

Citizen Participation in Municipal Planning in Razlog, Bulgaria

Bulgaria gained its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1908. It was occupied by Soviet forces toward the end of World War II and remained within the Soviet sphere of influence until massive pro-democracy rallies swept Sofia in 1989. A new constitution was adopted in 1991, enshrining the right to democratic elections and political freedom. Since then there has been significant success in privatizing and restructuring most of the old state-run economy, whilst periodic elections have been successfully contested. Turn-out has however been low, and has declined steadily since 1989. In recent municipal elections, only 29% of eligible voters participated.

The authorities generally respect constitutional freedoms, however members of minority faiths report occasional instances of harassment and discrimination despite constitutional guarantees. Ethnic minorities, particularly the Roma, continue to face discrimination in employment, health care, education, and housing.

In 2000 Bulgaria began accession talks with the EU, and full membership was achieved in 2007. Whilst the promise of EU membership triggered the intensification of decentralisation reforms, Bulgaria remains relatively centralised. There are two territorial levels of governance- 265 municipalities exercising local self governance, and 28 districts which are de-concentrated administrative structures of the central government.

1.1 Municipal Planning in Bulgaria

Citizen participation in municipal planning can improve local authorities ability to respond to the needs of the local community. It allows for better targeting of resources based on the articulated needs and priorities of the population, leading to more efficient use of resources. Creating channels and conditions for citizens to exercise voice and to demand accountability can also lead to greater transparency in local government affairs. Increased citizen participation is also a precondition of access to EU structural funds for municipal administrations.

Bulgaria lacks an established tradition of stakeholder and civic participation in policy making at both the national and local level¹. In general, municipalities have lacked the mechanisms and capabilities, whilst citizens lacked the confidence to actively engage with the state². Some key barriers to increased participation included:

- **The Statutory Framework:** Bulgarian legislation has enshrined direct citizen participation in local government decision making processes since 2001³.

¹ UNDP, HDR 2006

² UNDP, HDR, 2001

³ Local Self Government and Administrative Reform Legislation

However, this legislation has not been specific or clear enough to guarantee practical implementation. Efforts to promote participation have often been the result of formal requirements of funding programmes and poorly understood legislation. Local Administrations therefore have failed to grasp the importance of active citizen engagement, and have seen it as a 'necessary evil'. In these conditions, consultation exercises have often become a means of passing on information, in which critical views were skipped over by local authorities, and genuine participation limited.

- **Lack of confidence that participation would result in change:** A

nationwide survey of citizens' perceptions of why they did not participate in citizen action campaigns found that almost 86% of respondents did not believe that engaging with government bodies would elicit any change in policy⁴. These perceptions stem largely from the Soviet legacy, in which participation was positively discouraged. People therefore lack significant positive experiences of participation having led to efficient and visible results in their everyday life.

- **Lack of information:** The UNDP citizen participation survey found that a perceived lack of social, political and expert knowledge may be one of the main reasons why citizens are keen to delegate powers into the hands of "*competent people who know how to use it*"⁵. When citizens are not aware of the roles and responsibilities of different layers of government, and their own rights in terms of participation, they are less inclined to challenge policy and make their voices heard.

- **Lack of Capacity:** The capacity of stakeholders to actively engage is often weak. Municipal authorities, especially in rural communities, have limited staff and training, whilst lack of skills and information can undermine citizens' ability to influence local administrators.

1.2 The Razlog Model Municipality Project

The Razlog Model Municipality Project (ModRa) began in 2001 and ran until 2004, supported by the Government of the Netherlands, UNDP and the Municipality of Razlog. The core project objective was to promote improved governance in Bulgaria through the establishment of a replicable model for good governance at the municipal level. There were two principle objectives:

- 1) to improve municipal long-term strategic planning capacity through an integrated and participatory decision-making process
- 2) To enhance the conditions for efficiency, transparency and responsiveness of the municipal administration and improved service delivery.

The project employed a number of mechanisms to widen public participation in the development of policy and the planning of local service delivery.

⁴ This figure was even higher for the most socially disadvantaged groups- 92% of unemployed and ethnic minorities. (UNDP, HDR, 2001)

⁵ HDR, 2001, p.29

A **Local Forum for Sustainable Development** (LFSD) was established, with the task of eliciting the views of the local community, and to devise a strategy for discussion and adoption by the Municipal Council relating to sustainable development. A team of local citizens were hired, supported by external moderators, by the project to organise public hearings, create agendas, and to prepare and distribute minutes within the community. The team also conducted a stakeholder analysis to identify key participants, and ensure that all groups were represented in the forums, including NGOs, Chitalishte representatives⁶, local business, media and educational institutions.

Local administrators, including the mayor, were present and active in all meetings. A key criteria for the selection of Razlog was the strong support for and leadership of the process by the Mayor. In Razlog, the mayor invested significant political capital in the project, as a key election promise was to improve the quality and access of public services. Local authorities also had an incentive to ensure the success of the process as it was partly funded by the municipal budget.

One outcome of the Local Forum was the establishment of **Working Groups** to investigate commonly identified priority issues. Working Groups were made up of local residents, with particular expertise and interest in the subject matter. They were responsible for gathering information and eliciting views of the local community in a range of areas, such as municipal administration, economic development and inclusion of ethnic minorities. They analysed conclusions, and presented their findings back to the Public Forum for discussion.

