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

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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 (Mbah, 2020).

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 (McDonnell, 2023). Besides, officials place little trust in the skills, intelligence and experience of ordinary people. Arnstein (1969, p. 217) 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’”. 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** (Ianniello et al., 2019).

Relevance of the study

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 (Calder, and Beckie, 2011).

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 (Bowen, 2010).

Multiple involvement methods are to be used to achieve better results (Table 1). 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 (Ianniello et al., 2019)

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



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

METHODOLOGY



The study aimed to explore the attitudes of the residents of Joniskis district municipality towards community engagement.

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?

research method

A questionnaire survey

There were 15 closed-ended and 1 open-ended question in the questionnaire

included five 5-point Likert scale questions with 1 indicating ‘not at all’ / “almost never” and 5 indicating ‘to a great extent’/ “very often”.

participants

213 adult respondents

41% (n=88) men,
59% (n=125) women

- 47% - aged between 18 and 29
- 19% - aged between 30 and 39
- 16% - aged between 40 and 49
- 8% - aged between 50-59
- 10% - aged 60+

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.

CONTEXT INFORMATION

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). 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. 4 towns, 274 villages, and a total of 45 communities have been recorded in the district. (<https://geodata.lt>).

This study presents data which was collected as the part task while implementing Erasmus project “*Higher Education Institutions as Innovative Triggers of Sustainable Development in European Cities in Post Covid-19 Era*” (KA220-HED-96EB51E1).

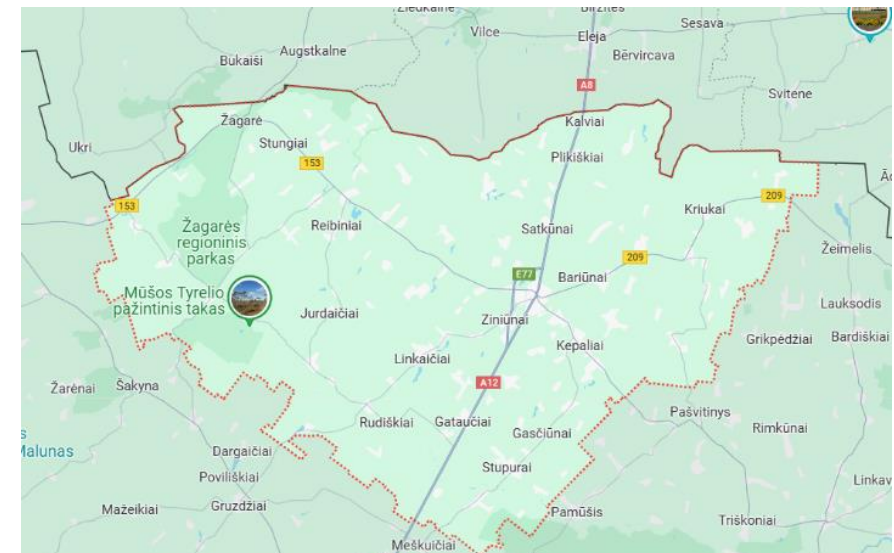
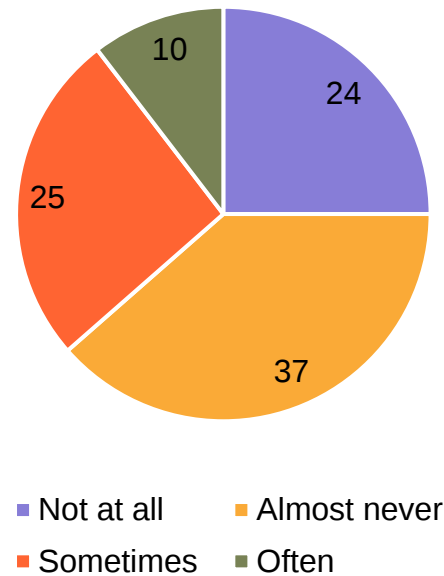


Figure 1. Location of Joniskis District in Lithuania map

Results. Current situation regarding community engagement

involvement in
public decision-
making
processes

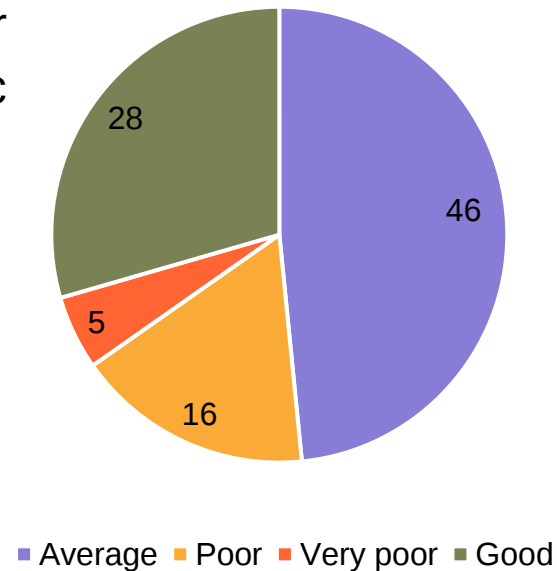


Respondents indicated that the most often used method is participation at surveys of municipality: forth expresses their opinion via questionnaires. Fifth of respondents participates at online meetings of municipality. About 10 percent of respondents participate at community's meetings, at meetings organized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

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.

Results (1). Obstacles to effectively participation

Personal knowledge
of the possibilities for
participation in public
decision-making
processes



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.

Two thirds of respondents would like to receive better quality information from their local authority.

In the open-ended responses, 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.')

Conclusions

01

Joniskis district residents – respondents – indicated „**nonparticipation**“ level in terms of active participation. 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.

02

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 (Ianniello et al., 2019).

03

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