

ICPS newsletter

Influencing the government not only in the pre-election period: the People's Voice Project experience

The achievement of good local governance by increasing citizen participation is an important goal for Ukraine's future development. However, the Ukrainian population often lacks knowledge about political institutions or about possibilities for participation; they are accustomed to obeying rather than openly questioning those who make decisions. Without a sufficient public voice and, therefore, control in the decision-making process, Ukrainian communities remain politically impotent

Under the current indirect democracy system Ukrainian citizens' needs cannot be fully reflected in policy, since their participation is basically limited to the election of representatives. Democracy, though, cannot be limited to the electoral process and its institutions (e.g., political parties, elections, etc.), as it creates a serious gap between representatives and their constituents. There is a real need in Ukraine to create channels of communication between citizens and their representatives at the local level in the periods between elections. Effective democracy is built through daily interaction; such interaction increases public awareness and helps to monitor and evaluate elected officials on a continual basis.

A wide range of mechanisms for civic participation has been developed over the last few decades in numerous democratic countries. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, and different methods serve different purposes. Such mechanisms and procedures have not been fully established in Ukraine. Before its independence in 1991, there was no longstanding modern history of public participation in an established civil

society. In the past decade, therefore, mechanisms and procedures for citizen participation have not taken hold in Ukraine, because even the idea of citizen participation was absent from both the people's and the government's awareness. During the Soviet era, methods of public engagement such as demonstrations and public meetings were applied, but at the orders and under control of the state. All these factors contributed to the destruction of civil society initiatives in Ukraine.

Adding to the sporadic experience of engaging the general public in Ukraine, the People's Voice Project is helping to create and develop mechanisms to increase civic participation through the implementation of a comprehensive methodology; a brief description is provided below for your consideration.

Mechanisms Aimed at Increasing Public Awareness and Public Education

There is a growing belief that the success of almost all approaches to citizen participation depends on how well citizens and users of services are informed about their government's performance.

Today, Ukraine faces a challenge to enhance the freedom of, and access to, public information. Unfortunately, the actions of many government bodies or representatives in Ukraine are not public and transparent, and policy development and implementation processes are not open to the general public. Even local administrative bodies remain outside public control and refuse to provide information to public organisations, violating Articles 5 and 9 of the Law of Ukraine "On information" (1992). The key, therefore, is to ensure wide public involvement during the early stages of developing policy documents, in order to widen communication and public input.

Advocacy Mechanisms

Among the main tasks of advocacy are the protection of those whose rights have been abused or ignored by public officials, the public investigation of such facts, the gathering and distribution of information about them, and monitoring of the situation. Relevant mechanisms include advocacy group activities, complaints, protests, and demonstrations.

During 1994–2000, opinion polls conducted by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation and NASU Institute of Sociology asked Ukrainian citizens which forms of public participation they would engage in if their rights or interests were violated. Respondents perceived demonstrations, mass meetings, and petitions supporting collective protests as being the most effective forms of public participation, and thus the ones in which they would be most likely to participate. In other words, the protection of human rights in Ukraine relies upon "traditional" mechanisms of civic action.

Public Consultation

On the other hand, public consultation mechanisms—which are new or unknown in Ukraine—include public hearings,

The People's Voice Project (PVP) is a three-year project, which began in 1999, that aims to assist in the transformation of Ukraine from a state-controlled civil society to one driven by the input of local citizens. The project is funded by the World Bank and the Canadian International Development Agency, and focuses on building integrity and improving governance at the municipal level in Ukraine. The overall goal of the PVP is to implement mechanisms and procedures that promote public participation in building an effective, responsible, and open government; strengthen the capacity of both citizen groups and officials to interact with each other in order to enhance the overall quality of governance; as well as assure public participation in the policy-making process.

roundtable discussions, public committees, stakeholder meetings, etc. These types of mechanisms allow for broad public involvement that can theoretically influence the decision-making, policy development, and service delivery processes of local governments. For instance, public hearings conducted on important issues give local citizens an opportunity to influence matters of importance to them. Organised groups as well as individual citizens can attend public consultations, express their views, and benefit from the exchange of ideas and information that transpires at these hearings. All of this aids public accountability by increasing transparency and creating direct and open contact between public officials and local citizens.

