

# IMPLICATIONS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION UPON CITIZENS' SATISFACTION

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*The satisfaction of citizens considering public services depends on the way the authorities identify and offer solutions to fulfil citizen's expectations, which are at least identical or even superior to the services offered in private domain. In addition, the worldwide governments are forced to adapt to the pressure exercised by the changes that appear in the demographic, technologic and economic environment, by the growing expectations of citizens and the necessity of lowering the taxes. As a consequence, the public system is starting to adopt the solutions that the citizens identified for the developing of the public policies, implying and making the community responsible in the act of governing.*

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The citizen participation is the process through which the preoccupations, needs and values of the citizens are incorporated in the decisional process of local public administration. There are two directions of communication (between citizens and administration), with the general purpose of making better decisions (local public administration) sustained by the citizens, on the basis of the attributes their satisfaction develops on.

Both Upson<sup>763</sup> and Schachter plead for the implication of the citizens in the act of governing. The problem they notice is given by the difficulty of implication of the citizens in public affair problems. After Schachter, the indirect benefits associated with the involvement of citizens in the administrative act are: economical development, community reviving, perception of safeness, low mobility of the citizens with low salaries. Stone<sup>764</sup> fights Schachter's ideas through the prism of plural wishes, expectations and opinions of citizens which mainly cannot be transform into efficient results for the governing act. Even though, Schachter himself admits the fact that the same project can be efficient or not, depending on what that community has been waiting for. In conclusion, it is difficult for the leaders of a community to decide which project should be implemented, because the results can be labelled as efficient or not depending on the subjective criteria each individual has. With such a big emphasis on the conformity of the administration's results to the citizens' expectations, Schachter misses the fact that the citizens' expectations can be unrealistic in what efficiency is concerned<sup>765</sup>.

Ebdon and Franklin<sup>766</sup> claim that the instruction of citizens with respect to fiscal aspects with which they operate in public system, helps them to separate the feasible projects from the unfeasible one. When Upson talks about the implication of citizens in problems of efficiency he distinguishes between "how" and "what" the public administration does. Upson argues that because this two situations interact with each other, the civil servants have to pay attention to

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<sup>763</sup> Upson, Lent D, Letters on Public Administration from Dean to His Graduates, Detroit: Citizens Research Council of Michigan, 1954, p. 152

<sup>764</sup> Stone, Deborah, Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making, New York: W.W. Norton, 1997

<sup>765</sup> Bothe John, Governmental Efficiency in Our Time: Is the "What" Really More Important Than The "How"?, Public Administration Review, Sep/Oct 2007; 67; 5; ABI/INFORM Global, p.813

<sup>766</sup> Ebdon, Carol and Aimee L. Franklin, Citizen Participation in Budgeting Theory. Public Administration Review, 2006, 66(3) : 437-45

both aspects: “what administration does and how it does it”.<sup>767</sup> By comparison, the hypothesis that Schachter supports relies more on “what” administration does and less on “how” it acts. Bothe<sup>768</sup> says that it might be possible to obtain better results, if they first of all let citizens know about actions, functions and implications of the activities performed in those public institutions, and only later, after they developed their knowledge in the matter of public system, the citizens can understand “how” the administration works and based on this knowledge they can analyse if the projects they support bring realistic solutions.

The most influential theory that has dominated the research in the domain of social and political participation of the past years is Putnam’s theory on social capital, from 1993, which resumed from another perspective the theory on political culture developed by Almond and Verba. The social capital refers to the characteristics of society, trust, norms and networks of interpersonal relationships, which can better the society’s efficiency, by facilitating common actions. According to Putnam’s<sup>769</sup> theory a civic community (society) (which can be said to detain a social capital to a large extent) would be characterized by the following elements:

1. Civic employment: the citizens participate actively in the public domain, pursuing their interests in the broader context of society acknowledging at the same time, the interests of the others.
2. Political equality: the community is bounded through relationships of cooperation and reciprocity, not through relationships of authority and dependence. People are employed in the process of self-governing, following norms of reciprocity, in the perception of citizens one being able to find the growing satisfaction of the act of governance.
3. Solidarity, trust and tolerance: the citizens are active, equal and they help, respect, trust each other, even if they have different opinions, they are tolerant with their opponents.
4. Associations, which are, in fact, “social structures of cooperation”: the norms and values of civic community are incorporated in distinct social structures and practices.

