

# PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE IN THE PUBLIC HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS OF THE SCANDINAVIAN AND BALTIC COUNTRIES

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*The diminished trust of citizens in the public sector, the increased complexity of policy issues and the reforms in accordance with the new public management principles generate the need of focusing more extensively on participatory governance. Participatory governance can be defined as the genuine engagement of citizens and other organizations in the formulation of policies and strategies, in the decision-making process from the public sector and in the implementation of the decisions. The present paper's objectives are to define the concept of participatory governance, to argue in favor of implementing it in the public sector and to find to what extent public healthcare institutions from Scandinavian and Baltic countries publish information on participatory governance and how they perceive community engagement. The research findings are that the information on participatory governance disclosed on the websites of relevant institutions from within the Scandinavian and Baltic public healthcare systems is scarce. The countries with the greatest concern for community engagement are Denmark and Sweden. It is argued that there should be a shift in focus within the public sector in general and within the healthcare system in particular, so that citizens are genuinely involved in the relevant processes and their satisfaction is indeed at an adequate level.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Citizens usually take the passive role of beneficiaries of the services provided by the public sector or are directly impacted by the developed policies, without having much to say about it. Even if the discourse of public sector entities may emphasize the orientation towards the general public and their needs, it is precisely the public which is actually least empowered. The power of the citizens to influence the decision-making process in the public sector is related to the concept of “participatory governance”, which according to Sneddon and Fox (2007) is a matter of power. The present paper's objectives are to define this concept, to argue in favor of implementing participatory governance in the public sector and to find to what extent public healthcare institutions from Scandinavian and Baltic countries publish information on participatory governance and how they perceive community engagement. The paper is structured as follows: the first section includes a brief literature review, the second describes the research design, then the concept of participatory governance is defined and arguments in favor of a greater emphasis on this type of community engagement are presented. Last but not least, the penultimate section describes the results of a qualitative research on the information on participatory governance disclosed by institutions from within the public healthcare sector of Scandinavian and Baltic countries.

## **2. Literature review**

The international body of literature on the concept of “participatory governance” is rather scarce when compared with the relevance of the issue. Participatory governance is examined as part of governance in the public sector. For instance, the paper of Edwards (2008) is part of a major project in Australia called “Corporate Governance in the Public Sector: An Evaluation of its Tensions, Gaps and Potential”. Participatory governance is considered to be a process that strengthens local democracy by opening new spaces for citizens’ participation. This understanding of the concept belongs to Peris et al. (2011), who explore the link between participatory government and urban environment planning. Actually implementing participation in the public sector is difficult, as pointed out by Sneddon and Fox (2007) who elucidate recent efforts to enhance policies of public participation within the context of governance in the Lower Mekong basin. Additionally, participatory governance was researched in the context of the public sector of the most diverse countries: China (Zhong and Mol, 2007), Brazil (Baiocchi, 2003), and Morocco (Berriane Y., 2010). The present paper builds upon the existing body of literature by developing a study on the participatory governance disclosure practices in the public healthcare systems of Scandinavian and Baltic countries.

## **3. Research design**

The research is interpretative in nature and consists of three dimensions: conceptual clarifications on participatory governance, arguments in favor of focusing more extensively on participatory governance and analysis of the information disclosed by Scandinavian and Baltic countries on community engagement. Authors performed a qualitative analysis consisting in the investigation of the websites of different relevant institutions of the public healthcare systems from Scandinavian and Baltic countries, namely from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The purpose of this analysis was to find to what extent these bodies publish information on participatory governance of the health system and the way they perceive community engagement. The healthcare system was first of all chosen due to its importance within the public sector, and secondly in order to continue the empirical studies performed by Ștefănescu et al (2010) regarding performance measurement and regarding the disclosure of information on social responsibility issues of public healthcare institutions. The reason for choosing to analyze the Scandinavian and Baltic countries was their pronounced and well-known interest for the well-being and social protection of their citizens and for social responsibility issues.

## **4. The concept of participatory governance and arguments in its favor**

In the view of OECD, governance is a concept that encompasses not only the public institutions and the instruments for governing them, but also the set of relationships between governments and citizens. In this context, citizens are considered to act both as individuals and as part of or through institutions, e.g. political parties, productive enterprises, special interest groups and the media. Edwards (2008) identifies within this approach two dimensions of corporate governance in the public sector: vertical and horizontal. The vertical dimension refers to hierarchy issues within the public sector, while the horizontal one refers to the involvement of stakeholders outside of the public sector. Hierarchy is not to be ignored, since it provides the structural framework necessary for the public decision-making process. However, the involvement of citizens and organizations outside of governments is increasingly important nowadays and is the focus of the present paper.

