

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 326 (2011)¹ Citizen participation at local and regional level in Europe

1. Recent demonstrations and events in Europe and on its borders indicate a growing need for citizens to be listened to by their elected politicians and to be able to influence politics at all levels, including between elections. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is convinced that increased public participation and direct involvement in local and regional governance can give citizens a sense of empowerment and more confidence in the democratic process.

2. For good governance at the local and regional level it is essential that citizens are able to have direct contact with elected officials and have some influence on the exercise of the authorities' powers and responsibilities. This is the level where their immediate concerns are taken into account. Working directly with people at neighbourhood level is central to how locally and regionally elected representatives should operate.

3. Representative democracy is the key mechanism whereby citizens can directly influence decision-making processes through universal suffrage. Participatory democracy is complementary to this process, serving as a tool to enable local and regional representatives to effectively carry out the role to which they are elected.

4. Providing clear, comprehensive and accessible information on local and regional politics strengthens active citizenship and fosters a feeling of belonging to a community, as well as encouraging the civic duty to contribute to this community in a democratic society.

5. Recent developments concerning "open data" (online publication of raw government information) in some countries show how new information and communication technologies, combined with a policy of transparency, can have a direct impact on participation and services at the local and regional level. Applications such as "Openly Local" and "spotlight-on-spend" filter the data and allow the emergence of smart communities.

6. It is essential that local and regional authorities have active and effective communication policies to keep their communities informed of their opportunities to participate in local life. In particular, they should ensure that those groups of citizens which have the most difficulty in being involved in public life at local level are informed appropriately whilst ensuring that participation is balanced and representative of their communities' composition.

7. For citizen participation to be effective, a strong civil society needs to exist. Local and regional authorities have a primordial role in the development of citizen networks and associations, to enable local people to come together as groups capable of advocating for specific needs in their community. Such groups and organisations should be consulted in a structured and balanced way to ensure that there is no undue influence on local authority decision-making.

8. Local and regional authorities are experimenting with new and different ways to engage their citizens in contributing to the governance of their communities. There is not a "one-size-fits-all" approach: cultural as well as locally specific factors can influence the effectiveness of participation initiatives.

9. Good examples of citizen participation in Europe are very varied: referendums, public consultation meetings, citizen panels, foreign residents' councils, citizen initiatives, and neighbourhood and youth councils. These initiatives should be developed where they do not exist.

10. Through actively seeking the participation of citizens, elected representatives can increase their knowledge base and use the electorate as a reservoir of expertise. Local and regional policy and decision making can be more informed, better adapted and smarter as a result. European citizens can be a source of innovation, specialised information, constructive feedback and motivation.

11. There are increasing examples of local and regional authorities making use of participatory budgeting, which, in a climate of severe cuts to local authority budgets, can provide a way to empower citizens by enabling them to make funding decisions that effect their everyday lives. With this tool, as with all direct democracy instruments, it is important to manage expectations with regard to the influence of participation on the final outcome.

12. In this regard, the Congress welcomes Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)2 of the Committee of Ministers on the evaluation, auditing and monitoring of participation and participation policies at local and regional level and the CLEAR diagnostic tool² which can be used by local and regional authorities to evaluate and improve citizen participation and to concentrate their efforts on involving citizens in local affairs.

13. The Congress:

a. asks its Governance Committee to consider following developments in citizen participation across Europe closely and to facilitate regular exchanges of innovative and successful practice amongst members through the organisation of specific meetings on this subject in the future, if necessary;

b. expresses its willingness to engage in dialogue with the Committee of Ministers on the use and evaluation of citizen participation at the local and regional level in member states;

c. will continue its examination of citizen participation with civil society groups to listen to their expectations and exchange ideas on how to improve participation;

d. asks its Monitoring Committee to continue taking the rights of citizens to participate in the conduct of local public affairs into account during its visits to assess member states' compliance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122).

14. The Congress calls on the local authority associations of Europe to help their members to promote citizen participation in their communities, in particular using new information and communication technologies, and to use their role as a multiplier of information to gather and share knowledge of best practices.

15. In view of the foregoing, the Congress calls on local and regional authorities of Council of Europe member states to:

a. make greater use of "informal" and "alternative" forms of participation, such as citizen panels, citizen initiatives and other forms that have proved effective;

b. harness the possibilities provided by new information and communication technologies for electronic governance to create smart communities;

c. in member states where civil society is weak, encourage local people to mobilise in groups and associations to act on their own behalf and advocate for specific needs in their community through institutional arrangements;

d. identify specific projects, such as the development of community centres and other community facilities, where direct participation by voluntary and residents' groups can be tested;

e. strengthen, where possible, the reception and follow-up they give to such forms of participation, for example by undertaking to systematically vote on citizen initiative proposals;

f. actively participate in the European Local Democracy Week, held in October each year, as an effective way of increasing citizens' knowledge of local and regional democratic institutions and strengthening the links between populations and their locally elected representatives;

g. establish mechanisms to facilitate and evaluate citizen participation at local and regional levels;

h. report regularly to the Congress on citizen participation initiatives in their countries.

1. Debated and adopted by the Congress on 18 October 2011, 1st Sitting (see Document CG(21)3, explanatory memorandum), rapporteur: Marjan Haak-Griffioen, the Netherlands (R, EPP/CD)

2. The CLEAR tool is appended to Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)2.