

The project « Europe, a tangible experience for all its citizens » was funded with the support of the European Union under the Programme "Europe for Citizens"

Applicable to the Strand 2 – Measure 2.1 "Town-Twinning"

Participation: The project involved 311 citizens, notably 133 participants from the city of Obec Mad (SK), 60 participants from the city of Comuna Suseni (RO), 59 participants from the city of Kispiac (SR), and 59 participants from the city of Feherto (HU).

Location/ Dates: The event took place in Obec Mad - Slovakia

Short description:

The day of 03.08.2016 was dedicated to the following workshops:

"Civic Participation in the Decision Making Process on European Level"

The opening event – held by Obec Mad , where discussions about the effectiveness of citizen participation. During the sub - activity, the following topics were debated:

- Community will and participation dilemmas
- Participation - what principles?
- Participation - in what?
- Participation - how?

Specific problems identified by partners:

- There is no real and meaningful community participation and involvement
- In the most recent methodology of the renewal of locality planning, in the level of principles appears the principle of partnership and consultation with stakeholders, but these details are not elaborated in the methodology. The guidance manual does not give the script of the involvement ways, being enough the protocols from the public forums and does not give space and especially commitment to the early involvement.
- Another basic problem is - at locality level almost everywhere - the politicization of processes and decisions.
- At the same time, non-governmental organizations appearance and sounds by their own choice is often a bothering factor

Recommendations made by participants:

- In order to facilitate participation, there is a need to make easier the decision-making processes, and by this the access to community planning – and this is the application of the principle of subsidiarity.
- Among all resources required, the first is time. This is not simply means work of experts, but also identifying stakeholders, creating situations in which the local community - or at least a broad range of its representatives – is activated, it believes that its participation has a matter, competence and negotiation techniques "deployment".
- Financial resources: it is essential to set up a central or at least a regional financial fund to help civic participation and community involvement processes.
- It is necessary to ensure the professional background of participatory planning, also establishing a helping network for this.
- The culture of community involvement and community participation should be strengthened in the state administration - preparations should be provided if necessary for employees, and if necessary, forced regulation for such procedures.
- At all levels of the education system and at the same time in adult education there have to be promoted the community planning and community involvement approach.

Also partners identified that there would be a need of action by a decision preparing community advisory board, and community friendly governments who collaborates with local communities, who would be the initiators of this activities.

More, there is a need for helper professions and skilled professionals who in their citizen being are helping and strengthening citizens and local communities, thus contributing effectively to strengthening community participation. For example, those dealing with social work, rural development and culture.

The greatest need - near democracy – is a prepared civil society, and well-organized communities.

This condition only partially is given in present times. Some of the politicians and local governments are beginning to feel that without the civilians it would not be function.

It is becoming clear that the European Union does not give any support to places where community involvement actions were not implemented. One of the conditions to apply for Structural and Cohesion is social dialogue and community participation. Thus, the external pressure has been released.

"Focus on the Positives. The role and relevance for civil society in times of crisis" – held by Comuna Suseni.

The discussion was moderated by Comuna Suseni – P2, and started with a general presentation of the situation of civil society in Romania, where the role of civil society is still not significant in influencing political decisions, economic and / or public interest and where the long transition period was accompanied by an underdeveloped civil society.

Topics debated:

- What should be the role of civil society in the new context locally and internationally?
- How we relate to politics and what we want from it?
- How can civil society work better for consistent action that will have an important impact?
- What would be the elements that could bring together different sectors and the civil society?
- What would be the practical aspects of civil society action to achieve its objectives?

The most important problem identified by partners was that young generations look disinterested, and there is a democratic deficit.

In this meaning, there is a need of rethinking the policy direction of democratic participation by civil society and to facilitate the engagement of European citizens for a more constructive and fulfilled engagement.

The exit of civil society from the jam it was surprised by the crisis could be to promote civil dialogue as a tool of reconciling divergent interests. Its role, as the role of the organizations that it facilitates, can be determined only on the assumption of continuing democratic evolutions.