Nevertheless, some authorities are not enthusiastic about widening public involvement in Ukraine. Many government officials lack the knowledge and expertise required to make public hearings an effective and helpful tool for policy-making activities. Frequently, public hearings turn into endless discussions and arguments—or into forums where authorities report on “work done” by presenting irrelevant and cumbersome data, as was common in Soviet times.

Public Control Over the Government

Public input into the work of the government can be achieved through mechanisms and procedures such as public service delivery surveys, monitoring, advisory boards, citizen juries, civic journalism, and NGO coalition building. This participatory approach can reinforce public accountability and transparency through the monitoring and feedback generated by the public.

Public Service Delivery Surveys

In public service delivery surveys, people are asked to evaluate the quality, adequacy, and other relevant dimensions of government services; their feedback is used as an important criterion to judge the performance of the public agencies involved. In Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk, this approach has been applied through the assistance and support of the PVP. Surveys focusing on citizens' attitudes to public services were conducted early during the PVP's involvement in Ukrainian cities. The results of the surveys were published and distributed to administrators, citizen groups, local media, and other stakeholders.

Public Monitoring

Another useful instrument in evaluating local government performance is public monitoring aimed at how public authorities track people's attitudes toward policy implementation. With the assistance and support of the PVP, a number of public monitoring initiatives have been implemented in Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk, producing report cards on issues such as gender inclusion, education, citizen hotlines, utilities payment centres, and ombudsman's offices. All of these documents contribute to public monitoring and transparency on issues where reform-minded initiatives have been adopted in these cities.

NGO Coalitions

A relatively new way to put public pressure on local administrations in Ukraine is NGO coalition activity, aimed at mobilising resources in order to strengthen civil society's bargaining capacity. NGO coalitions are a temporary alliance of factions and groups representing the stakeholders that come together to lobby decision-makers on a specific issue. These joint efforts mobilise individuals and groups to influence the outcomes of a particular issue or policy. For example, NGO coalitions organise candidate forums before elections in order to discuss specific local issues with elected representatives, conduct opinion polls on the priorities of such issues, and offer alternative solutions, taking action that directly improves their local communities.

So far, NGO coalitions in Ukraine have frequently been ineffective in their activities, with the main problems being their lack of understanding of their own aims and goals; problems in structure, leadership, and management; and insufficient resources, inner conflicts, and weak inter-coalition communication. The institutional capacity of Ukrainian NGO coalitions is particularly weak, and the government is not ready to see them as partners, thus keeping them at a low level of involvement in local decision-making and implementation processes.

Community Planning for Strategic Development

The main goal of local strategic planning is to create local social and economic policies

Dear Readers,

At YE'02, the International Centre for Policy Studies published a *Citizen Participation Handbook* (for public participation in decision-making processes at local levels). This handbook features both theoretical and practical issues related to the application of instruments which can promote the dialogue in Ukraine and elsewhere between local authorities and the public-at-large. The *Citizen Participation Handbook* includes the following sections:

- Citizen Advisory Groups
- City Strategic Planning
- Coalition Building
- Community Organising
- Participatory Budgeting and Capital Investment Planning
- Participatory Research
- Public Education
- Public Hearings
- Report Cards
- Social Monitoring

The handbook was published in Ukrainian and English. You can order your free copy of this publication from Yevhenia Yehorova (ee@icps.keiv.ua) at tel.: (38-044) 236-5464, or download the materials from the People's Voice Project web-site at <http://www.icps.keiv.ua/pvp>.

for long-term consideration that strengthen the city's economic position and improve the living standards of local citizens. Ivano-Frankivsk was one of the first cities in Ukraine to develop a City Strategic Development Plan (2000), supported by the PVP. For the first time in Ukraine, a strategic plan was drafted with the participation of local authorities, NGOs, scientists, and businesspeople, with the support of the local community. This plan outlined the main areas of further development of the city's economy, through progressive legislation, enlargement of the manufacturing and public services, and job creation to ultimately increase the welfare of the local community. ■

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