Putnam’s research on the communities in Italy pointed out the tight connection between the type of community and the degree of social integration: the citizens from less civic communities in the south Italy feel, to a larger extent, alienated, exploited and powerless. The social networks based on trust have bigger chances to overpass the difficulties that come from non-fulfillment of common interests, as a result of opportunistic and isolated actions of the citizens that are not implicated in the mechanisms of collective actions.

Spontaneous cooperation of people is facilitated by social capital, but the production of the social capital is a cycle. In the participation process, people acquire new skills, greater confidence in each other, so that the provision of social capital is recharged. All the forms of social capital grow as they are used, and they decrease if not implemented.

Almon and Verba have considered that it is good to begin with the local community when it comes to participation, because the problems are easier to understand, the government organisms are less distant and the chances of efficient participation are bigger. It is only here that the citizen can develop a feeling of knowledge with respect to the social and political problems<sup>770</sup>.

The citizens’ disinterest towards the involvement in the process of decision making and their distrust in their capacity of influencing the decisions of the authorities have as effect the emphasis of a dominant position of the public authorities in the structure of a participative administration. In this context, the role of local public authorities implies not only the acceptance

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<sup>767</sup> Upson, Lent D, Letters on Public Administration from Dean to His Graduates, Detroit: Citizens Research Council of Michigan, 1954, p.153

<sup>768</sup> Bothe John, Governmental Efficiency in Our Time: Is the “What” Really More Important Than The “How”?, Public Administration Review, Sep/Oct 2007; 67; 5; ABI/INFORM Global, p.814

<sup>769</sup> Putnam Robert D, Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

<sup>770</sup> Almond G., Sidney V., *Cultura civică, Atitudini politice și democrație în cinci națiuni (Civic Culture, Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations)*, Bucharest, Du Style Publishing House, 1996

of citizen's participation, but also the initiation of some measures for their effective implication in the decisional processes. The disinterest of public authorities considering citizen's participation seems to be a factor at least as important as the passivity of citizens, the relations between the mentioned dimensions being one of reciprocal causality<sup>771</sup>.

Gretchen<sup>772</sup> reveals in his study the lack of an active implication and participation of the final beneficiaries (citizens), demonstrating that this way the structural and operational changes that demand implementation fail to produce the desired effect, or at least it takes longer than expected.

The citizen's participation in the process of making public decision includes not only the specific methods of implication at local level, but also ways of ensuring participation of the entire community in the process. The diversity management becomes an important part of the process of implication of the citizens in the public life.

#### *Integration*

"The opportunity of participating equally in the socio-economical life, without loosing the distinctive identity (linguistic, cultural) and simultaneously, the contribution to the cultural heritage of society through individual distinctive elements...<sup>773</sup>"

If through integration the identity of a group is maintained, being identified modalities by which these would become a part of an entirety; the assimilation has, of course, a negative connotation due to the minorities' loss of identity and the adopting of the majority identity elements. The political integration based only based on equality in rights as it derives from the citizenship won't grant equal opportunities and it won't prevent social conflicts either. The participation opportunity implies not only the participation but also its capacity of consolidation. Not to become a symbolic effort the comprehensive integration has to complete the political, socio-economic and cultural participation with the inclusion and consolidation of the capacity.

#### *Social inclusion*

The social inclusion is the process through which the persons with a higher risk of poorness and social exclusion gains access to the opportunities and resources needed in order to have a full participation to the normal life of the society they live in. The process implies an active participation in decision making which affects their lives and the guarantee of fundamental rights. Inclusion has an important role because the role of the state is to ensure security, order and prosperity. The state can accomplish this task only if it manages to integrate all the groups of society. The inclusion has an important role because:

- if a group feels rejected from the process of elaboration of policy and from the state's institutions, it will create its own separate institutions;
- the majority will see these institutions and the work agenda of that minority as a threat;
- this situation might generate conflict.