The involvement of stakeholders outside of the public sector is not limited to disclosing to them relevant information, but also comprises their taking part in the formulation of policies and strategies, in the decision-making process and in the implementation of the decisions and

measures taken. This genuine engagement of citizens and other organizations in the public sector processes is called “participatory governance” and sometimes “community engagement”. The essence of “participatory governance” consists in all relevant non-government stakeholders having the opportunity to influence the process of policy development. They should have the chance to express their views and interests and according to Osmani (2007) should feel their opinions have been given consideration, even if the end result of the decision-making process may not fully comply with their wishes.

The main reasons for focusing more extensively on “participatory governance” are according to Edwards (2008) the following: (1) diminished trust of citizens in the public sector; (2) increased complexity of policy issues; and (3) reforms in accordance with the “new public management” principles. First of all, citizens become more cynical and less trustful in the public sector, especially on the background of the numerous “crisis measures” taken by governments, such as salary cuts, personnel cuts, and increased taxes. Second of all, the complexity of policy issues is increasingly greater and comprises the difficulty of defining issues, the involvement of several parties, and the impossibility for the governments to solve them on their own. Third of all, following the adoption of some measures from the private sector and the externalization of certain public services, governments lost part of their control and lacked the knowledge necessary for developing effective policies and offering high-quality services.

## 5. Participatory governance in the public healthcare systems of the Scandinavian and Baltic countries

The public healthcare system of a country is essential for the welfare of its citizens. Healthcare issues are of major interest for all citizens, at every stage of their lives, irrespective of age or social status. Naturally, a healthy lifestyle, healthcare adapted to one’s personal needs, and a proper life and work environment are highly desired both by the population, and by governments. As in the corporate sector human resources are considered the most valuable assets of companies, so in the public sector, people are a strategic resource and their wellbeing is critical. We therefore chose to focus our study on the public healthcare system and as previously presented, we limited to the Scandinavian and Baltic countries. We investigated the websites of the relevant institutions from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, in order to identify to what extent these bodies disclose information on community engagement within the healthcare system of that country and to examine the way they perceive participatory governance. An overall view of the results is presented in Table 1.

*Table 1: Disclosures on participatory governance in the Scandinavian and Baltic public healthcare systems*

COUNTRY	NAME OF INSTITUTION	SITE	DISCLOSURE LANGUAGE	INFORMATION ON PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE
<i>Denmark</i>	Ministry of the Interior and Health	<a href="http://www.sundhedsministeriet.dk/English.aspx">http://www.sundhedsministeriet.dk/English.aspx</a>	- Danish - English (partially)	The Danish Government launched in May 2002 the reform program “Welfare and Choice”. The underlying idea of this program is to enhance competition and quality in the public sector through choice. The citizens’ freedom of choice is considered very important. The website discloses information on the implementation of choice in education, health care, elderly care, child care, and on the implementation of choice for vulnerable groups.

COUNTRY	NAME OF INSTITUTION	SITE	DISCLOSURE LANGUAGE	INFORMATION ON PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE
	Danish Medicines Agency	<a href="http://www.dkma.dk/1024/visUKLSForside.asp?artikelID=728">http://www.dkma.dk/1024/visUKLSForside.asp?artikelID=728</a>	- Danish - English (partially)	No information in English on participatory governance. However, there is some information on the corporate culture of the Agency, namely on the fact that the initiatives and ideas of the employees are encouraged. Moreover, there is information on a nationwide campaign which was launched in 2010 and sets out to encourage hospital doctors to be more active in reporting serious and unexpected side effects from medicine.
Sweden	The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs	<a href="http://www.sve.hi.se/sb/d/2061">http://www.sve.hi.se/sb/d/2061</a>	- Swedish - English	No disclosure of explicit information in English on participatory governance.
	The Swedish National Institute of Public Health	<a href="http://www.fhi.se/en/">http://www.fhi.se/en/</a>	- Swedish - English	Clear interest for participatory governance. One of the most important public health objectives is to increase people's level of participation in society. Some of the most important fields where citizens should have the chance to participate in the governing and development of society are labor market policy, media policy, gender equality, integration and disability policies.
	National Board of Health and Welfare	<a href="http://www.socjalstyrelsen.se/english/aboutus">http://www.socjalstyrelsen.se/english/aboutus</a>	- Swedish - English	No disclosure of explicit information in English on participatory governance. However, information on how to report malpractice or dissatisfaction in Health Care or Social Services.
Norway	Ministry of Health and Care Services	<a href="http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/hod.html">http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/hod.html</a>	- Norwegian - North Sami - English (partially)	No disclosure of explicit information in English on participatory governance.
Finland	The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health	<a href="http://www.stm.fi/en/frontpage">http://www.stm.fi/en/frontpage</a>	- Finnish - English (partially)	No disclosure of explicit information in English on participatory governance. However, the Ministry started in November 2007 the Masto project to reduce depression-related work disability. It involves administrative sectors, social partners and third sector organizations. Moreover, in promoting welfare, the Ministry acknowledges the need for diverse cooperation within municipalities and groups of municipalities, and with the state, church parishes, NGOs and the private sector.
Estonia	State Agency of Medicines	<a href="http://www.sam.ee/">http://www.sam.ee/</a>	- Estonian - English (partially)	No disclosure of explicit information in English on participatory governance.
	The Ministry of	<a href="http://www.sm.ee">http://www.sm.ee</a>	- Estonian	No disclosure of explicit information

