



Learning for Local Democracy

A Study of Local Citizen Participation in Europe

Joerg Forbrig
Editor



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Introduction: Citizen Participation and Local Democracy in Europe

Joerg Forbrig

Democracy in Europe is in trouble. Or so it seems if one takes an only cursory glance at recent developments on the continent. Large parts of Europe are confronted with the effects of a grave economic crisis, and it has made clear the problematic influence of global markets and revealed serious misconduct on the part of political decision-makers. What is worse, the long and winding way out of this existential crisis, for individual countries and Europe as a whole, will likely be dictated by technocratic rigour rather than democratic consensus. Citizens can expect to have to shoulder much of the burden while having little say in the decision-making. Partly in response partly to these dire economic straights, populist movements and right-wing parties have sprung up across Europe, and have recently scored considerable electoral success. Some of these thrive on widespread discontent with political establishments, others appeal to latent societal tensions, blaming migration and diversity for social problems and accusing foreign capital of holding national economies hostage. Yet others see European integration as the root cause of all problems and advocate the re-nationalisation of political, economic and social affairs.

Together, these populisms challenge the very foundations on which the open and democratic project that is Europe has been constructed. That project seems to be weaker than ever – and the European Union along with it. Its ability to act effectively and, where needed, swiftly has hardly improved despite the contractual re-arrangements of the Lisbon treaty. The ambition of bringing Europe closer to its citizens has not been met, at least to date. Once a developmental model that outsiders queued to join, the EU today projects neither the attractiveness nor the willingness required for further enlargement into its neighbourhood to the East and Southeast. Unsurprisingly, pollsters time and again find that citizen confidence in democratic politics and European integration is lower than ever.

One would be forgiven for thinking all is gloom and doom in European democracy. This is, however, not the case. For one, citizens across Europe seem to be re-discovering their power. More frequently and spectacularly than at any other time in recent history, the last few years have seen ordinary Europeans making their voice heard. Three very visible examples with far reaching significance immediately spring to mind: the local protests against the *Stuttgart 21* railway project in Germany, the *15-M* movement in Spain, which demands more and better participatory democracy and the *Occupy* movement, which protests the unfettered power and the disastrous effects of global finance.¹ Although clearly

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driven by discontent, recent cases of mass mobilisation across Europe cannot only be considered the result of *Wutbürger* (angry citizens) going through the motions.² Instead, they signal genuine concern among a growing number of citizens about the workings of democracy in their home countries and on the continent as a whole. Europeans are acutely aware of the deficits displayed by political institutions and the leaders who make up the political establishments in their own countries and at the European level; most can readily identify with the social injustices that have only been amplified by the economic crisis; and they demand to be taken seriously as citizens. Their agitation is much more fundamental than the occasional protest vote in elections or mass demonstration in public places. These ordinary Europeans are seeking constructive ways of engaging in public discourse and influencing decision-making as a means addressing social problems outside of and alternative to the classical, and clearly limited, arenas of political parties, elections and parliaments.

While the current crisis and the civic mobilisation in its wake lend renewed currency to discussions about the role of citizens for democracy in Europe, such debates cannot be considered new. For several decades now, democratic discourse in Europe has been abuzz with notions of civil society, citizenship, and participation. There is hardly a politician that has not paid tribute, if often lip service, to these ideas; no scholar of democracy that could omit these terms in academic writing; and barely an activist or practitioner who would not embed themselves in these broader frameworks. Few policy questions seem to be left, from social welfare and economic development to the environment and education to public security and finance that have not invoked civil society and citizen participation as part of the answer. Most government institutions, be they local, national or international, now boast platforms, forums or councils that give, or pretend to give, a voice to interested citizens, civic groups and the multitude of concerns expressed by these. And as if following this demand, numerous and varied forms of social self-organisation and engagement, some genuinely new, others more traditional but redressed, now exist and lend a stronger-than-ever voice to Europe's citizens.

Of course, this extension of democratic politics beyond elections is to be welcomed. It reflects an acknowledgement that classical state institutions, political structures and representative democracy are limited in their capacity to accommodate the growing range of interests, beliefs, problems and solutions that come with ever more differentiated societies and global interdependencies of the post-modern age. It suggests a new centrality of citizens and their directly voiced concerns, and it highlights their continuous initiative and importance in public debate and decision-making. It expresses a hope that new forms of

¹ *Occupy*, or *Occupy Wall Street*, is a protest movement that originated in the occupation of Zuccotti Park near Wall Street in New York. It criticises social injustice and the excessive influence of corporations and banks in the United States, and it has been copied by other groups with similar grievances worldwide.

² Kurbjuweit, D., "Der Wutbürger" (The Angry Citizen), *Der Spiegel* no. 41/2010, pp. 26f.

political participation and a stronger role for civil society can help to re-invigorate contemporary democracy in Europe: by re-connecting politics and societies where democratic institutions and citizens seem to have grown apart, by challenging political elites where these close in on power and office, and by enhancing the civic grass-roots and its potential for detecting and solving pressing social issues.

Although it is often overlooked, the local level is perhaps the most important arena for such a broader understanding and practice of democracy. It is here, in communities, municipalities and regions, that citizens live their lives, find anchorage for much of their identity, encounter concrete social problems, and expect the delivery of effective policies and solutions. The immediate local context is what citizens understand best, what affects them most, and with which they are most likely to engage, far more likely than with the more faraway and abstract politics of the national and European levels. At the same time, state institutions in many European countries have undergone a considerable decentralisation. Competencies have been devolved from the national to the regional and local levels, and new forms of self-government have been established. Access to additional resources, not least European funds, has increased for sub-national units, although so has the burden of responsibility for social and economic problems, once the domain of national government. Finally, civil society has once again become more “localised”. It has long had a strong foothold in local communities through traditional associations ranging from sports clubs to voluntary fire brigades to parental councils in schools, not to mention religious congregations and welfare organisations. Adding to these are newer organisations such as local foundations and community-organising groups. Taken together, these institutional and social trends may yet see the local level become a key laboratory for new forms of democratic politics in Europe.

It is for this reason, primarily, that the Central and Eastern European Citizens Network (CEE CN) initiated this comprehensive mapping of citizen participation and local democracy in Europe. In a first phase, whose results are presented in this publication, eight countries were selected that reflect a broad variety of historical, cultural and social contexts: Croatia, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, and the United Kingdom. These perspectives from individual European countries have been authored by seasoned activists and experts of citizen participation, and they convey an action-oriented, rather than academic, view from the local grass-roots of European democracies. Brief country backgrounds are followed by case studies that portray concrete forms of civic engagement on the local level, and that discuss in detail the specific problems, approaches taken, obstacles encountered, and outcomes achieved. The country cases presented hint at a fascinating variety of citizen participation, civil society work and new forms of democracy that has emerged at the local level across Europe.

The study will be further enriched and expanded during a second phase. Several countries, including Austria, Estonia, Georgia, Serbia und Ukraine, will be added to draw an even richer and more representative picture of citizen participation and local democracy on the European continent. In addition to practitioner perspectives, a set of crosscutting analytical chapters will be provided by scholars and will focus on historical, conceptual, institutional and social factors that condition civic engagement and democracy on the local level. The result will be a topical resource serving both those actively engaged in building democracy in their communities and countries, and those observing and analysing European democracy from academic angles. It is hoped that this will contribute to bridging the divide between practice and theory that often persists on questions of democracy, civil society and participation.

Before presenting the concrete contexts and examples of local citizen participation in the eight European countries included, however, this opening chapter will discuss in somewhat greater detail a number of broad trends that have been driving recent and renewed interest in and relevance of the local level for democracy. Following that, an overview of ideas and concepts that often frame the current discourse and practice of democracy in Europe, on the local and other levels, will be provided. Against this background, the eight country cases included will be briefly introduced.

Realities: Broadening democratic politics and participation in Europe

While it may be a truism, it seems worth restating at a time when the European project and its democratic functioning seem so severely challenged: European integration and democracy are inseparably intertwined. European integration has been possible and legitimate only on the basis of democratic countries coming together; in turn, democracy in many a member country was strengthened considerably through accession and membership in the European Union. Adding to this close relationship is the fact that both, European integration as much as democracy, have undergone profound developments and changes over the last decades. The European Union as we know it today has travelled far from its modest, if visionary, beginnings, and it has achieved a geographic scope and depth of co-operation that was once unthinkable. Similarly, the idea of democracy has dynamically evolved, broadened and deepened; so much so that scholars and publics alike often find it difficult to state clearly what democracy is and what it is not.³

At the outset of modern-day democracy in Europe, it was primarily considered a set of national institutions, including voting rights and elections, political parties and parliaments that transformed the conflicting interests of social groups into regulated competition for government office. In this institutional process, citizens had only an occasional say through

³ Schmitter, Ph. C., and Karl, T. L., "What Democracy Is . . . and Is Not", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 2, no. 3 (summer 1991), pp. 75-88.

the vote they cast; all else lay in the hands of elected officials, professional politicians and bureaucrats. However, European history of the first half of the 20th century brutally exposed the weakness of this purely institutional idea and reality of democracy. Totalitarian ideologies of the left and right, autocratic rule and dictatorship crushed many a European democracy. Not rarely, this took place from within – once in power having been democratically elected to government office, democracy was swiftly abolished. Tragic as these experiences were, many in post-war Europe became concerned with the question of making democracy on the continent more resilient to such onslaughts. Over the past decades some democracy in Europe has evolved far beyond its originally narrow institutional shape on the basis of such reflection.

One approach, and a trend, has been to place ever-stronger emphasis on citizens and their more continuous and direct participation in politics. Perhaps the first major impulse in this direction was received from the new social movements that emerged in Western Europe during the 1960s and 1970s. They consciously called themselves extra-parliamentary. An important further boost came from dissident movements in East-Central Europe, confronting communist regimes from the late 1970s and eventually toppling them in 1989, unequivocally demonstrating the power of citizens in the face of what were thought to be omnipotent state apparatuses. The rise of these and other similar movements expressed the clear desire among many Europeans to participate more immediately and frequently than is possible in the voting booth. Other developments in the post-war period accompanied this newfound role of European citizens, including the introduction of civics classes in public education, the permanent monitoring of public opinion by specialised polling institutes, and the more frequent use of referenda in many countries.

A second development that has come to shape democracy in Europe was the emergence of extensive and Europe-wide layers of civil society. To be sure, civic and intermediary structures located between people and power-holders have long existed in many European countries, whether professional groups or leisure and sports clubs, charities or foundations, churches or fire brigades. However, what the last decades added to these traditional forms of civic life are organisations that explicitly engage with politics. They can be watchdogs monitoring political decision-making, public institutions, elections or respect for human rights, as well as think tanks that analyse policy achievements and failures and bring forward alternative proposals. They can be advocacy groups to advance an issue of general public interest, but also lobbyists or unions that represent more narrowly defined goals vis-à-vis political players. What is common to many of these newer organisations of civil society is that they are an important complement to classical political institutions. They represent further channels for public engagement, entry points for inputs from citizens to the political agenda, arenas for public debate and, importantly, additional checks and balances. On the national level, the significance of these new segments of civil society became most apparent in the course of post-communist transformation, during which newly democratic institutions

remained fragile, but often found a key corrective in civil society.⁴ On the European level, too, growing demands to bring the largely institutionalised project of EU integration closer to citizens have translated into numerous conduits provided by civil society organisations.