The inclusion implies the participation of minorities in the processes of elaboration of policy and the consolidation of their capacity, for a more efficient participation; it means acknowledgement and adaptation of minority groups. Thus, in what defining of community problems are concerned, the information has to include the definition of everyone's problems and needs, from the viewpoint of each, majority or minority. After the problem has been defined, they are prioritized and included in the work agenda. This process needs to be based on the participation of all the groups of community, reflecting the problems and the needs of the community in general and not only of a particular group. In what the participation of the minority to these processes is concerned, greater attention needs to be paid to the way the minorities are represented. The

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<sup>771</sup> Comşa, Mircea et al. (2006) Evaluation of Law 52/2003 on decisional transparency in public administration, research report of Metro Media Transilvania, beneficiary InWent,p.35

<sup>772</sup> Gretchen K. . Managing the impersonal in a personalized public service. Public Administration and Development 23(2), 2003,pp. 197–209.

<sup>773</sup> United Nations Development Programme(2002).The Roma in Central and Eastern Europe.Avoiding the Dependency Trap. <http://roma.undp.sk/>

principle of the majority decision does not have to be determinant for the setting of priorities and of the agenda, neither in continuity in general, nor inside groups.

Thus, local policies need to be adapted to the diversity of the community and at the diversity within each group, as well. The participation of all the groups in the process of elaboration and implementation of local politics ensures their acceptance by the entire community, triggering a feeling of responsibility towards the results obtained. The responsibility of local authorities, in addition to the ensuring of participation of all those affected directly or indirectly by that policy, includes the development of complimentary structures of the policy, the creation of capacities and allocation of resources.

#### *Exclusion and inequities*

Social exclusion means limited or blocked access to social systems (labour market, political institutions, access to education, social services etc.). It is a process in which certain individuals are pushed to the margins of society and they are not allowed to fully participate, because of discrimination or due to poorness or lack of elementary competences.

It is important to emphasize that the inequities are characteristic to democracy not only at a level of representation, but also at the participation level: non-dominant ethnic groups, inferior in number or vulnerable ones could not only be neglected, but they also have less power to influence the rules, procedures and policies. If these are not taken into consideration or moderated by special procedures, they can cause later inequities.

On short term, the exclusion of a non-dominant group and of the preferences of this group from the political agenda might seem an efficient and effective solution, but on long term, the win-lose situation will become a loss-loss one as long as the social situation will get unbalanced. The restricted competition for power and resources and the exclusion of different groups from the decision making process sooner or later results in social conflicts, massive migration which effect the entire community, not only the group that is exposed to the exclusion. In such cases the risk of conflict is higher.

There are more values accepted in governing, such as equity, equal treatment, inclusion, social unity, participation. They all are meant to fight against the phenomenon of exclusion. Therefore, good governance is designed to reduce exclusion and promote inclusion, a fundamental principle of democratic states.

#### *Marginalization*

According to the Law concerning prevention and fight against social marginalization, social marginalization is defined by peripheral social position of isolation of individuals or groups with limited access to economic, political, educational and communication resources of community, it is manifested by the absence of minimum social conditions of life <sup>774</sup>. It is the result of multiple exclusion from different social systems and of segregation. It is a process of socio-economic degradation. It is the total failure of inclusion.

Segregation is illegal separation without consent or expressed desire of the segregated. It means isolation from society by denying access to major social, political or economic institutions. Segregation based on ethnic criteria can lead to both "vertical" and "horizontal" stratification, where different units are separated into their own structures and mutually incompatible.

To be fair, the state and its institutions must be neutral and must not favor one group over another. To ensure participation of all groups in local decision-making process there is a primary need for recognition and awareness of diversity as well as of the way in which the identities overlap and intersect.

Public participation is desirable when it is effective. The management of the participatory process primarily supposes a series of decisions and actions meant to make it possible:

- identifying the most appropriate form of participation for the desired goal, considering the nature of the problem, the size of the group involved;

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<sup>774</sup> Law no.116 / 2002, art.3

- identification and clear communication of the objective of participation;
- invitations sent in time;
- providing necessary resources for the good development of the process: moderators, operating room, materials to present the problem, etc.

To get the desired result, participation must be first *inclusive*, i.e. the views of those directly and indirectly affected by the resulting public policy should be allowed to transpire. This is especially relevant where the community is distinct ethno-culturally.

#### *Language barriers*

Symbols, linguistic structures and rules make the coding mode of the message sent to the listener represent an important barrier in intercultural communication. Beyond the linguistic problem, the level of knowledge of communication language and the vocabulary which the participant has, make the message and its understanding difficult the way it was intended by the others. Ensuring communication in mother tongue is one of the ways of passing that barrier.

