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# Citizens’ participation in local decision-making

Democracy is not only to choose and to periodically renew or not its representatives. It is a living and continuous process. They are responsible citizens who are interested in public affairs and are encouraged to do so through participatory processes. It is at the local level that these processes are the easiest to implement.

Some concrete examples. In my municipality, Uccle, which is one of the 19 municipalities that form Brussels in Belgium, we created an advisory council for persons with disabilities. It is chaired by a blind person and has for objectives:

* to give an opinion on all matters of municipal interest submitted by the municipal authorities related to the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of each action aiming at equality and inclusion of persons with a disability. For example, we request this council advice for the development of new communal buildings or for major renovation projects of roads;
* to be the place for information, reflection and debate on all matters of municipal interest related to persons with a disability on the municipal territory, and making it possible to improve his or her autonomy and quality of life.

We also have a municipal youth council. It is made up of young people from 18 to 25 years old. They make proposals to the municipal council of projects they would like to see implemented (creation of a health trail ...) and debate with elected officials on the management of the municipality. The youth council organises on its own activities such as a music festival, outdoor film screenings, inter-religious youth meetings, etc., with the logistical support of the municipality.

Personally, I chair almost every week a consultation committee where citizens who wish to do so can make their remarks on the main urbanisation and planning projects, after having been informed by a public inquiry. It is not always an easy task. I am often confronted to the complex that the Anglo-Saxons have called NIMBY (not in my back yard). Nothing in my neighbourhood. Whether it is new housing, nurseries, a school, a bus stop in front of the house, businesses, shops, etc. Sometimes individuals selfishly oppose any project beside their homes and no longer tolerate anything. This type of behaviour is fortunately not a general one. However, it illustrates a loss of what general interest is among some of our fellow citizens. And it is reinforced by the disinformation that is sometimes done on some projects... The local elected representatives must in this case show courage and act towards the general interest. And they have to explain, explain and explain.

Citizens may also ask questions directly to the executive body during the municipal council. They must make a written request in advance and provide their question in writing. It has to be supported by 20 inhabitants (my town counts 82.000 inhabitants, so this is not an obstacle).

Citizen participation can also take other forms. Like a “repair coffee”, collective gardens or collective compost. Several initiatives of this type exist in my municipality, usually on land that we make available to residents.

We have just attempted a new form of participation. Following the building of a new neighbourhood, a new public square and four streets had to be named. We have launched an appeal to the citizens of our municipality via the website of the municipality and the social networks to make suggestions for these new names. This idea box technique is very common in cities like Montreal, Canada.

In order to collect the suggestions of our inhabitants on certain projects in the making, we have used the technique of "post it". After a keynote presentation, citizens come together in small groups and write their ideas on an anonymous post that is stuck on a board. This facilitates the dialogue and expression of those who are not necessarily at ease to speak out. We have made extensive use of this technique when we developed our Local Agenda 21, the action plan of our municipality for sustainable development. A series of thematic meetings were organised. In general, participation is stronger when the opinion of citizens is asked about a very precise project rather than on a general level. The mobilisation will therefore be important, and sometimes with contradictory opinions, to debate whether or not a street should be one-way, if we install time stamps for parking, if we allow an estate project of a relatively big size...

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities encourages participatory democracy. It is not opposed to representative democracy, which is indispensable, but complements it with the aim of enabling citizens to better understand and influence the actions of their elected representatives. The European Local Democracy Week, coordinated by the Congress will be organised this year from 9 to 15 October 2017. Its theme for 2017 is "Citizen participation, consultation and commitment for a thriving local democracy". I can only encourage your municipalities to develop during this week activities centred on citizen participation, if they have the opportunity.

Thank you for your attention.

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