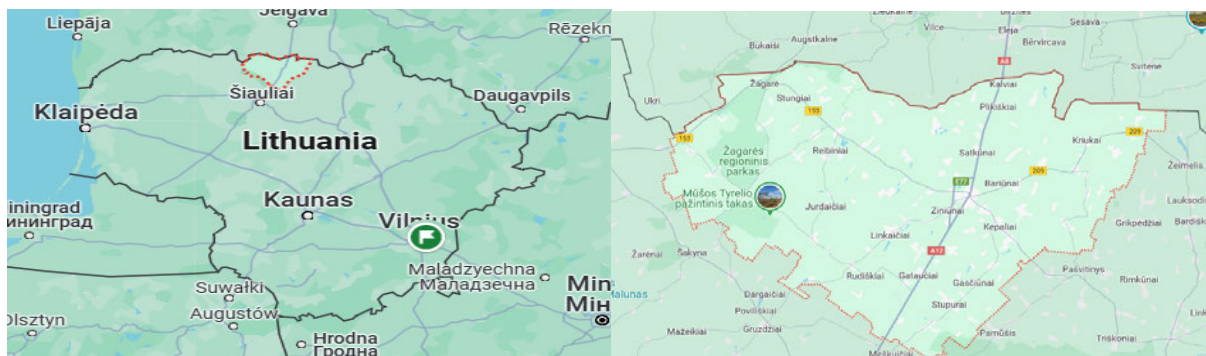


Figure 1. Location of Joniskis District in Lithuania map

McDonnell [8], while investigating the effect of municipality size on active citizenry, has found that the smaller municipality is better in terms of fostering the democratic culture from below, „citizens of smaller municipalities are more likely to participate in all modes of electoral participation – voting, candidacy, contacting, and meeting attendance“ (p. 81). Of particular importance here is the possibility of varying attitudes among communities toward engaging with municipality. Community expectations, constituents' stances and attitudes are important community context factors [11].

3 RESULTS

3.1 Current situation regarding community engagement

The results of the survey showed that people in Joniskis understand the meaning of participation. Almost every second respondent (47%) agrees that it is very important to participate, another 44% of the respondents chose the answer option "important", a small number (6%) of the respondents indicated that they have no opinion and 2% of the respondents indicated that it is not important to participate.

Respondents were asked what they saw as the benefits of participating in local government decision-making processes. Respondents were given 7 possible answers, with the ask to indicate how much they agree with the statement or to write in their own answer. As many as 129 respondents (61 perc.) agreed with the statement that participation involves citizens in public life. Similarly, the same number of respondents agreed with the statement that cooperation builds trust between government representatives and local community residents. A large proportion of respondents (56 perc.) also indicated that citizens feel important and responsible for the decisions taken and their implementation when participating in local government public decisions. Almost half (53 perc.) of the respondents who completed the questionnaire agreed that participation helps to persuade the government to take decisions that benefit citizens. Just under half (45 perc.) of respondents believe that by getting involved in local government decision-making processes, local people are better able to understand the difficulties faced by government in making decisions. However, only a third of respondents (75) believe that citizens have some control over the policy process. Moreover, 5 respondents stated that they do not believe that citizens' participation in local government decision-making processes can bring any benefits.

Respondents were asked to rate their involvement in public decision-making processes. The most frequent response was "almost never" (37%), with almost 24% of respondents saying they do not participate at all. A quarter (25%) of the respondents indicated that they are sometimes involved in public decision-making processes and only 10% of respondents indicated that they are involved in public decision-making processes.

The participation at voting for national government is high enough and higher than the national indicator. About 60% of the Lithuanian population participated in the 2024 presidential elections (<https://www.vrk.lt/2024>), but as many as 87% of respondents - citizens of Joniskis district - indicated that they had participated in the elections. 85% of respondents indicated that they had participated in the elections to the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania and 61% in the elections to the European

Parliament (the national rates are 48% and 29% respectively (<https://www.vrk.lt/2024>)). However, participation rate at voting for regional and local governments is lower. 68% of respondents took part in municipal council-mayoral elections.

Local residents were asked to rate their interest in local issues. In this case, more than half (61%) of the respondents revealed that they are interested in local issues, half as many (32%) indicated that they are neither interested nor disinterested, and only 7% indicated that they are not interested in local issues.

Respondents were asked how often they participate in petitions. The results show that the majority of respondents (39%) indicated that they do not participate in petitions at all, almost a fifth (17%) indicated that they participate rarely, just over a quarter (28%) indicated that they participate infrequently, and the smallest proportion of the population surveyed indicated that they participate frequently (10%) or very frequently (5%).

While it's obvious that petitions are not a common form of appeal to the authorities, it is important to note that on April 4, 2024, the secretariat of the Joniskis Municipal Council was handed over binders containing 5,474 signatures of the residents of the Joniskis region, demanding that the District Council take measures to ensure that the Department of Internal Diseases and the Department of Emergency Medicine are open 24 hours a day. More than a quarter of the signatures of the people living in Joniskis District Municipality were collected.

Respondents indicated that the most often used method is participation at surveys of municipality: forth expresses their opinion via questionnaires. Fifth of respondents participates at online meetings of municipality. About 10 percent of respondents participate at community's meetings, at meetings organized by municipality.