The more continuous involvement of Europeans in public debate and decision-making that can be facilitated by civil society has, thirdly, led to an enormous expansion of what is considered political. A hundred years ago, politics was largely concerned with questions of external security, internal stability, fiscal policy, and aspects of economic development and prosperity; it was the domain of a small caste of politicians and bureaucrats. Today, by contrast, it is hard to find a question that cannot be considered political, and many more citizens and professionals, social groups and institutions voice opinions, conduct analyses and make proposals that they expect politicians and other decision-makers to take seriously in relevant debates. In part, the reason for this lies with the unprecedented growth in the number of responsibilities conferred on state institutions that now include tasks as diverse as providing social welfare, managing cultural diversity, ensuring the rights of future generations, preventing economic monopolies, and supporting development in poorer regions of the world. Today, policy issues are subject to far more and much more continuous and public debate than ever before, facilitated by both media and civil society, serving the interest of a citizenry that is better educated and more concerned with politics, more diverse in its opinions and less reluctant to express these in public.

Finally, the last decades have seen a far-reaching differentiation and de-centralisation of political processes and state institutions. Additional arenas for political debate and decision-making have been introduced, and new layers of public administration have been added, within countries, Europe-wide and internationally. Sometimes, these follow functional lines, as is the case with negotiations between employers and employees that the state merely supervises. More commonly, sub-national levels have been introduced that give greater responsibilities and autonomy to local municipalities or regions; this devolution is mirrored on the supra-national level where cross-border arrangements such as Euro regions, EU institutions and international organisations have taken on responsibilities once the purview of national capitals. Some communities, such as religious congregations or ethnic and cultural groups, have their own structures of self-government and function alongside general state institutions. All these differentiated structures now add to the traditional understanding of the political sphere as belonging to the nation state, they are equally home to political processes and decision-making, and they provide citizens and civil society with additional entry points for participation.

⁴ Perhaps the most spectacular example of this civic oversight was a series of “electoral revolutions” that challenged neo-authoritarian rulers in a number of post-communist countries; Forbrig, J., and Demes, P. (eds.), [*Reclaiming Democracy. Civil Society and Electoral Change in Central and Eastern Europe*](#) (Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2007);

In short, this broad development has taken European democracy far beyond institutions and opened it up, albeit with limitations, setbacks and disappointments, to citizens, their concerns and actions, and their self-organisation in civil society. Curious is the fact that this development seems mostly associated with democratic processes on national and European levels. Much attention has been directed by politicians, civil society representatives and engaged citizens to the national and supra-national levels, as have scholars' analyses of democratic developments and processes. What has often gone unnoticed by the broader public is the fact that the local level has been a key location for this broadening of democratic practices. Numerous examples exist by now of citizens taking a collective stand on behalf of their village, town or region, employing a rich and innovative repertoire of actions, and yielding concrete and sometimes spectacular results, as demonstrated by several case studies including in the country chapters in this report. These "unseen" developments at the grass-roots certainly warrant both greater publicity and more systematic enquiry, as they may be a sign of positive changes to come for European democracy, seen by so many as in constant crisis.

Concepts: Democracy, civil society and related notions

The broadening of democracy, as an ideal as well as a reality in Europe, has been accompanied by growing scholarly interest and theoretical debate. New social science disciplines emerged to study modern states, such as sociology and political science, and within these, new strands of scholarly enquiry have been developed to understand democratisation, as this took pace in the 20th century. Especially after World War II, research and debate on democracy gathered momentum, and a vast variety of institutes and journals, concepts and approaches emerged both among academics and practitioners. The resulting knowledge base, comprising as it does ideas and theories, opinions and experiences, is equally rich from an intellectual perspective, as it can be confusing from a practical one. For this reason, some of the key notions associated with it shall be briefly discussed in the following.

Besides democracy itself, which is the central concept that bases, relates to and overarches almost all others, the key notion that has emerged over the last decades is that of civil society. In fact, the latter is typically mentioned in one breath with the former. This close relationship is also manifest in the way that civil society is being conceptualised today, with several older theories that postulated a different understanding of the relationship between the two have been consigned to obsolescence by real life developments. Typically associated with discourse ethics, contemporary thinking on civil society acknowledges that there is a need for mediation between the private and the public, for processes to determine which private interests or beliefs have (or have no) public consequence, and for channels to subject legitimate public concerns to decision-making by societal or state institutions. The necessity for discursive mediation has become very pronounced in

contemporary European societies, which have undergone enormous internal differentiation and diversification along with social, cultural, regional and ethnic lines. In order for public debate and democratic decision-making to be able take this increasing diversity into account, discourse ethics proposes a set of procedures that guide a permanent process of reflection and debate among different and often competing social concerns. Civil society, then, is exactly the realm in which this public discourse can take place without the constraints that are inherent to the political public of the state, the intimate sphere of the family, or the economic relationships of the market. Different from these three arenas, civil society is the public sphere.⁵

On this basis, typical definitions describe civil society as forms of social self-organisation that are autonomous from states, markets and families, take collective action without aiming for political power, act in public, and respect diversity.⁶ Such definitions provide an easy-to-use shorthand for a great many social actors, groups and organisations. They may be traditional ones, such as religious communities, social welfare organisations and trade unions, or newer ones including environmental groups, human rights campaigns or community foundations. Different legal statuses fit into civil society thus understood, from informal groups, formal associations of citizens and private foundations to public charities and public benefit companies. Purely private interests, be they those of industries or bird-watchers, can consider themselves part of civil society as much as evidently public concerns, such as political education or reconciliation among previously warring groups. Collective action from strikes to commercial lobbying falls into the realm of civil society as much as signature collections or fundraising in the street or through the Internet, seminars or conferences, mass protests or door-to-door campaigns.

Adopted as a suitable umbrella by so many, civil society today stands for a maximum range of social interests, more and less organised groups, and their public actions. Taken together, they are said to perform a set of very concrete functions for democracy.⁷ The first of these is civic control over state and political power. The relationship between state and society,

⁵ Much of this debate owes to Habermas, J., *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); see also Cohen, J. L., and Arato, A., *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

⁶ A typical political science definition reads: "civil society can be defined as a set or system of self-organised intermediary groups that: (1) are relatively independent of both public authorities and private units of production and reproduction, that is, of firms and families; (2) are capable of deliberating about and taking collective actions in defence or promotion of their interests or passions; (3) do not seek to replace either state agents or private (re)producers or to accept responsibility for governing the polity as a whole; and (4) agree to act within pre-established rules of a 'civil,' i.e. mutually respectful, nature"; from Schmitter, P. C., "Civil Society East and West," in: Diamond, L., Plattner, M. F., Chu, Y., and Tien, H. (eds.), *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies. Themes and Perspectives* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 239-262.

⁷ Overviews of civil society's democratic functions are provided by the following authors: Diamond, L., *Developing Democracy. Toward Consolidation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Merkel, W., "Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in Eastern Europe," *Budapest Papers on Democratic Transition* no. 255 (Budapest: Hungarian Centre for Democracy Foundation, 1999).

between the public and the private has always been one of fragile balance, necessitating arrangements that guarantee their separation and that regulate their interaction. Besides a range of institutional precautions, for example the rule of law, civil society has the capacity to act as an important additional watchdog over this relationship. By way of association in civil society, individuals can better stave off undue state interference in social and individual life. As intermediaries, these associations operate in the public realm, add checks and balances, and contribute to and share in decision-making processes. By observing political processes, providing information to various publics and also mobilising them if needed, civil society can help to hold government accountable to democratic rules as well as responsive to societal concerns.⁸

A second function of civil society – representation and mediation of interests – addresses the content of decisions taken democratically. What is at stake is the problematic translation of conflicting interests and values into publicly binding decisions. While, traditionally, political parties have been key interest representatives, civil society can play an important supplementary role. It can compensate for the deficits inherent to party politics, caused primarily by vote maximisation and electoral cycles, and provide for a fuller and more continuous representation of societal interests.⁹ Civil society can also contribute to the mediation of conflicting interests, as it provides arenas, where competing social groups and interests interact directly and arrive at settlements on more specialised disputes.¹⁰ Civil society, thus, contributes to a more differentiated system of governance, which in turn is more commensurate with the increasing social pluralism of contemporary societies, and to decision-making processes, which more closely reflect social reality and diversity.

Social Integration is a third task for civil society and shifts the focus towards social relationships and cohesion. No polity is sustainable unless the society forming its basis is held together by some measure of integration overarching the differences among individuals and social groups, and containing the disruptive potential generated by these differences. Civil society has the capacity to generate some additional integrity. It is a space for individuals to come together on the basis of a shared interest or belief, a common hobby or a similar social position. The very same individuals, however, differ along with many other features; this is a function of the multiple nature of their identities. By mixing

⁸ Numerous studies have typically focused on specific types of civil society organisations that are relevant to this function. One example are policy think tanks, see Smith, J. A., *The Idea Brokers. Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), another example can be found in protest movements, see Szabó, M., “Repertoires of Contention in Post-Communist Protest Cultures: An East Central European Comparative Survey,” *Social Research* vol. 63, no. 4 (Winter 1996), pp. 1155-1182.

⁹ Lehmbruch, G., “Liberal Corporatism and Party Government,” in: Schmitter, P. C., and Lehmbruch, G. (eds.), *Trends toward Corporatist Intermediation* (London: Sage, 1979), pp. 147-184.

¹⁰ Such arenas have come to be known as “concertation regime[s];” see Schmitter, P. C., “The Consolidation of Democracy and Representation of Social Groups,” *American Behavioural Scientist* vol. 35, no. 4/5 (March/June 1992), pp. 422-449.

sameness and otherness, as pluralists have argued time and again, involvement with civic associations has moderating effects on both individuals and social groups.¹¹

Perhaps the most-often cited function of civil society is that of political socialisation. As the vibrancy of democracy undoubtedly depends on the existence of a democratic political culture, civil society is said to be an important agent for anchoring such norms, attitudes and behaviour with individuals. Tocqueville emphasised that “associations may [...] be considered as large free schools, where all the members of the community go to learn the general theory of association.”¹² Put more broadly, individual participation in the associations of civil society inculcates citizens with an understanding of the workings of democracy. They acquire a greater sense of political efficacy, develop a willingness to combine with others and to accept the necessity of compromise resulting from such cooperation. Over time, this exercise in civil society is said to spread a culture of democracy, citizenship and participation.

Finally, civil society also provides very concrete material outputs to society. In contemporary societies, a wide range of goods form part of daily life that are typically provided by either the market or the state. Situations occur frequently, however, in which the state and the market are limited in their capacity to provide for a range of, usually quasi-public, goods. Thus, markets are typically constrained when goods and services are of a collective nature, most prominently the environment, or when they are very complex, such as health or education. States, in turn, are often bound by majority-decisions that often neglect the specific needs of social minorities, and their bureaucratic nature limits their flexibility to adjust provision to changing needs. It is in such situations that civil society can play an important compensatory function. Its organisations combine a non-profit with a non-governmental character, which enables them to overcome the structural constraints facing markets and states and which allows them to provide goods and services not otherwise available.¹³

As the case studies presented in the following country chapters illustrate with numerous practical examples, these five functions of civil society can have an important impact on democracy at the local level. Thus, the citizens of Pecs in Hungary and Zarra in Spain exercised control over decision-making in their municipalities when they voiced their disagreement with planned military and nuclear installations. The cases of Alba in Romania and Volkovce in Slovakia, in which attention was drawing attention to the rights and concerns of people with disabilities and senior citizens respectively, are clear examples of

¹¹ Truman, D. B., *The Governmental Process Political Interests and Public Opinion* (New York: Knopf, 1958); Lipset, S. M., *Political Man* (London: Heinemann, 1969).