Organizations that innovate, then try to multiply their actions will go up to change public policy. Organizations that initiate or are involved in networks tend to have the highest impact.

"New Media for Increased Impact" - discussion about the challenges linked to social media and citizens' participation in our societies and at EU level, held by Kispiac.

Conclusion:

In the context of the social media that it challenges the traditional models, allow people to communicate, facilitates collaboration, inverts the hierarchy and is built from the bottom up, is open and transparent it can be used to encourage collaboration between citizens and stakeholders.

Also it is a tool to facilitate better management of activities and the visibility of results and collaborative skills.

In this context, partners realized and made a self commitment to use more often the social media tool in involving citizens as local public authorities, not just to increase the number of local people who are interested in the decision making process, but to increase transparency in their activities.

"Civil Society and the Non-Europe Debate"

This session was one of the most complex session during the event, where issues related to inclusion in Europe, common identity, equality and making people to imply in the decision making process were debated.

Participants made recommendations on the following topics:

Employment:

- Support mechanisms for vulnerable youth
- Inclusion of unemployed and inactive people in a personalized service for employment
- Improving training for workers in small and medium-sized farms

Social services:

- development of a minimum package of intervention as a mandatory responsibility of every local authority;
- Developing community intervention teams for social services

Education:

- increasing the number of kindergartens
- Improving access to quality education for children with special educational needs

The day of 04/08.2016 was dedicated to the following workshops:

"Citizen Participation in the Political Life of the EU" – held by Obec Mad.

Partners identified a series of factors and problems which has influence on citizen participation, such as:

- Societies with strong traditional elements - parochialism: family, religion, local institutions, intolerance, conflicts, the participation of women
- Survival values ahead of those of self-realization - subjective poverty, non-public expression, police more credible than media or NGOs, low individualism
- Rather non-participating national profile
- In terms of politics, citizens informing, but are not informed - discrepancy between interest and political knowledge, ideologically contradictory profile
- There is a rupture between the social environment and the political one.
- People expect institutions to solve issues, but rarely put pressure on these institutions to get what they want.
- Subcultures of participation - young, middle class.
- How public institutions manage citizen's involvement in decision-making is considered at least defective. The administration is opening, at least in declarative but has no resources and does not know how to manage it. Do not know who to call for consultations and what to do with input. Consultations organized by public authorities seem not outcome oriented, but rather seem efforts to apply procedures that have not found a place clear in the functioning of the institution.
- The evolution of public involvement in decision making is one quantitative and not qualitative, appreciates participants at the event. NGOs are suspicious about the results of their participation in various public consultations. They are suspicious about the authorities' initiatives, explaining this suspicion with previous experiences, where their input was not useful.

Solutions:

One of the first things that can determine the success of a process of citizen involvement in public decision is the issue around which it is organized. During the activity it became obvious that people participate rather when the subject / topic of the consultation is one close to their everyday concerns.

Conclusion:

Public authorities have to make citizens believe that every move is on their everyday concerns.

"Solidarity in Times of Crisis" – held by Comuna Suseni

At this session partners agreed on that the European Union it has been always "social", as a result of analyzing the following round of questions:

- What does it mean agricultural budget? It is also a form of solidarity with farmers and between farmers in order to create conditions and guaranteed income to ensure food security of the population and sufficient food at reasonable prices?
- What it means regional policy? Is it all a form of solidarity with the less developed regions compared to the EU average?

Also there were debated politics used by different EU institutions to promote solidarity, such the redistributive policies through mandatory and optional EU legislation and trough social dialogue.

Redistributive policies through mandatory and optional EU legislation identified:

- Redistribution in favor of the poor: The Common Agricultural Policy, Structural and Cohesion Funds, European Social Fund

Regulatory policies:

- Women's equality with men in the workplace
- Measures against discrimination
- Free movement of workers, Regulations regarding free movement
- Healthcare and labor protection

Social dialogue:

- Discussions
- Consultations
- Negotiations
- Common measures taken by the social partners (employers and unions)

Conclusions:

Active solidarity can be implemented only by combining national policies with community policies. The lack of clearly formulated goals prevents the adoption of common measures in the direction of solidarity.

