



Drivers of Engagement: Participatory-Communicative Projects and Concepts **10 November 2017**

Speakers: Marije van den Berg (researcher and advisor on local democracy and citizen control, Whiteboxing, The Netherlands), Tracy Vaughan (public participation professional, Canada), Catherine Veyrat-Durebex (project manager, City of Nantes, France), Beata Kolecka (Head of the Communication Unit, Secretariat General of the European Commission)

Moderator: Pamela Bartar (Communication specialist, Centre for Social Innovation, Austria)

Across Europe, administrations at all levels of governance are paying increasing attention to the need to involve the public in shaping the plans and programmes that significantly affect their lives. In addition to supporting democracy, good governance and accountability, the input of the general public is a valuable resource for policy making. New ways of approaching communication, collaboration and co-creation between amateurs and professionals from different disciplinary backgrounds have unlocked creative talent and brought about innovative solutions. This workshop examined several ways of creating responsive and integrative communication approaches to citizen participation, illustrated by specific projects.

Pamela Bartar briefly introduced the topic and gave the floor to the speakers.

Marije van den Berg started her presentation by stating that hassle is a symptom of democracy. Therefore avoiding hassle means avoiding democracy. Ms van der Berg then gave an overview of the topic. She began by asking those present to consider the factors leading to greater engagement with community projects. Differences in opinion are seen by some as a challenge that can make direct democracy unrealistic. However, she highlighted that democracy not only sometimes *involves* working together in spite of differing opinions but, by definition, *requires* collaboration between people who hold different points of view.

Ms van der Berg believes that new tools should not be used simply for the novelty value, and that tools should be chosen on the basis of the value they can add to the democratic process. She invited the audience to consider the features that lead to tools improving democratic quality. After some suggestions were made by the audience, she suggested that inclusion, deliberation, transparency, public control, efficiency and democratic skills are the key elements for evaluating new tools when selecting the most effective ones from a number of options.

The second speaker, **Catherine Veyrat-Durebex** shared insights from her work in Nantes. She began by introducing the city and went on to explore the working model for participation used by the local authorities. In Nantes, the process for participatory projects began with an initial preparation phase and was then followed by a debating stage, where members of the public could make suggestions and discuss the pros and cons of various initiatives to modify the proposal. A feasibility study was then carried out before the plan was finalised and commitments were made. After the project had been implemented, a follow-up was carried out where success could be evaluated and adjustments made to the ongoing aspects of the initiative. Lastly, she drew on examples of a project concerning the Loire river, as well as the initiative "la transition énergétique, c'est nous" (the energy transition is about us).

Tracy Vaughan then shared her experience with the participatory work she conducted in the city of Vancouver, Canada. She began by outlining the demographics of the low-income areas, which have a young population facing barriers to their engagement. For instance, Vancouver's relatively large LGBT+ community in particular presents a paradox as it consists of especially passionate and active



people, who are nonetheless not fulfilling their potential for involvement with participatory projects proposed from outside their community.

Ms Vaughan went on to give advice on how to improve engagement with such demographic groups. She highlighted the role of "community champions", whose task is to encourage people to engage with direct democracy initiatives. These people are recruited from the local area and their detailed understanding of the community with which they are working is a vital asset. Ms Vaughan also explored the importance of adapting the techniques used to the audience. For example, since the population of Vancouver is predominantly young, considerable use was made of online platforms - albeit in combination with offline techniques, so that not only those who were comfortable with technology were included. Another valuable piece of advice given by the speaker was simply to make the projects fun: to choose themes that are relevant to people's lives and present them in an engaging format.

Beata Kolecka placed the theme of the session in an EU context, informing the audience about the web portal "Have your say on EU policies", which allows stakeholders and citizens to share their views on the EU decision-making process, and which has successfully attracted contributions from hundreds of millions of people in the years since it was set up. This initiative aims to give power to the public and has been designed to achieve a greater impact while using less time and resources compared to previous working methods. Ms Kolecka and her colleagues are working to change perceptions of the EU, using social media as well as face-to-face communication.

She nevertheless recognised that due to the many different languages spoken in the Member States, publishing only in English can create a barrier to participation for less socially and educationally privileged groups, and that it is therefore extremely important to translate content into the other official languages of the EU. Similarly, there are currently a disproportionate number of contributions from countries such as the UK and Germany, and not enough from Central and Eastern European countries. Ms Kolecka then provided an email address where suggestions regarding the web portal can be sent, and highlighted that (constructive!) criticism is welcome.

Ms Bartar finally opened the floor for debate and questions, and the discussion focused first on the different approaches used to include the different groups of socio-economically disadvantaged people in local and participatory initiatives. **Ms Vaughan** started by emphasising that disadvantaged groups are not uniform, and then described the methods that can be used to reach people. She explained for instance the necessity to use a variety of languages when addressing migrants, or that the use of online tools has proven useful, as they can be accessed from public spaces. The discussion then shifted to how to shape messages to target specific groups, and **Ms van den Berg** concluded by describing a successful programme run in her hometown in the Netherlands, and closed the session by stressing the need to include more young people in participatory projects.