¹² de Tocqueville, A., *Democracy in America* (London: David Campbell Publishers, 1994), p. 116.

¹³ See Powell, W. W. (ed.), *The Non-profit Sector. A Research Handbook* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Powell, W. W., and Elisabeth S. C. (eds.), *Private Action and the Public Good* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

civil society's role in representing social interests to local authorities and the general public. The contribution of civil society to social integration at the local level is exemplified by the efforts of citizens in Karlovac, Croatia, and Oevre Eiker, Norway to build vibrant communities. Elsewhere, educating democratic citizens by involving them in the making of decisions affecting them directly has been a key focus of local civil society, as is illustrated by participatory budgeting in Sopot, Poland, and the large-scale training programme conducted in Borsoj-Abauj-Zemplen County in Hungary. And the direct provision of much-needed public services through local civil society is reflected in Scottish programmes to advance community land management, and in improved day care for children in the Romanian village of Tiganesti.

Three further notions closely relate to that of civil society, as readily reflected in the country chapters. Firstly, social capital has become an important reference point in thinking and practicing democracy, not least at the local level. Social capital describes the extent and quality of relationships within society, among social networks, and with social institutions. These determine outcomes that can be achieved for society as a whole, and it is generally considered beneficial if relationships are marked by high degrees of cooperation and confidence; in turn confrontation or mistrust can undermine society and its development. A related notion is, secondly, that of trust, which also describes the nature of social relationships. At times it applies to ties between individuals or social groups, at others to the perception of political institutions. Either way, trust relates to the belief in the fairness, honesty or benevolence of a given individual, group or institution, with high degrees of trust being conducive to fruitful interaction and mutually beneficial results.

Thirdly, political efficacy is a further and important indicator for the health of social and political communities. It describes the confidence of citizens in government institutions, as well as their self-confidence to understand and influence political decision-making. Efficacy is typically related with participation, as understandably citizens will see greater sense in engaging in politics if they believe that their input is both wanted and useful.

Finally, and again as revealed by the grassroots experiences here documented, one practical approach relates to all these notions: community development and community organising. These processes bring people that live close to each other together, so that their forces can be joined in pursuit of shared interests. This is typically being done through interactive and discursive methods, the joint identification of problems, the building of coalitions, and the organisation of collective actions. In so doing, both community development and community organising can build social capital, trust and political efficacy all at once, and it can be aimed at any or several of the functions of civil society mentioned earlier. In short, community development and community organising are the local-level equivalent of the broader concept of civil society. It is for this reason that these practical approaches also run

prominently through many of the country chapters and case studies presented in the following.

The contributions to this study

These overarching developments in European societies and trends in their democratic realities, as well as the conceptual discussions and analyses that accompanied them, have not proceeded at the same pace or with the same intensity across the continent. Instead, they have varied considerably across countries and have reflected the diversity of historical, cultural, social and economic processes that are so characteristic of Europe. Thus, history has allowed some European countries, typically in the North and West of Europe, to introduce democratic practices earlier, while authoritarian and totalitarian rule long held sway in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe. Cultural patterns that often date back centuries, whether the result of religious or ethnic population compositions or traditions of paternalism or egalitarianism, have equally shaped democratic realities in individual countries. These are manifest in social developments ranging from medieval forms of self-government in towns and guilds to more recent processes of nation building. Economic growth and prosperity, the emergence of a middle class, urbanisation and education have facilitated democracy in many European regions and countries; their absence, in turn, has made it harder for other parts of Europe to institute stable and vibrant democratic governance. These and many other factors have shaped the ways in which democracy took hold and is practiced, how citizens and civil society engage, which social and political issues they address, and how they relate to the state.

To map this diversity of democratic realities in Europe in more detail, to add nuance to what is characteristic for democratic practices in individual countries, and to understand better which trends, challenges and experiences face democrats in Europe more broadly is the task of the country chapters brought together by this study. They do so by looking at the very grass-roots of European democracies, that is, at the participation of citizens and civic organisations at the local level. Written by democratic activists, community organisers and NGO experts, the country studies provide a practical and action-oriented perspective, especially in reporting on several cases where citizens engaged to address concrete, mostly local-level, deficits in democratic decision-making and delivery. The national context, in which these local cases and experiences are set, is subject to an introductory section of each chapter, with overviews and analyses of the historical, political, social and legal environment that bears on the participation of citizens in their local communities. Taken together, background information and case studies provide an unusual view of the current state of democracy in eight European countries.

In the first of these country studies, Mirela Despotović of the Centre for Civil Initiatives describes how her native Croatia, now close to joining the European Union, has had a

particularly thorny road to democracy. Part of the former Yugoslavia, its early years of independence were marred by nationalism, war and neo-authoritarian rule. The decade or so since has seen much democratic development but also struggles to overcome these legacies, as the case studies included in the chapter readily reveal. In the small town of Petrinja, old-time residents and war refugees had to work hard to find ways to live together and build a viable community, achieved through their citizen engagement and help from professional community organisers and developers. A joint citizen effort to improve day care for local children in the under privileged town of Karlovac became the catalyst for the community to get organised and for engaging local authorities. Also in Karlovac, concerted action on the part of the vibrant local NGO sector, in conjunction with cooperative local and national authorities, succeeded in establishing a youth centre and NGO offices that provide critical infrastructure for long-term citizen participation and community development.

Neighbouring Hungary is the subject of the second chapter written by Ilona Vercseg and several colleagues from the Hungarian Association for Community Development. While their country boasts a rich heritage of early forms of citizen and community participation, long periods of foreign rule and most recently communism have weakened Hungary's civic fabric. Rebuilding social capital, the confidence and capacity of citizens to influence the life and development of their communities, is a difficult and long-term task, however. This is vividly illustrated by the case of rural settlements in Borsoj-Abauj-Zemplen County, where a large-scale programme to educate locals in participation and community development has had first positive results. Such programmes, long-term as they have to be if they are to generate sustainable results, depend on infrastructure for training and education of those engaged in local communities, such as the Civil College Foundation described in a second case study. Evidence of the power locals can muster, once organised, is provided by a third example from Pecs, where citizens successfully mobilised against a planned military installation that threatened to jeopardise the development of their town.

Kirsten Paaby of the Ideas Bank Foundation in Norway provides a perspective from Scandinavia, considered by many as a model region of remarkable democratic development. Indeed, efforts to engage citizens strongly in the building and decision-making of local communities go back a long way in Norway, and they can draw on the country's strong tradition of '*dugnad*', or collective work on common tasks and performing good deeds. Not surprisingly against this background, the first example provided, that of Oslo's Sagene district, can look back at over thirty years of successful community building and cooperation with local authorities and other stakeholders. Such experiences are echoed in the experience of the municipality of Oevre Eiker that has been particularly creative in participatory local planning and development, including citizen academies, flower parliaments, and grandparents' conferences. The Svartlamon neighbourhood of Trondheim, in contrast, is an example in which local residents, business and authorities went through a

period of conflict before residents succeeded in preserving the area, which has since been recognised as a model of urban ecology and participation.

In a contribution from Poland, Łukasz Prykowski who serves as plenipotentiary for cooperation with NGOs in Łódź places emphasis on mechanisms of public consultation between local authorities and citizens. This chapter argues that, while local democracy and development can benefit much from citizen organising and pressure, municipal authorities also have to institutionalise and nourish forms of dialogue with the public for sustainable results, a responsibility that is all too often neglected by the holders of public office. If taken seriously by local governments, public consultations can enhance the quality of decisions taken, the development of communities, and the interest and participation of citizens-at-large in local affairs, as is demonstrated by the two cases included in the chapter. The first of these shows how the city of Sopot, encouraged by a vocal community group, pioneered the practice of participatory budgeting that now gives citizens the right to determine how one per cent of the municipal budget should be used. The second example comes from the city of Torun where the deficient quality of public consultations prompted the idea of the Torun Participator, a planning process based on user needs, that successfully shaped the development of a public park in the city.

Oana Preda of the Resource Centre for Public Participation in Romania maintains that in her context most initiatives aiming at increasing citizen engagement originate in NGOs. As such, civil society has often been inspired by international experiences and support and has frequently exerted successful pressure on state and political actors, yet struggles to reach out to citizens, their natural constituency. In response, there has been a trend among civic organisations to use community organising as a key approach for building citizens participation and activism, as the three case studies include in the chapter demonstrate. More critically, the example of Bucharest's Favorit district demonstrates how reluctance among residents to engage in their immediate neighbourhood often exacerbates the unwillingness of local authorities to open up decision-making to public participation. More positive experiences can be found in the city of Alba where a local NGO campaign successfully advocated better access to public spaces and offices for people with disabilities. Most encouraging is, however, the third example from the village of Tiganesti where previously disengaged residents joined forces to establish a day care centre for children that has since become the corner stone of a lasting participatory community development process.

Comparable experiences with organising citizens at community level and influencing decision-making by local authorities can be observed in Slovakia, as testified to by Kajo Zbořil in his chapter. The country went through a period of neo-authoritarian backsliding after it gained independence in 1992, but a well-organised civil society and the mass mobilisation of citizens eventually reasserted the will of the people for democracy. On the

local level, however, democratic decision-making and citizen participation have emerged more slowly. As two of the case studies indicate, local development projects are frequently decided against the will of residents. Only by way of civic mobilisation and organised protest over several years have the citizens of Pezinok been able to avert the construction of a hazardous waste dump close to their homes, while residents of Banská Bystrica combined public and legal action to prevent an oversized building from being constructed in their Fončorda neighbourhood. Citizen action is, however, not limited to protesting decisions made by local authorities and business, but often initiates improvements and developments directly, as demonstrated by the third example from Volkovce where senior citizens reclaimed and improved a public park for the benefit of the entire village.

Contentious politics, or citizen protest against decisions made by public authorities, is central to Amparo Rodrigo Mateu's chapter on Spain. She argues that the relationship between citizens and power structures has long been confrontational rather than cooperative, the legacy of the decades of dictatorship in that country. Protest regularly erupts when the state fails to take the interests of local residents and communities into account, as is illustrated by examples from Cabanyal, a neighbourhood in Valencia under threat of destruction by local re-development plans, and from Zarra where residents and authorities clashed over a planned storage facility for nuclear waste. Disenchanted citizens have, however, also made attempts at introducing new and more participatory practices of democratic decision-making, as is shown by the case of *Take the Square Morvedre*, one local chapter of the country-wide *15-M* movement that emerged in 2011 in the wake of the economic crisis.