COUNTRY	NAME OF INSTITUTION	SITE	DISCLOSURE LANGUAGE	INFORMATION ON PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE
	Social Affairs	<a href="#">e/eng.html</a>	- Russian - English (partially)	in English on participatory governance. However, there is information on the actions in 2009 under the Implementation Plan 2009-2013 for the National Health Plan 2009-2020. First of all, it is relevant that a survey on patient satisfaction was launched, that for the first time also examined the issue of corruption. Second of all, the Estonian Patient Advocacy Association and the Committee of Experts on the Quality of Health Services were provided funds in 2009. Generally, the Ministry aims at developing a patient-centred healthcare system.
<i>Latvia</i>	The State Agency of Medicines is a Regulatory Authority	<a href="http://www.vza.gov.lv/">http://www.vza.gov.lv/</a>	- Latvian - English (partially)	No disclosure of explicit information in English on participatory governance.
<i>Lithuania</i>	The State Medicines Control Agency (SMCA)	<a href="http://www.vvkt.lt/">http://www.vvkt.lt/</a>	- Lithuanian - English (partially)	No disclosure of explicit information in English on participatory governance.

*Made by the authors*

The general finding of the research is that the information on participatory governance disclosed on the websites of relevant institutions from within the Scandinavian and Baltic public healthcare systems is scarce. In Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, no explicit information on participatory governance is disclosed. Their disclosure on such issues is rather limited. For instance, Finland admits that cooperation within municipalities and groups of municipalities, and with the state, church parishes, NGOs and the private sector is required in welfare promotion. In Estonia, the concern for the satisfaction of patients is obvious, and one of the Ministry's objectives is to develop a patient-centered healthcare system.

Denmark and Sweden are the two countries from this geographical area which show the greatest concern for community engagement. The Danish Government launched in May 2002 the reform program "Welfare and Choice". The starting point of this program is that the common responsibility to provide welfare services for the citizens should be combined with personal freedom to choose between different solutions. The citizens' right to choose is thus acknowledged. As a consequence, competition and quality in the public sector are to be enhanced by means of choice. On the other hand, Sweden shows clear and explicit interest for participatory governance. One of the most important public health objectives stated on the website of The Swedish National Institute of Public Health is to increase people's level of participation in society. It is considered that strengthening democracy and defending human rights reinforce the feeling of affinity in society as a whole and increase trust between people, two factors which promote good health. Opportunities to influence and participate in society are especially supported for financially and socially challenged persons, as well as children, young people and the elderly.

## 6. Conclusions

Participatory governance can be defined as the genuine engagement of citizens and other organizations in the formulation of policies and strategies, in the decision-making process and in the implementation of the decisions. The diminished trust of citizens in the public sector, the increased complexity of policy issues and the reforms in accordance with the new public management principles are the main reasons for focusing more extensively on participatory governance. However, the research showed that the information on participatory governance disclosed on the websites of relevant institutions from within the Scandinavian and Baltic public healthcare systems is scarce. The greatest concern for community engagement is displayed by Denmark and Sweden only. Authors consider there should be a shift in focus within the public sector in general and within the healthcare system in particular, so that citizens are genuinely involved in the relevant processes and their satisfaction is indeed at an adequate level.

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