Recommendations:

- Promoting the European Solidarity Corps, which is a new initiative which creates opportunities for young people to volunteer or work in projects in their own country or abroad
- Equitable distribution of wellbeing through political solidarity should be accompanied by a coherent equitable distribution and responsibilities and efforts of creation of wellbeing, both between member states and between European institutions and even among the big European business operators.

„Development of Social Enterprises in the EU” – held by Kispiac:

In short, was presented the SE at EU level, being highlighted that the social economy plays a very important role in the European economy combining profitability with solidarity, creating jobs, strengthening social, economic and regional cohesion, generating social capital, promoting solidarity and a type of economy that give priority to people, supporting sustainable development and social, technological and environmental innovation. In the EU 10% of European business activity is for social enterprises, which integrates more than 11 million employees.

What should be done at country levels?

- Initiating (Serbia) and finalizing (Romania, Hungary and Slovakia) the regulatory framework
- non-financial and fiscal measures for social enterprises, similar to best practices in the other Member States of the EU
- tax incentives: exemptions or reductions of taxes and social contributions, regulation of the right to free use or minimum rent for spaces,
- The right to lease public services without commercial character under the law
- offering a grace period of 1-5 years, involving tax exemption for a certain time from the establishment of the social enterprise;
- non-financial measures: regional incubators, advisory services for starting and developing social enterprises, business type technical assistance centers;
- Direct support for the establishment and development of social enterprises, financed by resources from the state budget and/or local budgets;

During the subactivity, P2 – Comuna Suseni presented project entitled Less Poverty, More Employment: Contribution to the achievement of the EU's 2020 targets, implemented in 2016, and where an in-depth analysis of fight against poverty process in the partner countries were made, being highlighted the role of social enterprises.

The day of 05.08.2016 was dedicated to the following workshops:

„Protecting Citizens' Rights: Challenges and Opportunities for EU Passengers” – held by Feherto

This session included debates about mobility, where the following topics were touched:

- Accessibility – including connectivity, which refers to the ability to travel between certain points and access (people have access to many opportunities to travel, despite physical disability or social factors)
- Improving safety and security while traveling;
- Environment - reducing pollution, greenhouse emissions and energy consumption - promotion of non motorized transport
- Economic efficiency
- The quality of the environment

The most important problems identified by partners were issues regarding to the mobility for persons with reduced mobility, the mobility of workers in Europe (restrictions for non –EU member states - Serbia) and obstacles of geographical mobility between member states: the lack of mutual acceptance of diplomas and qualifications.

Recommendations

- Elimination of administrative and legal barriers in acceptance of qualifications
- There is a need to make Sustainable Mobility Plans at regional or microregional levels to achieve an efficient, integrated, sustainable and safe transport system, to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion and ensure a better quality of life, dealing with surface transport, traffic management, bicycle infrastructure.

„Keeping Europe Open - Mechanisms available for Serbian citizens so that they could more actively participate or influence the accession negotiations process” – held by Kispiac

Kispiac showed a very optimistic behavior regarding to the negotiation process between the EU and Serbia. The

European Union has approved the accession negotiations almost three years ago, but delayed the official start of negotiations until Serbia has taken concrete steps regarding to its separatist province, Kosovo. Also, the country must continue the process of normalization of relations with Kosovo, reform its judiciary system, the public administration and economy, fight against corruption and discrimination and to consolidate freedom of expression. And this point is where Serbian citizens can be involved not only in the negotiation process, but in the reform of the above mentioned systems.

Problems identified at local levels in Serbia:

- Few active non-profit organizations at local levels
- Confused citizens regarding to the situation of Kosovo – enter with or without Kosovo
- Uncertain media influence

Recommendations:

- Help the activities of non-profit organizations
- More citizen involvement
- More trust in the Government
- More participation in networking programs financed by the EU, where Serbian participants can experience from EU member states.

The information template can be find here:

<http://obecmad.sk/en/photo-gallery/>

<http://www.suseni.ro/pdf/973-info-template-en-3.pdf>