Empowering Citizens at Local Level
21st October 2016

Speakers: Alec Walker-Love (Communications Specialist, Belgium), Erdmuthe Klaer (Deputy Secretary General of European Network of Regions and Cities for the Social Economy, REVES, Belgium), Jonathan Dehas (Communication and Marketing Manager at Atrium.Brussels, Belgium),

Moderator: Natasja van den Berg (Author and Journalist, The Netherlands)

The workshop aimed to answer the crucial question of how citizen participation can flourish, and discussed the political and philosophical legitimacy of involving citizens in a more thorough way at the local and regional levels. The speakers presented best practice examples and offered possible solutions for communication challenges faced in this area.

The first speaker was **Alec Walker-Love**, who explored ways of empowering citizens at a local level from the perspective of 'smart cities' projects. These urban transformation projects are often long-term and complicated, which can lead to public disengagement and complaints, especially regarding local infrastructure development. It is therefore important to make sure that citizens have a good understanding of the complex issues involved.

Citizen empowerment as a process relies heavily on communicating correct information. However, good communication alone does not necessarily mean citizen engagement. Citizen engagement is a process whereby public concerns, perspectives, needs and values are incorporated into decision-making, and where citizens are at certain stages put on equal footing with the 'people in power'. This, however, is difficult to apply in the linear decision-making processes used today. For example, a smart city project typically starts with 3-4 years of preparatory work including feasibility studies, technical evaluations and contractual work before citizens are informed about the project – at which point is it essentially a 'fait accompli'.

Nonetheless, administrations can still try to create space for citizen empowerment and engagement in 3 steps:

- Bundle it up – finding projects where citizens can have a say (e.g. playgrounds, landscaping), and introducing new voices and opinions, e.g. from residents, businesses, police.
- Let people to see and understand the difference the project will make in their everyday lives.
- Consider and choose the engagement tool carefully – by segment of population (e.g. consider the difference between established residents and transient residents) and by appropriate channel or method (consultation, public meeting, survey, etc.)

Mr Walker-Love's concluding remark was that generating trust and good will around engagement is like a bank account – if you only go there when you want to take something out, you will very quickly have nothing left.

The second speaker was **Erdmuthe Klaer**, whose network (REVES) brings local and regional authorities together with social economy organisations. The aim is to enable them develop partnerships by co-designing policies. The network started as a response to the observation that citizens have less and less trust in local and regional policy-making, mainly because they do not share the overarching vision. REVES has introduced the Territorial Social Responsibility (TSR) method in order to develop effective ways of working together with citizens on visions of community and policy. This starts from defining principles of a common future vision for the community, involving as many citizens as possible and deducing criteria that policy-makers and other stakeholders have to meet during their policy-making process. The final step is to measure how successfully these criteria have been incorporated into the policy.

The system has so far been tested twice in the small cities of Messina and Feanza in Italy. In the case of Messina, once the community vision was established, a community foundation was set-up to facilitate implementation of the vision. In the final remark, Ms Klaer explained that the TSR methodology still requires further reflection on how to communicate the results of the process to citizens. What is still missing from this approach is communication of the results to the citizens, so that the perception of such projects will begin to change.

The last speaker, **Jonathan Dehas**, shared the citizen empowerment triggered by the lockdown in Brussels after the recent terrorist attacks. Trade and commerce were negatively affected when people stopped coming to the city centre. The mayor and local authorities decided to address this problem, but instead of following traditional methods of attracting citizens back to the city centre, they initiated a campaign which allowed citizens to participate in co-decision and the creation of new projects in the city centre.

The project was carried out in four stages: 1, submit your idea for Brussels; 2, vote for your favourite idea; 3, prototype your project; 4, make it with a budget of 30,000 EUR. 30 of the most popular ideas became prototypes, from which a final 10 were selected, and are now in the process of execution. A video of the selection process was then presented to the workshop audience, showing the great variety of ideas received.

The discussion that followed focused on the different levels of participatory democracy and citizen engagement in the different models that had been presented. The question of trust in representative institutions was also posed, underlining the importance of drawing inspiration from these cases to enhance existing processes. The movement away from 'ordinary' participation towards more digital methods was noted, but it was also highlighted that many citizens do not participate in social media campaigns or other digitalised participatory tools. Overall, the discussion can be summarised in the following key points.

- In order to better involve citizens we need to develop the right communication and engagement tools. In particular, we need to make use of appropriate channels of communication for different groups.
- It is important to consider the way we formulate and communicate 'questions' when consulting and/or involving citizens.
- We cannot wait for people to come to us – we need to reach out to them.
- Active citizen involvement throughout the process is crucial for any project to succeed.
- Scaling the engagement methods and processes up from the local level is challenging. Tangible outcomes are best seen at local level.