The last of the country chapters considers the United Kingdom. Alison Gilchrist, a long-time practitioner and expert in community development, emphasises the important effects of the devolution of power on local communities. Over the last decades, the UK's four jurisdictions have taken competencies over from Whitehall across a range of policy areas, allowing communities in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to assume new responsibilities and to adjust approaches to local and regional specificities. In England, as the first case from Dudley Borough in the West Midlands exemplifies, communication, consultation and cooperation between voluntary organisations and local authorities has been key to improving public services. In Scotland, remote rural communities enhanced local development through community buy-outs of land, underutilised by traditional owners. Such investments by communities and subsequent property management have resulted in more resilient and sustainable communities and their economic regeneration. In Wales, the underprivileged Caia Park housing estate received a boost under the 'Communities First' regeneration programme, as a community-led partnership provided residents with a range of services, addressed social problems, and rebuilt confidence and the sense of community among locals.

In their sum, these perspectives from eight European countries and the experiences of the two- dozen case studies included in the country chapters amount to a fascinating mosaic of contemporary citizen participation and local democracy. Although the examples brought together here are certainly not exhaustive, and while they do not claim to be representative for individual countries or Europe as a whole, they do hold important lessons for revitalising European democracy from the grass-roots up. Some of these lessons will be presented in a concluding chapter that also outlines which challenges remain to be addressed for all those engaged for strengthening the participation of citizens in making decisions affecting them and their communities.

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Building Local Communities and Civic Infrastructure in Croatia

Mirela Despotović

Croatia is a former socialist country in South East Europe, a republic of the former Yugoslavia. It is currently working towards membership of the European Union, and its transition to democracy and a free-market economy is progressing.¹ Under the socialist system in Yugoslavia, a dominant and centralised government dictated every aspect citizens' lives and made every decision for the whole society. Individual initiative or the expression of individual opinion was frowned upon and even forbidden, although the political system formally recognised and created space for citizen activism and developed several models of citizen participation.

One of the specifics of Croatia as a republic within the former Yugoslavia was a form of self-government that allowed workers to participate in enterprise management, and to be involved in important decision-making. At the local level, citizen participation took place in active community life. Institutions at several levels recognised and functioned in favour of citizen participation. At the local level, the most important of these was the local community committee. This body was in charge of mobilising citizens to organise social, cultural and sports activities in their communities or neighbourhoods. However, the nucleus for the post-socialist civil society development in Croatia was in organisations such as the Red Cross, voluntary fire brigade associations and national women's associations.

The entire social, political and economic system that was Yugoslavia was built on the principle of citizen participation, including the self-management of decentralised communes. In the 1950's, the responsibility for certain national programmes, including those for education and social care, was transferred from the national/federal administration to various decentralised public institutions. The agencies responsible for education were given quite significant autonomy in decision-making. While republic level legislation determined standards in a certain field (for example, professional qualifications, vocational training), citizens determined how these programmes were implemented on the local level. The role of professionals was to advise, motivate, and encourage citizens in influencing public policies.

At the same time, Yugoslavia was a one party system, and citizens recognised the power of the ruling party and individual members of that party, and in the end, most important

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¹ Croatia completed the negotiations on its EU accession on 30 June 2011. At the time of writing this chapter, Croatia was expected to join the EU as of 1 July 2013.

decisions were made by political cells on the local or higher levels. On the one hand, the citizens lived in a country of fair and just laws, with a supposedly socially sensitive government. On the other hand, they were positively discouraged from having opinions that differed from the 'party line' and from being 'different from the crowd'. Citizens that lived in such societies for many years or for their whole lives generally distrust and have little confidence in dealings with governmental authorities.

The political and administrative environment is an important factor for the success of citizen initiatives. Local governments and the civic administration in former socialist countries, including Croatia, are not used to reacting positively to the expression of citizens' interests. Cooperating with citizens means sharing power, which such authorities often see as threatening. The effectiveness of citizen participation in decision-making and the stimulation of civil initiative are also determined by the quality of communication between groups of citizens and local or regional governments and their staffs. Discussions about their perception of the role of civil society in the development of their regions, cities and neighbourhoods and training in participative community planning are essential to facilitate such communication. A current example is the Croatian Ministry of Health and Social Care, which is planning changes that will give local and regional authorities more responsibility for developing local social policy. In the process, community building and planning with input from local partners will gain in importance. The employees of the Ministry and the local Centres for Social Care that will be responsible for implementation on the ground need training and instruction on how to be more effective in mobilising citizens to create local community plans for development.

In Croatia, the term 'community' is understood in a predominantly geographical sense, based on the definition of a neighbourhood that in most cases coheres with the administrative boundaries determined by community neighbourhood committees. In rural Croatia, communities were 'strong', in that they possessed a spirit of helping each other, building houses together, joint contributions to community facilities, etc. One of the unfortunate results of the homeland war in Croatia (from 1991 to 1995) was the outward migration of the ethnically and religiously diverse communities that historically lived all over the country. A further 70,000 to 80,000 Catholic Croats from the surrounding former-Yugoslav republics were encouraged to settle in Croatia during the war – this was a political priority for the government. They moved in large numbers into communities with a high percentage of Orthodox and/or Serb minority populations, which in turn were resettled to Serbia. Those communities suffered during the war and have not had the chance to reconcile their grievances, and heal the trauma they experienced.² Especially in rural Croatia, this has led to a lack of social and community cohesion. From the social and psychological perspective, post-war communities in Croatia are overburdened by political, religious, ethnic and cultural differences, greatly affecting their sense of safety and the quality of relations in

² These communities are located in seven of 21 counties and represent one third of Croatia's territory.

the community. The segregation of such communities is only exacerbated by the fact that many civil society organisations work exclusively with one or other cultural group and not the community as a whole.

One legacy of Franjo Tudjman's presidency for Croatia's history is that for administrative purposes the country was divided into 21 counties (established around the 20 largest cities plus the capital Zagreb, which has a dual status as city and county), 126 cities and 429 municipalities.³ Critics of this division believe that it was a means to effectively control the country during the war years, and to maintain political control over the country as a whole in its aftermath. By contrast, during the former Yugoslav federation (1945 –1991), Croatia had only 69 cities and 103 municipalities.

Despite a budget decentralisation model, according to which primary health care, social care, primary education and public transportation are under the responsibility of local and regional authorities, decentralisation rarely works in practice. Rural communities are too poor to cover the costs of social services. Communities and municipalities whose political leadership is close to the federal government tend to prosper in comparison to those with no political connections. The demographic and economic outlook of such rural communities is also discouraging.

A typical example of the relationship between public authorities at various levels and citizens is the case of the state-run maternity hospitals in the Dalmatian cities of Makarska, Sinj, Imotski, Supetar, and Slavonia Djakovo from mid-2011. These were to be closed due to insufficient equipment, personnel, and funding to keep them in operation or for modernisation. As the state health system is centralised in Zagreb, none of these cities were in a position to raise sufficient funds to maintain their facilities. Citizens, various civic groups, political parties and even some staff of public authorities protested vociferously. Ultimately, the reopening of several hospitals calmed local protests, but did not address the increasingly difficult problem of state versus local funding and decision-making, or the mechanisms that are needed to tackle contentious local issues. Similarly, there were several standoffs between local and national officials regarding the Law on Golf Courses. This law allows locally designated green and agricultural areas to be rezoned as strategic investment areas for golf courses, hotels, and other tourism infrastructure, without local due process or public participation in decision-making. Croatia is one of few countries with such a law. The issue erupted near Zadar, in Istria and in Dubrovnik. In all three cases citizens initiatives succeeded in stopping the project, which discouraged potential investors.

Citizen initiatives have not been as successful in cases involving urban planning, development and private investments in the capital, Zagreb and in the second largest city, Split. In both, citizen initiatives protested against the local political leadership who, favouring

³ Franjo Tudjman was President of Croatia from 1990 to 1999.

the interests of private investors. In Zagreb, the status of public property in the city centre's pedestrian zone was changed, so that some wealthy people could use it as a parking lot. In Split there was a clear conflict of interest. The private investor was the Mayor's partner. She took advantage of her position, requesting permission to use public property located in one of the most beautiful forests of Split as a parking lot for a restaurant she owned nearby. In both cases thousands of citizens protested for months. In Zagreb, the protesters worked with 30 lawyers providing pro bono services and managed to have the construction of the garage stopped on several occasions by the Ministry of Construction and Environment. The protests lasted for three years and involved more than 400,000 citizens (which represents about half Zagreb's population). The citizens were remarkably well organised. Even the President sympathised with the initiative and visited the protesters on a couple of occasions. Finally, though, the police arrested more than 70 citizens who attempted to prevent the further construction of the garage using techniques of passive resistance. After the police intervened, the construction of the garage was completed, with profitable results for the private investor. Local government acted in favour of the investors, which simply confirmed to the already sceptical and disillusioned population that as a citizen it is not possible to take on the 'powers that be' – the Mayor and business people.

Croatia is a specific example of institutionalised cooperation between NGOs and governmental authorities, because it took the path of establishing a centralised NGO liaison office and later decentralised cooperation, delegating some functions of that office to other bodies. This process was determined within the framework of the 'New Model of the Organisational Structure for Civil Society Development in Croatia'.⁴

The Government Office for Cooperation with Non-Governmental Organisations (henceforth, the Government Office for NGOs) was established in 1998.⁵ Its primary goals were to lay foundations for mutual confidence and to promote processes of collaboration with the NGO sector.⁶ It was responsible for developing cooperation with NGOs through the provision of financial support, advice and training and through information sharing. It also coordinated legislative initiatives on issues affecting civil society organisations. It channelled state funds in almost all fields of NGO activity through a transparent funding mechanism characterised by the public announcement of calls for proposals with clearly stated criteria for selection, the creation of independent groups for the review and assessment of projects and monitoring and evaluation processes. The government office for NGOs also led the process of preparing a Programme of Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of

⁴ For an overview of this 'Model', see Hadži-Miceva, K., "[Legal and Institutional Mechanisms for NGO-Government Cooperation in Croatia, Estonia, and Hungary](#)", *The International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, vol. 10, no. 4 (August 2008), pp. 43-72.

⁵ For more detail, refer to the website of the [Office for Cooperation with NGOs](#) of the Government of the Republic of Croatia.

⁶ Barić, S., [Current legislative framework in Croatia relating to possibilities for cooperation among NGOs and state and local administrations](#) (Budapest: ICNL, 2000).

Croatia and the Non-governmental, Non-profit Sector in Croatia (henceforth, the Programme of Cooperation),⁷ which was signed in 2001. Through its activities, the Government office for NGOs contributed to the development of trust and transparent cooperation between the government and NGOs.

The development of cooperation between the government and NGOs in Croatia did not end with the institutionalisation of the office. Indeed, the cooperation proved to be a vibrant process, which required monitoring and revision based on the growing need for ensuring sustainability of civil society organisations and the definition of their role in the collaboration process. Hence, following the government's commitment to "... propose to the Croatian Parliament means of financing and improving the basis of the institutions of the civil society", the Government Office for NGOs developed a decentralised model of organisational structure for the further encouragement and support of civil society.⁸ As a result, a Council for the Development of Civil Society (henceforth, the Council) was set up in 2002, as a cross-sectoral advisory body to the government primarily responsible for the implementation of the Programme of Cooperation, the creation of the Strategy for the Development of Civil Society and the harmonisation of the state funding process. In 2003, a National Foundation for Civil Society Development (henceforth, the National Foundation) was established and thus, the new Model was launched.⁹

The new Model is a result of a two-year process led by the Government Office for NGOs, with the aim of decentralising the cooperation and state funding from one centralised office to diverse stakeholders (government bodies, local and regional authorities, the National Foundation and the Council). Specifically, Ministries, government offices and institutions are now responsible for channelling state funds directly to NGOs who are active under their jurisdiction. The new Model encourages Ministries to designate one person or a unit as responsible for cooperation with NGOs.