3.2 Obstacles to effectively participation

In order to analyse the possibilities for improving citizens' participation, respondents were asked to reveal their views on the reasons for non-participation. The statement "local people do not believe that they can influence public decisions" received the highest level of support (84%). As many as 75% of respondents also agree that there is not enough information on participation opportunities, and almost as many (74%) agree that there is a lack of initiative by local authorities to encourage local people to participate. A slightly smaller proportion (67%) of those who completed the questionnaire stated that there is a lack of general information and feedback. More than half (53%) of the respondents agree with the statement that residents fear negative consequences. Just under half of the respondents cite apathy and lack of time as reasons for non-participation. The lowest level of agreement (44%) was "the participation process is too complicated".

The survey also asked citizens to rate their personal knowledge of the possibilities for participation in public decision-making processes). Almost half (46%) of the respondents rate their knowledge of participation as average; 16% of respondents rated their knowledge as poor and 5% rated their knowledge as very poor. 28% of the citizens surveyed consider their knowledge of participation possibilities. Thus, less than third of the population of the Joniskis region has a good understanding of how they can get involved in public decision-making processes.

Respondents were asked how they felt about the informativeness of the information provided by their local government. The results of the survey show that more than half (52%) of the respondents are "moderately satisfied". While 15% of respondents are dissatisfied with the information provided, 34% say they are satisfied with the quality of the information they receive. A review of the results gives the following picture that two thirds of respondents would like to receive better quality information from their local authority.

Respondents were asked what they thought would encourage them to become more involved in public decision-making processes. Respondents were asked an open-ended question with no response options. A wide range of opinions was received.

In the open-ended responses, the most frequently mentioned topic related to the quality and lack of municipal information provision. Respondents lack publicly and easily accessible information. Respondents indicate that they would like to see more frequent and clearer information on the preparation and outcome of decisions via email, social networks, local press and the municipality's website. There is also a lack of information on the progress of processes, feedback, meeting information (issues to be addressed, date, time, place, estimated duration of the meeting). Respondents miss the possibility to participate remotely in the various meetings and the possibility to contribute to the decision-

making process by responding to the surveys. Respondents mention a lack of clarity on how, to whom, where, and by when to respond to the various questions posed by the municipality ('often there is only general information and a note saying that they are waiting for suggestions. Residents do not understand the limits to which documents can be amended, the limits to which proposals can be made, and no specific person is mentioned.") Respondents felt that education, involvement of young people, identification of benefits and education on the possibilities of participation in public decisions would involve more people in the region.

Respondents to the survey say that they miss the local government's proactivity, willingness and tolerance to cooperate with the inhabitants of the local communities, the mutual trust, the feeling that the voice of the inhabitants is "heard", the understanding of the needs of the inhabitants, and the appreciation of the inhabitants for the concrete works, ideas or time they have given up for volunteering.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Through community engagement local people can articulate the knowledge of what and where local community issues are, and possibly the knowledge of how local community issues could be addressed, drawing on their lived experiences [16]. Level of engagement ranges from the least (nonparticipation) to the most involved (citizen empowerment); increases from one-way information sharing, through two-way dialogue and collaboration, to community leadership or empowerment [11].

The study identified some important communication needs of citizens of Joniskis district relevant for successful citizen participation. Citizen participation suffers from the information deficits. Study suggests that meeting local residents' information and communication needs contributes to active civic engagement.

Joniskis district residents – respondents – indicated „nonparticipation“ level in terms of active participation. Respondents pointed out the municipality as the variable for nonparticipation. They tend to blame that there is lack of initiatives from the municipality side (74 perc.). They lack information about engagement possibilities (75 perc.). In addition, they lack feedback, information afterward (67 perc.). Even the fear was pointed out: respondents (53 perc.) are afraid of jeopardizing the negative outcomes of participation initiatives. Indeed, the involvement of citizens is often time-consuming; it may be pointless if its results are ignored, or even backfire creating mistrust and hostility [7].

Less respondents pointed out themselves to be the variable for nonparticipation. The apathy of residents (50 perc.), or contrary, the lack of time because of their business (50 perc.), as well as the uncertainty due to the process (34 perc.) are named as the main obstacles referring to inner ability of residents.

In line with other research, distrust is the main issue. It refers to management of involvement efforts. Participants disappointment may have important consequences for current and future engagement efforts. To mitigate information deficit an extended process of mutual learning through ongoing dialogue is important. Ianniello and colleagues [7] give practical recommendations to be taken into account in order to facilitate successful citizen participation, including in particular: (a) allowing for long-term interaction; (b) involving participants in research; (c) favoring diversity and representativeness in participants' selection; (d) institutionalizing participation; (e) using multiple participatory methods; (f) clarifying rules and mechanisms; (g) agreeing on expected outcomes; (h) involving knowledgeable facilitators; (i) avoiding hierarchical arrangements and red tape; (j) planning for short-term gains within a long-term strategy; (k) building supporting networks and collaborative capacity with key institutions; (l) mixing learning strategies that combine new ideas and refinement; (m) developing a context-sensitive design; (n) giving voice to participants' goals and agendas.

Political trust means that citizens know the “basic ideas or good of an institution”. If those ideas make sense, citizens will be motivated to engage with that particular institution. Governmental features like transparency in public decision making, availability of and accessibility to information affect citizens' trust in their government [1]. Trust between community members and the local government is also built by public engagement, as public engagement facilitates more effective plans when action relies on behavior change by individuals and households [17]. Public engagement helps to maintain realistic expectations about the process and its potential outcome.

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