#### *Anxiety*

Coming into contact with members of other cultures makes them find out that other cultures have different values, that in the same situation the culture guides others differently. Interaction with a stranger is a challenge for any guide considering the behavior, the rules that were as clear as possible in the communication with a person of the same culture are lost, thus leading to anxiety - nervousness. Such an emotional reaction is normal when someone enters an environment that is unfamiliar, considering the fact that one cannot predict the behavior of others.

#### *Stereotypes*

Stereotypes are labels that are applied to individuals that are associated with a group of people and share one characteristic. They can be negative, and they function as mechanisms to discourage involvement in community life.

#### *Cultural context*

Communication must take into account the differences in codes of conduct and rules of communication that can differ according to culture / different ethnic group, age, social environment. These differences are relevant when they either discourage the participation due to the misunderstanding of the communication meaning and of behaviour, inability of expressing in the same way or have negative and offending effects that certain behaviours can inflict to the others.

However these communication barriers can be overcome. The Public Administration role in this process is to identify the differences among community members, to facilitate mutual understanding and communication between them, to mediate conflict situations.

To meet the needs of citizens, participation must be *transparent*, which is to rely on early communication of information necessary for participants to make decisions. The information must be communicated in a language accessible to a bigger part of the target group. Also, information should be distributed as widely as possible.

Participation should be facilitated in order to allow each participant to express their views, to ensure reaching a conclusion related to the objective of participation. The role of the facilitator or mediator is based on four principles:

- *separating people from their problems*: separation of subjective problems, caused by different perceptions and other inherent obstacles in communication between people, by objectives, by content;
- *focusing on interests beyond the positions of different parts*: finding the real problems, under apparent solutions or symptoms;
- *generating of multiple solutions before reaching an agreement*: identifying alternative solutions to the same problem, to identify the best alternatives or combination;
- *identifying objective criteria for the reached agreement*: objective evaluation of multiple options for taking any kind of decision, when determining priority issues or choosing the best solution from several alternatives.

The participation goal is to reach an agreement, a common understanding on solving a problem of the community or of a part of the community, thereby achieving a higher level of satisfaction of the community members.

The most effective methods of citizen involvement are the direct ones:

- *Regular meetings* between representatives of public authority with the public, both on specific areas of local public policies and with groups of citizens directly affected by specific policy measures (an effective method of citizen involvement is represented by the meetings organized by the local executive with the leaders of associations of owners in the community to identify together the ways of meeting the wishes of the citizens they represent).

- *Public hearings* - to identify problems of public policy brought by citizens.

- *Public debates* aiming to identify the alternatives of public policies approved by citizens and to select alternatives that are viable and/or the evaluation of the impact of implementation of various public policies (consulting citizens living on the streets included in the project of asphaltting and rehabilitation, aiming at surveying the riverants' opinion on the opportunity of the project implementation, on the method of further development of the road ditches, bridges etc. ).

- Encouraging *the formation of citizen advisory committees* to identify solutions to the diverse problems of public policies at local level.

International experience shows that in the case of efficient and effective functioning of local authorities through active and direct involvement of citizens, the chances of the development of the town become bigger, but this has also a positive effect on decreasing the level of corruption at the level of local officials and clerks, all these reflecting a significant impact on citizens' satisfaction. Even if there is a legal framework in this regard and even if the transfer of power and financial funds is perfected, they should be supported by the knowledge of the citizens regarding this process and their commitment for local problems of public interest, too. But, the participation of citizens, more likely its effectiveness, is influenced by more factors such as: civic responsibility, knowledge related to the system, possibilities of participation, age as an indicator of political mobility and knowledge, occupation as time constraint, social integration as a network communication, income, education level, consumption of media.

In the case of services, implicitly those of local public administration, the client is part of the provision process. Therefore, there is a need to inform and educate him/her that his/her opinion counts, that depending on his/her options certain public services can develop and reorganize, that the benefits of active and inclusive involvement of citizens in the process of elaborating legislative acts and that of decision making are multiple. This involvement can be conceptualized as a form of partnership between authorities, public institutions and citizens to achieve common goals at the level of community. Citizen involvement is also a way of socialization, of making citizens responsible regarding community problems. Citizen involvement contributes to an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual support necessary for a balanced, sustainable and long-lasting development at local level.

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