The rationale behind decentralising the cooperation and funding process is based on the need for the renewal of direct communication between various Ministries and NGOs and for furthering their cooperation in addressing particular needs of citizens. It also creates the possibility of diversifying funding sources and reaching out to alternative and matching funds in implementation of common activities between the Government and NGOs. In order to ensure continuity of this transparent funding mechanism, the Government Office for NGOs launched a process to draft a Code of Good Practice and Standards for the Financing of

⁷ Government of the Republic of Croatia, Office for Cooperation with NGOs, [Program suradnje Vlade Republike Hrvatske i nevladinog, neprofitnog sektora u Republici Hrvatskoj](#) [Programme of cooperation between the Croatian Government and the non-governmental, non-profit sector in Croatia] (Zagreb: UZUVRH, 2000).

⁸ Government of the Republic of Croatia, *Program rada Vlade Republike Hrvatske za razdoblje 2000.-2004. godine* [Work Programme of the Government of the Republic of Croatia 2000-04] (Zagreb: VHR, 2000).

⁹ For more detail, see the website of the [National Foundation for Civil Society Development](#). The new model of cooperation between government and civil society is described in more detail in: Plavša-Matić, C., and Hadži-Miceva, K., "A New Model for Civil Society Development in Croatia", *SEAL*, Winter 2003/Spring 2004, p. 43.

Programmes of Civil Society Organisations out of State and Local Budgets.¹⁰

However, in the current model, the Council, the Government Office for NGOs and the National Foundation hold the key strategic positions. The National Foundation was established by the Republic of Croatia through the Law on the National Foundation for Civil Society Development as a public not-for-profit entity in 2003. It is responsible for promoting and supporting the sustainability of the sector, cross-sectoral cooperation, civic initiatives, philanthropy, and voluntarism through education and publications, grant-making, public awareness campaigns, evaluation services, research and regional development. The Foundation is governed by a Management Board, composed of three representatives from the Government, one from the Local Government and five from civil society organisations. It is financed by state budget funds, Croatian lottery funds, private donations, income from economic activities and other legitimate sources.

The Council is composed of ten government representatives, ten NGOs and three experts. The members are approved by the Government based on nominations by specific Ministries, NGOs and the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs.¹¹ Among other tasks, the Council is in the process of creating a database of NGO programmes that are being funded by the Government, monitors the implementation of the Programme for Cooperation at national and local levels, works on the Strategy for Civil Society Development and initiates further changes in legislation relating to NGOs.

The Government Office for NGOs initiated the creation of several cross-sectoral working groups, which are composed of representatives of ministries, NGOs, domestic and international experts. The groups were tasked with leading different legislative initiatives to create a supportive legal environment for NGOs (the framework for such has been achieved through the promulgation of a Law on Associations, a Law on Income from Games of Chance and Competition, a Law on Humanitarian Assistance and a draft Law on Foundations among others). Civil society organisations have their representatives in the Management Board of the National Foundation and also in the Council. In addition, they participate in almost all the working groups that work on initiatives led by the Government Office for NGOs, the National Foundation and the Council. The most recent example is NGOs representation in the National Committee for the Development of Volunteerism, which is a body established by the Council to prepare a draft law on volunteerism and to develop a strategy for the promotion and support of volunteering in Croatia. Another successful initiative, which is the result of close cooperation between the Government and NGOs, was the signing of the

¹⁰ Croatian Parliament, *Code of Good Practice, Standards and Benchmarks for the Allocation of Grants for Programmes and Projects of NGOs* (Zagreb: Croatian Parliament, 2007).

¹¹ The Decision on the Amendment of the Decision for Establishment of the Council for Development of Civil Society and Election of President and Members of the Council (Official Gazette of R. Croatia no. 111/2003) specifically enumerates the Ministries that can nominate representatives and the fields out of which NGOs can nominate own representatives.

above-mentioned Programme for Cooperation on 4 January 2001.

The Programme of Cooperation defines the following fields as areas for cooperation between government and NGOs: consultations with NGOs in legal initiatives and their inclusion in working groups; consultation in designing the government's National Programme and evaluation of its strategy and priorities, consultation in evaluation of projects in which public money is invested; evaluation of national policy in all areas; decentralisation and cooperation for the sustainable development of the society; partial or complete financing for programmes and services; public participation in the process of decision-making and meeting community needs, support and enhancement of self-organising and volunteer action for the benefit of the community; development of social enterprise and social capital as an important component for social development and support for a socially responsible business sector. A survey including several active civil society organisations about the implementation of the Programme of Cooperation with NGOs resulted in a statement that the Programme is still in its test phase.

One crucial objection towards the programme is that it is implemented in a top-down manner. Both the National Foundation and the Government Office are seen by some NGOs as organising public forums and discussions on a pro forma basis, without attempting to ensure true and active two-way communication. Not surprisingly, these NGOs report a lack of responsiveness from both bodies.¹² Further, some of the interviewed organisations report a lack of will on the part of the National Foundation to reply to their questions, requests and correspondence, especially if it demonstrates unfavourable evaluations of the work of the Foundation. The majority of NGOs that are funded by the National Foundation seem to be reluctant to openly criticise it, or other government bodies such as Ministries. They fear losing their funding. Ironically, this reflects the nature of relations between citizens and the government under the former socialist political system, in which citizens feared being openly critical or even making constructive suggestions for improving the situation.

Nonetheless, over the last decade or so, civil society organisations have become stronger and are increasingly competent of challenging their funders and the government. Several high profile actions by trade unions and citizens' groups have demonstrated this growing influence and public support for civic action. Survey results show that in the past the public was mostly unwilling to support civil society initiatives.¹³ This tendency is still attributed to Croatia's experience with socialism, as well as the decade under the Tudjman government, which both treated independent civil society with hostility. This changed after the death of President Tudjman in late 1999 when a new coalition government was formed. As mentioned above, the National Foundation was established in 2003 with the aim of

¹² Such were the evaluations of participants of round tables organised by the Centre for Civil Initiatives in the Karlovačka and Zagrebačka counties in 2007.

¹³ Such were the findings of several surveys conducted by the staff of the Centre for Civil Initiatives in local communities of the Karlovačka and Sisačko-moslavačka counties between 2005 and 2009.

improving state support to civic groups. In its 2009 annual report, it reported that the founding assets of 2 million Kuna (US\$ 369,500) allocated in 2003 increased to 42 million Kuna (US\$7.8 million) in 2009.¹⁴ However, there has not been sufficient improvement in the ability of small grassroots movements and organisations to access these funds, and financial challenges persist for all but the most well established NGOs and civic initiatives. The Government Office for Cooperation with Civil Society Organisations reports that 45.4 per cent of Croatian citizens have been active in at least one of the around 40,000 registered nongovernmental organisations in civil society (the EU average is 40 per cent).¹⁵ Activity corresponds to the following types of organisational membership: 12 per cent religion-based, 14 per cent sport or recreational, 12 per cent cultural and educational groups, 8 per cent professional groups, 4 per cent youth groups, 3 per cent health-based groups, 4 per cent environmental and 12 per cent union-based groups.¹⁶

Within these types of engagement, civil society has had increasing influence on decision-making processes on a variety of state and government issues. Some examples are illustrative. The organisations *Kontra* and *Iskorak* continued their work to ensure safeguards concerning gender and sexual minority rights.¹⁷ Transparency International Croatia helped to draft a law proposal on financing political parties and campaigns.¹⁸ In June 2010, major trade unions gathered some 700,000 signatures – well exceeding the required threshold of 450,000 – requesting a national referendum on proposed changes to the Labour Law that union leaders argued solely benefited employers. Several factors may have contributed to the public response, including appeals from the representative of the Unions, Ozren Matijašević, the government’s low approval rating, the high level of media attention, and support from opposition parties. Apparently influenced by the public’s response, the government rescinded the proposed changes to the Labour Law. During the height of the public campaign, the Parliament asked the Constitutional Court to rule on the validity of the referendum. The court eventually ruled that the referendum was no longer needed because the government withdrew the legislation. Despite the fact that their practical goal had already been achieved, union and civil society leaders, as well as President Ivo Josipović, criticised this ruling and accused the court of lacking independence.

Later in 2010, the Zagreb-based initiative *Pravo na grad* (Right to the City) organised more than a dozen demonstrations to stop construction by a local entrepreneur.¹⁹ The civic group asserted that regulations were ignored due to alleged corruption in the issuing of construction permits and that the builder’s plans were going to change the visual character

¹⁴ Nacionalna zaklada za razvoj civilnog društva [National Foundation for the Development of Civil Society], [Godišnji izvještaj o radu za 2009. Godinu](#) [Annual Report for 2009] (Zagreb: National Foundation, 2010).

¹⁵ Bežovan, G., *Civilno društvo* (Zagreb: Globus, 2005).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ For more detail, refer to the websites of [Kontra](#) and [Iskorak](#).

¹⁸ See the online presence of the Croatian chapter of [Transparency International](#).

¹⁹ Further information is available on the website of [Pravo na grad](#).

of a downtown street called *Varšavska*. The group used social media to organise activities, and news coverage of the protest at the construction site ensured a nationwide following. During one of the protests, the police used force and arrested around 70 demonstrators who were blocking engineers and construction workers from entering the site. The activities of *Pravo na grad* inspired several other protest actions against construction plans around the country, using *Varšavska* Street as a rallying cry for citizens opposing building projects promoted by local governments.

However, in the Croatian experience, the most pressing issues around which citizens organise and participate tend to be those related to work and employment. For example, there have been several cases of workers who were not paid their salaries over long periods of time or of large factories and industries that were closed down. Currently, about 330,000 people are unemployed in Croatia and unemployment is the most common and the most important national social issue for which citizens' initiatives will attempt to change public policies and governmental (local, regional and national) decisions.²⁰ On the local level, more and more citizens' initiatives consider issues such as kindergartens and primary education, pollution and other environmental issues. Moreover, recent research also reports a slight but significant increase in the number of citizens that are active in environmental organisations.²¹

It is important to mention that local and national media tend to be open to covering these issues, affording them higher visibility and the opportunity to attract a high number of followers.

Case study I: Bridging the gap between old time residents and new settlers in Petrinja

This case study describes the story of a project team of five community workers employed by the Centre for Civil Initiatives (CCI) that conducted a community development project in Petrinja, a town that is included among the areas of special state concern identified by the authorities.²² These are communities that were destroyed by the war from 1991 to 1995. Petrinja is about an hour's travel from the capital Zagreb and has 23,413 inhabitants. There, a team of two community workers from CCI, assisted by a local social worker and two youth workers, aimed at contributing to community development using new working methods for improving the quality of life in local communities.

For Petrinja, a key consequence of the war was the departure of many long-standing residents and the arrival of new settlers. Thus, today's population statistics for the town show that 42 per cent of the population remains from before the war, while 58 per cent

²⁰ These figures and further statistical data are available on the website of the [Croatian Employment Service](#).

²¹ Bežovan, G., *Civilno društvo* (Zagreb: Globus, 2005).