Following feedback from Working Groups, and discussion of the findings in the Public Forum, a **Strategy for Sustainable Development** was devised. The Strategy identified a commonly agreed vision for community development, as well as a set of strategic goals and priorities and an action plan for implementation. The strategy was submitted to the Municipal Council for approval and implementation.

A **small grants scheme** was established as a means of promoting further participation and stimulating local ownership of the planning process. Local participants submitted project proposals for small demonstration projects, aligned behind the priorities identified in the forum. Out of a total of 59 proposals submitted over two rounds, 6 were chosen for implementation by local NGOs.

In order to enhance the conditions for more efficient and responsive municipal administration and improve service delivery, ModRa supported a number of initiatives. The project conducted a training needs assessment to identify capacity gaps that needed to be filled. As a result, municipal administrators were **trained in modern management practises**, including computer skills (in the use of the Internet and various software packages), participatory consultation techniques and communication and networking skills.

⁶ Chitalishte are traditional Bulgarian cultural centres. They are used as educational institutions, where people can enroll in foreign language, dance, music and other courses, as well as acting as libraries, theatres and community centers.

A **communications strategy** was developed, aimed at improving citizens' access to information about the activities of the municipal authorities. A free quarterly municipal newsletter was distributed throughout the community, whilst municipal bulletin boards and local TV and radio stations carried information about municipal affairs. A website was established (www.razlog.info) in which citizens could access information about municipal activities. Local Chitalishte offered free internet access and lessons to the poor. A Municipal Information Centre was set up to provide a 'one-stop-shop' of services, including information not only on the municipality, but also on the courts, the tax authorities and the land commission.

1.3 Results

Opinion surveys carried out since the end of the project have revealed an improvement in the standard of living in the municipality, greater trust in the municipal administration, greater confidence among local people that they can affect the decision making processes, and better interaction between the primary institutions for the delivery of services.

"it is trust that gives an incentive for involvement and a desire to come up with new ideas. We held a public forum, we discussed issues the municipality is facing, we explored different visions and only after that made decisions".

Tanya Shumkova,
National Project
Manager, ModRa

Initially, local people were sceptical about the worth of the project and reluctant to participate. However, the process through which the Sustainable Development Strategy was devised helped to build trust between citizens and local authorities. Initiatives such as the Small Grants Scheme demonstrated concrete changes as a result of citizen demands, thereby giving people greater confidence in the scheme, and in their ability to affect change. As a result, involvement in Public Forums became more enthusiastic and a greater sense of ownership over development strategies grew amongst local citizens.

Particular efforts were made to include a wide selection of municipal administration representatives in local forums. Whilst the mayor was an enthusiastic participant from the beginning (the Razlog Municipality was a project sponsor and the mayor had therefore invested significant political capital in the success of the project), other municipal administrators showed initial reluctance to fully participate. However, as the public forums progressed, officials became more open and ready to discuss issues with local people. Local administrators reported being able to see the benefits of increased participation, such as improved relationships with local NGOs. As a result of the project, three new NGOs were formed, all of which have continued to work closely with local government, for example to produce joint funding proposals and to advocate for the rights of marginalised groups.

Improving ties between local authorities and the business community presented a particular challenge. A lack of clarity as to the respective roles and responsibilities of local and central government agencies, and an atmosphere of rapidly changing business regulations meant that local businesses were suspicious of attempts to engage with local government. In response, meetings

and roundtable discussions were arranged involving members of the business community and representatives of both local and central government. These helped to clarify understanding of the value of engagement, and resulted in the enthusiastic participation of the local business community in local forums and the building of strong ties.

Four years after the end of the project, the improved trust and cooperation between local authorities and citizens has been maintained. Local authorities continue to engage with citizens in the planning of local services, whilst the structures set up to improve service delivery continue to function. The delivery of services by municipal authorities has improved significantly. Whilst Public Forums are held less regularly, they continue to be

“for me the most important outcome of (ModRa) was that it highlighted the level of service in the administration and achieved a more advanced type of communication between businesses, local authorities and civil society. This triad created stability in the community. The impact that was felt first and that was, by and large, the most important one was communication between people. Now we are building a community where one can share with the others and look for new options and avenues to deal with an issue”

Luyben Tatarski, Mayor of Razlog, 2004

convened by local organisations in response to specific issues. For example, a local NGO recently convened a forum to debate the proposed building of new holiday homes in the city centre. The proposal was rejected by local residents, and the municipal council rejected planning permission as a result.

In order to share the experiences and lessons learned from the project, regular exchange visits and study tours were set up with officials from other municipalities. Lessons learned from ModRa were also disseminated through a national conference held in Sofia at the end of the project. The conference was attended by representatives of municipalities throughout the country, donors, media and civil society representatives. Public hearings and local forums are now commonly held in municipalities throughout the country.

A number of factors may have contributed to the improved atmosphere of cooperation between citizens and local government. In the run up to EC accession, a number of reforms to the legal framework have been implemented to strengthen the capacity of citizens to participate in local government planning. Furthermore, the period since 2004 has seen stable economic growth and political reform, whilst Razlog municipality has enjoyed political continuity with the re-election of the mayor.

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