

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Recommendation 307 (2011)¹ Citizen participation at local and regional level in Europe

1. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe reaffirms its commitment to public participation in local and regional affairs as a basic right at the heart of local democracy, giving people the ability to influence the decisions of the representative bodies that affect their lives and communities. To participate effectively people need to have both the capacity and the motivation to act. Local and regional authorities, for their part, need to have dynamic communication policies and ensure easy access to relevant information.

2. The Congress recalls Recommendation Rec(2001)19 of the Committee of Ministers on the participation of citizens in local public life and notes that, in the ten years since this recommendation was adopted, many member states have instituted and use an increasingly wide variety of tools and institutions to encourage citizen participation and strengthen local and regional democracy.

3. These tools vary from informal instruments, such as citizens' panels, to binding local and regional referendums. It is important that such instruments are not just empty frameworks but are actively used: however good an instrument is, poor implementation can damage trust in the democratic process rather than encourage it.

4. Citizen participation can be hampered by many factors. Citizen groups and popular initiatives can be disheartened by the complicated and rigid procedures in place. There can be a lack of information on the opportunities to participate in local public affairs or the information may only reach certain groups, leading to participants who are not representative of all of the community. Dialogue between all groups can lead to a more cohesive community.

5. The Congress believes that, in these times of increasing cuts to local and regional authority allocations and disenchantment with the political process, it is more important than ever that citizens actively participate at the level closest to them. The way forward is through innovation and active citizenship at grassroots level. Increased public participation and direct involvement in local governance will give citizens a sense of empowerment, and will help to restore confidence.

6. 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.

7. Providing clear, comprehensive and accessible information on local and regional policies strengthens active citizenship and fosters a feeling of belonging to a community, as well as the civic duty to contribute to this community in a democratic society. Recent developments concerning the online publication of raw public sector information as "open data" in some countries have shown 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.²

8. Through actively consulting citizens, elected representatives can increase their knowledge base and ensure that decisions and policies are more innovative, informed, cost-effective and balanced.

9. The Congress regrets that, despite the importance that the Council of Europe places on the active participation of citizens in local and regional life, the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority (CETS No. 207) has not yet entered into force. The Council of Europe Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level (ETS No. 144) opened for signature in 1992, has also received few ratifications.

10. 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 is ready to participate in any follow-up to this recommendation which aims to ascertain what works well in participatory democracy and to ensure that best practices are exchanged and shared.

11. The Congress recommends that the Committee of Ministers invite member states to:

a. follow the example of certain member states and publish public sector data online, creating an "open data" source for public government information, which is a valuable element in increasing dialogue with citizens at the local and regional level;

b. make greater use in their countries of existing instruments which are available for direct democracy at local and regional level and, in those countries where local regulation is entrusted to a regional level of government, to encourage the regional authorities to do likewise;

c. introduce incentives to encourage local and regional authorities to use new information and communication technologies, including social networks, to increase citizen participation, and improve transparency and services to the public;

d. in those countries where it is not yet possible, allow local and regional authorities to introduce participatory budgeting in order to increase confidence in the democratic process and strengthen social cohesion in local communities;

e. ensure that national and, where applicable, regional rules governing citizens' initiatives are straightforward and not a disincentive for those wishing to launch an initiative;

f. sign and ratify the Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority;

g. sign and ratify the Convention on the Participation of Foreigners in Public Life at Local Level to ensure reasonable efforts are made to involve foreign residents in consultations on local matters;

h. ensure that all forms of democratic participation at local level are open to all people, regardless of citizenship or nationality.

12. The Congress invites the Committee of Ministers to:

a. follow up its Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)2 by asking member states to report on its implementation, and

encourage those member states which are not yet using direct forms of citizen participation to begin doing so;

b. support the Congress in its efforts to continue taking the right of citizens to participate in the conduct of local public affairs into account during its visits to assess the application of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122) in member states;

c. continue its dialogue with the Congress on improving democratic participation at the local and regional level.

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. See <http://data.gov.uk/apps> (some examples include www.fixmystreet.com, www.openlylocal.com and www.spotlightsonspend.org.uk).