²² For more detail, see the website of the [Centre for Civil Initiatives](#).

have arrived and settled in the area since. The local economy was almost entirely destroyed during the war and today it primarily relies on the *Gavrilović* meat factory, one brick producer, one furniture company, and the local public transportation provider. There are three primary schools, one kindergarten and one secondary school in the town. About 200 children each year cannot yet attend kindergarten or school and their parents stay home to take care of them. A higher education institution for kindergarten teachers also functions in Petrinja, bringing about 400 students to the town.

The town is divided into four districts for administrative purposes. Statistical evidence and reports from citizens indicate that the 4th district (known as *Češko selo* or Czech Village) experiences higher juvenile delinquency, school vandalism, family violence and intolerance among neighbours than the other parts of Petrinja and that its infrastructure is underdeveloped. This district was chosen for the pilot phase of the project.

The first step in the project was profiling the district. The district has 2,800 inhabitants, almost one third of them are under 18, while 300 are over 65. Its main street is situated on the main county road leading to the county capital, Sisak. This road divides the district in two, and due to heavy traffic communication between the two sides of the street is not easy. No important community institution is located in the district – there is no pre-school institution, no school, no church, no health institution and no post office. Further, the district is not connected to the central sewage system and the surrounding area is still mined.

In order to obtain a better picture of what the local population think about life in this community, the project team conducted a survey among 175 inhabitants, men and women, representing youth, adults and the elderly, as well as the employed and unemployed population of the district. The findings indicated that 51 per cent of respondents thought that life in the district was worse than in other parts of Petrinja. As advantages of living in the district respondents cited the fact that it was a peaceful and quiet neighbourhood, had green areas, and was close to the centre and the county capital. The main disadvantages were seen in the infrastructure: no sewage system (73 per cent of respondents); lack of facilities and events for young people (36 per cent); unpaved roads (12 per cent) and no kindergarten (16 per cent).

The project team supported the creation of a local working group, composed of 15 community members forming a representative sample of the district's population. The working group and the project team met monthly, while subgroups convened on a weekly basis. The subgroups were composed of an additional four to seven community members, so the actual membership of the working group was approximately 100. At one of the first monthly meetings, the vision for the district was discussed and decided, based on a problem analysis. In addition, the general objective, goals and activities of the project were identified. CCI staff further conducted presentations on various topics related to community

development, such as community analysis, profile of a community worker, assessing needs, gender issues in community development, action planning, and others.

The problem analysis revealed two key groups of problems: the infrastructure (sewage system, kindergarten, mines) and interpersonal relationships (intolerance among neighbours). Despite the fact that infrastructural challenges dominated in the problem analysis, the members of the working group decided that interpersonal relationships were the more important problem to be addressed in their community. The members of the working group made this choice because they believed they could affect change in relations among the citizens more effectively than if they tried to improve infrastructure, which often requires a high level of financial investment. Further, reports from the school showed that the children from the district tended towards behavioural disorders more than other children, and that they were more likely to be involved in vandalism.

During the war and in the immediate post-war period, there was a major population shift in Petrinja, including in the 4th district. Part of the population left the area for good, and some of the new settlers occupied their empty houses. Despite the fact that 15 years had passed, the old and new residents had not gotten to know each other, and a gap had emerged between 'old-timers' and 'newcomers'. This gap was essentially a problem of a lack of acceptance of different cultures, as although all are Croatians, the 'old-timers' and the 'newcomers' have different approaches to life and many traditions that differ.

In daily life in the town and district, this gap manifests itself as a lack of civility and care. People pass each other in the street without greeting each other; they live in the same street without knowing each other. In the district, it is clear that one of the key reasons for the fact that people do not know each other even though they are neighbours is that there are no meeting facilities – there is no square, church or community centre where people could get together and talk. Further, no activities are organised to allow people to get to know each other better, to develop a community spirit and a sense of belonging to the district.

In view of the above, the working group decided that the aim of the project would be to increase cooperation, mutual knowledge, and acceptance of differences, and to develop a sense of community in the population of the 4th district. The pilot phase was to last 18 months, from July 2010 to December 2011. Specific objectives were set by the working group as follows: to increase the number of opportunities and possibilities for inhabitants of the 4th district to get to know each other – through public events organised in the district over a period of 18 months and to provide space which would allow the inhabitants of the 4th district to meet. The action plan included many activities in the district including public events, such as the Days of Bread, a primary school open day, a traditional food product show, a barbecue on the river and a boat race; the building of a playground; a sports

tournaments; a work drive; and the creation of a web site.²³ The planned primary school is also expected to become the regular meeting space for the district's citizens.

The first activities included the organisation of several events, including a masquerade, a flea market and the preparation of products for a Christmas Bazaar. The team took over most of the organisational work, but that soon resulted in fatigue, feelings of being used and anger at community members. During the 'inter-vision meeting' all staff reported that the residents were too passive – not motivated enough to be active and not keen enough to influence change in the community. The project team received assistance from management for the reorganisation of the teamwork. It was decided that instead of the whole team working with the large group, team members should divide into task groups and work with subgroups. A month later, the number of involved citizens from the community had tripled. Slowly but surely the community was taking ownership of the project. They subsequently successfully organised a sports tournament (147 people participated in various traditional sports), some sale events, and an action to clean up the surroundings of the future community centre. Two subgroups successfully submitted proposals to the local community foundation, which was encouraging for the project's continuation.

The development of a web page created a new 'public space' for community members to be informed about project activities. One young person from the community took over the web page subgroup and began to film the activities taking place in the district. The same young person decided to set up a youth group in Petrinja with a few of his friends (some of whom live in the 4th district and some do not), and the group was registered in December 2010. Since then the number of young people involved in the activities of the new organisation has significantly increased. It is currently working on the restoration of an old building which in the future will become a youth and community centre with a variety of facilities and activities for the young people in Petrinja, including creative workshops, hip-hop classes, a gym, computer lessons, youth leadership trainings and other activities based on their needs. The youth group is also creating a documentary movie about the life of young people in the area and an anthem for the district.

The project was supported by the Centre for Civil Initiatives and the teachers from the HAN University, a school for community workers in Nijmegen in the Netherlands, with funding from the MATRA programme of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁴ CCI provided two professional community workers on a part-time basis for the project. The town of Petrinja gradually became involved in the project and provided financial and logistical support. The Town Council was impressed by the level of the motivation for change and readiness to work on the development of the community of the citizens involved.

²³ The 'Days of Bread', a traditional Croatian festivity, take place every October. People bring homemade bread to schools, churches, work places, etc.

²⁴ See the website of [HAN University](#).

There were some issues that had to be addressed in the first part of the project. For example, there were some disagreements between the older members of the working group and the youth group. The older members of the community wanted recognition from the younger ones for their past engagement in community affairs, something the young people were not willing to offer, as they preferred to focus on the future. The 'old-timer' members of the community felt that they had more right to decide about life in the community, although the 'newcomers' had already been living in the district for 15 years.

The community was not really ready to speak openly about these sensitive issues, or about the intolerance between neighbours within the community. By establishing subgroups according to the community members' interests, such discussions were made easier. Four subgroups were established – a web-page group; an infrastructure group; a creative workshops group and a group for monitoring and evaluation. The monitoring group was composed of a CCI community worker and three community members. They created evaluation instruments for each project activity and implemented them. The results of the on-going project evaluation showed that citizens of the 4th district were quite happy and enthusiastic about the sports tournament and the schoolbook exchange. Further conversations confirmed that the members of the community appreciated events that brought people in the neighbourhood together the most.

The project has had a number of long-term results. First, a group of young people, the youth volunteers involved in the project, decided to get formally organised, and established their own organisation, called C.R.E.E.D. Soon after registering, the organisation submitted project proposals to the Town of Petrinja and to the EU's *Youth in Action* Programme with positive responses. They have already managed to raise funds for the establishment of a youth community centre in Petrinja.

Secondly, the Head of the District Council reported that it was obvious that members of the community were more actively engaged in relation to community issues and had gained knowledge about local fundraising. She gathered a group of women from the community to conduct two new projects in the district that were funded by the town and local community foundation. Both projects involved the participation of citizens from the community (rebuilding of the community centre and cleaning actions in the neighbourhood). It is interesting that citizens representing different cultural and ethnic backgrounds also worked together in the project, indicating that the aims of the project have been met.

Third, one of the subgroups worked on a strategy for increasing the income of women in the neighbourhood. It resulted in a new activity – the manufacturing of traditional Petrinja regional souvenirs and their sale at local fairs. The funds raised are re-invested in the business. This group of women started up a free of charge creative workshop for children

with the aim of providing children from the community with new and positive ways of using their spare time, thus spending less time on the streets and in cafeterias.

Fourthly, although the resolution of the problems around the sewage system was not explicitly part of the project, it encouraged town officials to put the question on the agenda of a meeting of the town council. The Council decided to apply for EU funds to resolve the problem of the sewage system in the entire town. By the time of writing, the EU Delegation in Croatia had responded positively to the proposal for a sewage system project, indicating their will to approve it. The town, therefore, began to work on the project documentation and all the legal requirements needed for the project's implementation.

Case study II – A kindergarten helps to reinvigorate a local community in Karlovac

This is the story of a local fundraising effort to improve a kindergarten in the town of Karlovac, which has 65,000 inhabitants. Although located close to Zagreb (54 kilometres), Karlovac is far behind the capital in terms of social development. Karlovac was badly affected by the war, which resulted in the large-scale migration of populations, the establishment of several large refugee camps and a new multi-ethnic composition of the local population. CCI community workers and a social worker from the local Centre for Social Care led an 18-month long community development project in Karlovac.

Although Karlovac has many registered civil society organisations, very few of them are running programmes, and especially not in the field of community development. There is one women's organisation that runs a women's shelter. There are also some youth groups and several environmental organisations – the town faces serious problems with the pollution of its four rivers. The city finances the operations of particular organisations, especially sports associations, organisations of war veterans, and folk clubs, but this financing is not organised in an open and transparent manner. Although more open to civil society than some years ago, local authorities are still not sufficiently skilled to effectively involve citizens in community planning, or to act transparently in relation to the funding of civic initiatives. The local social service centre and its social workers provide assistance to individual people, but do not deal with 'community issues'. Hence, citizen participation in Karlovac remains limited.

The Centre for Civil Initiatives has been cooperating with the town of Karlovac since 2008. The town supports CCI in mobilising citizens on issues of community development and increased citizen participation in urban issues. The project described here has been highlighted as an example of good practice, and its story will be published as a manual for use by postgraduate students of social work at Zagreb University.²⁵

²⁵ This manual is due to be published in December 2011.

This case study focuses on the work conducted by CCI in the Rakovac district of Karlovac. Rakovac is a predominantly residential district, covering an area of one square kilometre, and it has 6,404 inhabitants (45 per cent male and 55 per cent female). Rakovac was established as a military settlement in the 18th century. Later on, merchants and craftspeople also settled there. The 19th century was characterised by the gradual development of the metal and textile industries. These industries were important for the district throughout the 20th century, although by the time of the war in the 1990s, when two major plants and the manufacturing industry closed once and for all, they had become less important. In the 1970s, the district was extensively developed as a residential area. Today, the district's few economic activities include services and a small local printing plant. There are two educational institutions in Rakovac – a kindergarten and a primary school. The kindergarten provides services to 90 children of age 2-7, organised in four groups.

The population of Rakovac is composed of socially deprived people and people displaced from other parts of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war. Further, as the Croatian Army owns property in the district, military servicemen live in the area. One of the problems in the district is that 'old-timer' residents and 'newcomers' demonstrate differences in mentality and lifestyle. This manifests itself in disputes between neighbours, complaints from 'old-timer' residents about the conduct of 'newcomers', who are accused of not respecting the rules of living in multi-unit housing, and on occasion there have been disruptions of public order.

At the beginning of the project, a community assessment was conducted. The representatives of CCI initially requested information from the office of the Mayor of Karlovac, the Employment Agency of Karlovac County and the Central Statistical Office, and conducted background desk and Internet research. Subsequently, they contacted a number of local community leaders and the local police. Community leaders were identified on the basis of personal acquaintance, discussions with Rakovac inhabitants and a survey. Based on the information collected, a questionnaire was prepared and was filled in by approximately 160 randomly selected respondents from the Rakovac district.

In a next step, a working group composed of 40 Rakovac residents was formed and a mini-survey was conducted in order to identify the problems of the district and to decide on an appropriate plan of action. The major challenges identified included a lack of well-equipped sports, recreational and children's facilities; poor urban planning and the exclusion of citizens from decision-making processes relevant for the design and maintenance of public areas; problems with irresponsible behaviour on the part of dog owners and attendant safety and hygiene issues at the kindergarten; and a lack of social responsibility on the part of some citizens, who were used to throwing garbage out of windows, damaged green areas, and inappropriately treated benches and parking lots.

The working group identified improving the urban environment in Rakovac as the main aim of the community development project. The specific objective was to improve the quality of sports facilities and playgrounds in the district. Two outdoor facilities were chosen for renovation and renewal – a children’s playground and a sports ground. These were recognised as important for raising the quality of life in Rakovac because they were ideal locations for the parents of kindergarten children, and young people, to socialise, engage in community activities and help to improve life in their communities. The project was planned for a period of 18 months. The work was delegated to several sub-groups. One of these was responsible for the work on the children’s playground located at the kindergarten, which had no fence. CCI staff, the local social worker and one kindergarten teacher invited the parents of all 90 children attending the kindergarten to a meeting. Forty of them came and half of those in attendance voluntarily signed-up to help to put up a fence around the kindergarten playground.

The kindergarten building is situated in the middle of Rakovac, surrounded by buildings on one side and a busy road on the other. As there is grass around the building, many dog owners walk their dogs around the kindergarten, and few clean up after their dogs. In addition, young people use the grassy area to meet and party over the weekends, often leaving broken glass and bottles behind. As it became increasingly unsafe place for children, the teachers at the kindergarten decided that the children should not play outside and, as a result, the children spent the whole day indoors. Interestingly, the teachers felt helpless to change the situation, and they doubted that involving the parents could lead to a solution.

CCI staff helped the teachers and the parents who wanted to get more actively involved to form small task groups in order to raise funds to purchase a fence that would enclose the kindergarten playground, thereby allowing the children to play outside safely. Another group worked with the children on the creation of a colour book that would help raise the awareness of members of the general public about the challenges faced by the kindergarten and the neighbourhood. The idea was to involve as many people as possible in addressing these challenges. A third group worked on the preparation of a Children’s Fair and Lottery to take place in front of the kindergarten.

The preparation phase took several months. The parents were very enthusiastic and willing to offer of their free time, money, and skills. They also engaged their friends, relatives and neighbours. Parents even got together and jointly created a project idea that they submitted for funding to the local community foundation *Zamah*.²⁶ The foundation approved funding for a children’s colour book, including children’s drawings and words about the lack of a safe playground at their kindergarten. The colour book was to be disseminated to potential donors, residents of Rakovac and visitors to the Children’s Fair, which was equally supported by the *Zamah* foundation. Every child at the kindergarten, their parents and many

²⁶ For more information, see the website of the [Regional Foundation for Local Development *Zamah*](#).

grandparents attended the children's fair. Everyone bought something, raising money to purchase the fence and equipment for the playground. Another group of parents approached local companies such as Croatian Forests, Croatian Roads and *Zelenilo*, a local company that takes care of green areas in Karlovac. They provided machinery, soil and grass and cash funding. The local police donated USD 4,500. Some other local firms donated money. The colour book was an absolute hit in the neighbourhood because it contains the children's perspective on their kindergarten and the urban environment in Rakovac. Their honesty about the state of the playground and their dissatisfaction with the adults who cause the playground to be in such poor condition sent a strong message to the community – respect us, your children, and respect your environment – a message that no one could ignore.

This project was supported on an on-going basis by the office of the Centre for Civil Initiatives in Karlovac and three of its part time staff. The local social worker was at the disposal of the project for one to two days a week. The kindergarten teachers and some parents attended an initial training about community development and social actions conducted by the CCI staff. The Karlovac local authority was supportive in obtaining various permits to build the fence and erect the equipment at the playground.

The community has benefited from this project in many ways. First, the kindergarten teachers got motivated to organise a new project in the community. Some of them approached CCI with the idea to create a community centre in the same building as the kindergarten. This community centre would provide space for parents and other adults in the community for evening classes, support groups, creative workshops, debates and so on. If the project succeeds, this will be the first kindergarten in Croatia to provide space for evening time activities in service of the community.

Second, the principal of the kindergarten, who had reservations about involving the parents and active citizens in resolving the fence problem, became more open towards future projects. She admitted to never having thought of alternatives to requesting funds from governmental sources, and says that the project has changed her way of thinking about how to approach the question of funding and fundraising.

Third, the Children's Fair was visited by the representatives of the city, which decided to provide city owned machinery to prepare the land for building the fence at the kindergarten. The Mayor gave a short interview to the local Internet portal *Radio Mrežnica* saying that the kindergarten in Rakovac should be seen as a model for how citizens can initiate positive change in the rest of Karlovac.

Finally, the CCI community workers acted as intermediaries between the kindergarten as a local educational institution, the parents, and citizens at large, city officials, and the private

sector. They assisted parents in creating a new approach to community issues and problems, an approach in which citizens join forces to raise funds from local sources and to address an urgent problem for the community's children. This successful community action with the participation of local businesses, the local police, and public service companies in the city will hopefully motivate new citizen initiatives in the Rakovac district and other parts of Karlovac.

The working group faced some obstacles during the project. A change of staff within the CCI project team complicated the work; it took some time for the membership of the working group to stabilise; project organisers were initially hesitant to ask for financial assistance from local sources; and the principal of the kindergarten did not initially want to participate in the project. Eventually, however, these obstacles were overcome and this community-building effort came to full fruition.

Case study III: New venues for local civil society: a youth centre and *MUZA* in Karlovac

The 2009 local elections saw a new Mayor take office in Karlovac. A former secondary school teacher, the Mayor entered office with a strong interest in supporting youth development and citizen initiatives. The specifics of local life in Karlovac, including of its vigorous civil society sector, have been described above, but it is important to note here that youth organisations and organisations that deal with community development, citizen participation, human rights and good governance did not have any facilities and depended on either foreign donor support or their own resources, in contrast to the many sport, veteran and care associations operating in the town.

As a result of the Mayor's concern for youth issues, a municipal strategy for youth was developed with a high level of youth participation, including representatives of the local youth council and the staff of the Centre for Civil Initiatives. CCI community workers facilitated the development of the strategy for youth. Monthly and bi-monthly meetings were held with more than 70 youth activists and representatives of civil society organisations that have some form of youth programme in the town. Along with these meetings, a local youth organisation called *Domaći* conducted a survey among 384 young people from Karlovac about their expectations towards the strategy.²⁷ The same organisation supported by the Croatian Youth Network later took over the facilitation of the process. One of the main issues that emerged from the meetings and survey was that youth organisations and other civil society organisations dealing with youth lack proper facilities and space for doing their work.

Soon after the municipal strategy for youth was completed and published, the local authorities renovated a large space to house the first and only community youth centre in Karlovac, which was to include a youth information centre, a meeting space for youth and

²⁷ Detailed information is available from the [Domaći](#) website.

activities, exhibitions and a multimedia centre. The city issued a public tender for the management of the youth centre and invested more than 100,000 Euros in renovating, equipping and furnishing the facility. It selected three organisations to manage the facility and the centre's programme: the local youth organisation *Carpe Diem*, the Centre for Civil Initiatives and the environmental group PCAP International.²⁸

Soon after the youth centre's management was taken over by the three selected CSOs, some members of the town council criticised the selection process in the media, questioning the legitimacy of the decision to select CCI and PCAP, because neither are youth organisations *per se* and because they do not have youth as clients. Further, it was suggested that CCI and PCAP were only interested in acquiring office space.

Although numerous CSOs could use the 150 square meter, renovated, multi-purpose space of the youth centre, the problem of insufficient office space for civil society organisations dealing with issues other than sport and youth remained. Premises for seminars or training activities were equally lacking, and organisations had to rent local hotels and restaurants to conduct educational activities. While the youth centre helped to address the challenges faced by youth organisations and young people in the town to some extent, numerous organisations still suffered from a chronic lack of office and meeting space. CCI joined an initiative group of 38 civil society organisations, discussed the problem, and helped to put pressure on the local authorities to address the issue and find a suitable space to accommodate civil society organisations in Karlovac.

In the meantime, relations between the youth organisations benefiting from the use of the youth centre and the organisations with no space began to deteriorate, with negative effects for the everyday functioning of the civic society sector in Karlovac.

The initiative group identified a suitable space for the needs of the organisations concerned – a former Yugoslav Army dormitory, which had been abandoned since the 1990s and whose ownership was unclear. The organisations signed a petition to the Mayor requesting that the building be given over for use by local CSOs for at least one year. The petition action was followed up with a strong public campaign.

Over a two-year period, the following steps had to be taken to secure the use of the building. The owner of the building had to be identified; as it turned out, this was the Ministry of Interior Affairs. A relationship with the Ministry needed to be established, and a request for the use of facilities in state ownership had to be lodged. Negotiations were held with the city of Karlovac over coverage of the running costs of the building. Eventually, a Memorandum of Cooperation was signed, on the basis of which the city would provide the

²⁸ PCAP International stands for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Plants International; for detail, see the website of the [Croatian chapter](#) of the organisation.

space free of charge and partially cover utility costs. Interest among civil society organisations had to be garnered, and civic groups interested to move into the building formed a committee in charge of the construction works needed to prepare the facilities.

Along with all the administrative work, for which five organisations took responsibility, a group of young people created a visual identity and joint strategy for the civic organisations that would use the facility, now known as the *MUZA* building. *MUZA* is an acronym, whose full meaning in Croatian is “little urban community”. The acronym also reflects the idea of a 'muse', with the message that the *MUZA* centre is a place open for creativity, art and other forms of cultural expression, as well as a platform where differences in opinion can be voiced and where educational programmes for life-long learning, training activities and workshops can take place.

Nine organisations eventually moved into the *MUZA* centre. They received support from the City of Karlovac, and each of them signed a rental contract for the space with the city authorities. The organisations decided among themselves how to run the everyday operations in the building and how to cover the running costs. Public companies such as the water and sewage companies did not claim repayment of any previous debts for the building, and started with new bills for each organisation. Some of the organisations, such as one dance studio and a Hare Krishna association, managed to raise funds from local companies for renovating the building, and for covering the heating costs during the first winter. Donations were received in cash and in kind.

This story of the establishment of these two centres in Karlovac shows how perseverance and a clear joint vision among civil society organisations can be a strong driving force to achieve common goals. In this case, a facilitating factor was that the Minister of Interior, who had to intervene in person to resolve the ownership issue, lived in Karlovac County and some of the members of the initiative knew him personally. Without his willingness to support the project, the administrative transfer of the paper work from the ministry to the city authorities would have been impossible and would have stopped the project.

The organisations moved into their new office spaces at the beginning of January 2011. These include groups with different goals and activities, ranging from cultural organisations, two music clubs, and a dance studio to a community development group, a youth organisation, the local majorettes' club, and a Hare Krishna organisation with a vegetarian restaurant. These share the public space and use it as offices and as a venue for their activities. They have to negotiate on the joint renovation of the building, cover heating costs during the winter months, and overcome differences in the resources available to each organisation. This is, sometimes, a very challenging process. It is, however, also an educational process that trains the organisations concerned in negotiation, conflict resolution, compromise, and work towards common goals and interests.

Rebuilding Local Communities and Social Capital in Hungary

Ilona Vercseg, Aranka Molnár, Máté Varga and Péter Peták

Although the term ‘non-profit’ has only been used in relation to organisations since the middle of the 20th century, societal institutions conducting ‘non-profit’ activities have existed as long as human communities.¹ Throughout history, interest in and concern for ‘community’ have been conveyed to individuals through religious commands, social norms and state edicts, although with differing levels of coerciveness and with variable degrees of charitable voluntary action. The following will outline some milestones and tendencies in the development of the Hungarian civic sector.

Forebears of civil society and first examples of cooperation between the state and the civic sector in Hungary date back to the Middle Ages and the founding of the first independent state. Early examples of foundations can be seen in the actions of Prince Géza and King Stephan, who confiscated lands from heathen rebel leaders and donated them to the Catholic Church, thus providing resources for the establishment of religious orders.² The monarch was not allowed to rescind the resources provided, but could partly determine the purposes for which they could be used, as is also the case of modern foundations.

Until the late 20th century, however, Hungary experienced only short periods of political independence, the result of wars or revolts that typically ended in suppression and occupation. Under these conditions, little scope existed for voluntary citizen initiative. By contrast, strategies and techniques for resistance and survival developed in society, and remain embedded in the collective memory. These continue to shape community responses, even to modern challenges, and have an impact on the behaviour of non-profit organisations today.

Hungary’s political, social and civic development has been extensively determined by its experience of invasion by the Turks in the late 15th century, and by foreign colonisation in

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¹ This section is mainly based, with her permission, on the work of Éva Kuti, especially Kuti, É., [Hívjuk talán non-profitnak](#) [Let’s Call It NGO], Nonprofit kutatások no. 7 (Budapest: Non-profit Research Group, 1998); and Kuti, É., [Civil Europe - Civil Hungary](#) (Budapest: European House, 2008).

² Kecskés, L., “Az alapítványi jog fejlődése” [The Development of the Legislation on Foundations], *Magyar Jog*, no 2 (1988), pp. 110-111.

the Habsburg Monarchy. Especially the policies of the latter hindered the development of bourgeois values. Prolonged feudalism and the delayed development of the bourgeoisie rendered the self-organisation of society difficult, and emergent 'voluntary' movements in the late 18th and early 19th century became clearly oppositional. An example are the reading circles created in the 1790's which were, to all intents and purposes, "... political associations regarding reading and culture as tools of social transformation and of the fight against the Austrian colonisation".³ Several of its leaders were executed, the reading circles banned, and public libraries closed.⁴ When some libraries were reopened, a special imperial decree was issued prohibiting "... that the libraries be connected to a public reading room or a scientific association".⁵ The flourishing of associations was an organic element of the reform movement of the 19th century. Hence, after the 1848 revolution, the court in Vienna made great efforts to ban or at least to paralyse associations. Before the Austrian-Hungarian compromise of 1867, only 319 associations were registered. After the compromise their number increased gradually.⁶

With the advent of the 20th century, people from specific social strata began to associate and organise. Besides building an identity as a group and organising cultural and leisure activities for their members, such associations also performed advocacy functions, including the representation of workers' interests. In addition to the earlier associations of nobles, intellectuals and burgers, workers, craftsmen and peasants also formed their organisations. Many of these addressed social challenges, especially workers' associations and those of an explicit political nature. Despite conflicts with the authorities, repeated bans and excessive administrative requirements, the number and scope of voluntary associations continued to grow.

Hence, by the interwar period, 'associating' could already be considered a mass phenomenon. In 1932, there were 14,365 registered associations in Hungary, of which 12.6 per cent operated in the fields of culture and religion, 6.6 per cent in sports, 32.6 per cent in leisure activities, 0.7 per cent in education and science, 19.8 per cent in health and welfare, 9.3 per cent in fire brigades, 16.4 per cent in trade and 2 per cent in other fields.⁷

In parallel, the early 20th century witnessed the emergence of a strong foundation sector. Less politically explosive than voluntary associations, foundation activities were mainly of a

³ Fülöp, G., *A magyar olvasóközönség a felvilágosodás idején és a reformkorban* [The Hungarian Reading Public during the Enlightenment and the Reform Age] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1978), p. 33.

⁴ Kósa, J., *A magyar kölcsönkönyvtárak kezdetei* [The Beginnings of Hungarian Public Libraries] (Budapest: Magyar Könyvszemle, 1939), p. 463; Kulcsár, A., *Olvasóközönségünk 1800 táján* [Our Reading Public Around 1800] (Budapest: Egyetemi Nyomda, 1943), p. 29.

⁵ Gárdonyi, A., *Régi pesti könyvkereskedők* [Book Traders of Old Pest] (Budapest: Stephaneum Nyomda, 1930), p. 85

⁶ Kuti, É., *Statistics of Foundations and Associations* (Budapest: Central Statistics Office, 1994), p 83.

⁷ Ibid.

charitable nature. Foundations usually specialised in initiating, supporting and financing the development of welfare services, often in tandem with state authorities. A great deal of foundation support and many private donations and bequests went to public education and social care. There were 'foundation beds' in public hospitals, 'foundation places' in public orphanages, shelters, nursing homes, schools, and universities. Government often contributed, financially or in kind, to the establishment of private charities. Voluntary organisations and foundations may not have been dominant in service provision but made important contributions in terms of quality and innovation. In health and education, associations and foundations 'pioneered' institutions, such as the first kindergartens and hospitals. Their role was not only charitable, as they made explicit social needs and acted as policy advocates. Frequently, voluntary organisations persuaded state authorities to provide social services when philanthropic sources proved to be insufficient.

With the beginning of World War II and the subsequent Communist takeover, this development was interrupted for several decades. Communist governments considered individuals as potentially hostile and as needing re-education as socialists. They feared that social movements might fall outside party control. In keeping with this, almost all voluntary organisations in Hungary were banned in the early 1950s. What remained of the voluntary sector was nationalised and brought under state control. A series of administrative rules prevented citizens from establishing new independent voluntary associations, while the government artificially created 'mass organisations' which worked under strict party control. The 1956 revolution revealed the depth of the gap that had emerged between state and society in Hungary – the government understood that crude oppression would not work in Hungary as a means of governance and citizens learned from the failure of the revolution that more subtle approaches to resistance were necessary. This created a curious atmosphere of distrust. Citizens formed voluntary organisations, which they pretended were politically neutral, when in fact their nature was oppositional. Their very existence represented society's hostility towards the dictatorship and its desire for even limited autonomy, and whenever the political climate became milder, these organisations took every opportunity to carve out a little more freedom.

Heit and Vidra Szabó point out that in the 1970s and 1980s, the creation of local (mostly cultural and leisure) associations was motivated by a wider array of issues than interest in culture and leisure.⁸ Through such organisations, people living in villages often tried to address problems caused by local community policy dictated by the central government, and deficiencies in services and institutions. They used these associations as platforms for their advocacy actions. Citizens were further motivated to associate because this allowed

⁸ Heit, G., and Vidra Szabó, F., "A kulturális egyesületek és szabadidős társaságok szerepe a helyi társadalom fejlődésében" [The Role of Cultural Associations and Leisure Clubs in the Development of Local Societies], in: Kuti, É. (ed.), *A non-profit szektor Magyarországon* [The Non-Profit Sector in Hungary] (Budapest: Non-profit Research Group, 1992), pp. 198-201.

them to experience independence and autonomy, gave them the possibility to engage with different values, and the opportunity to be part of an honest exchange of opinions.

The 1980s saw a gradual broadening of the scope of associative activity. While the state still had the legal authority to do so, it did not dare to crack down on citizens' initiatives. State socialism came to be considered in crisis, as it clearly failed to deliver on its promises. A comprehensive system of public institutions providing every citizen with the whole range of high quality public services free of charge was simply too costly. The state was forced to accept that alternative methods of financing were needed, and by the mid-1980s, state authorities admitted that structural reform was inevitable. Thus, by the time the Iron Curtain was raised and fundamental political change became feasible, the Hungarian government had already begun to admit that it needed the assistance of both for-profit and non-profit organisations to solve social problems.

In 1989, there were 8,296 associations and 400 foundations in Hungary.⁹ In fact, the 'rehabilitation' of foundations preceded political change, as legal provisions pertaining to foundations reappeared in the Civil Code as early as 1987. Moreover, the Parliament passed a law on association in 1989 that established legal guarantees for the freedom of association. In other words, the development of civil society was not an outcome of political change in Hungary. Rather, civic organisations played an active role in preparing political transformation.

The regulatory framework for civil society evolved further throughout the 1990s and 2000s. There were two milestones in this process. The first was the 1997 law on the 1 per cent system. The second was the 2004 law on the creation of the National Civic Fund. Both acts delegated some government decision-making to private actors. They authorised taxpayers and elected civil society representatives to distribute a limited part of the state budget to non-profit organisations. Thus, the 1 per cent system and the National Civic Fund enabled non-profit organisations to get public support through intensive civic participation, in accordance with civic priorities and without endangering their independence from the state.

The legal and economic regulations enacted since 1989 have created a broad institutional framework and favourable, although not ideal, conditions for the development of civil initiatives and non-profit service provision in Hungary. Statistical data available demonstrates that this framework is appreciated by actors of civil society and has encouraged them to continue their development and work, resulting in the impressive

⁹ These associations engaged in culture and religion (3.9 per cent), sports (36.3 per cent), leisure (23.8 per cent), education and science (1.6 per cent), health and welfare (6.7 per cent), fire service (13.9 per cent), trade (7.6 per cent), and other activities 6.2 per cent); see Kuti, É., *Statistics of Foundations and Associations* (Budapest: Central Statistics Office, 1994), p. 83.

growth of the civic sector. The number of non-profit organisations has grown by a factor of nine since 1989, exceeding 72,860 in 2009.¹⁰ Growth was particularly rapid in the early 1990s. Since 1995, it has not only slowed down but has become more differentiated. Non-profit organisations engaged in health care, education and research, economic development, human rights, and social care are characterised by dynamic and steady growth. Culture, environment, sports and recreation, international relations, and non-profit federations demonstrate slowing growth, while economic and professional advocacy organisations and voluntary fire brigades demonstrate stagnation and even decline.

In Hungary today one can observe varied relationships between the state and non-profit organisations, and a dynamic flow of benefits. These include support to the actions of government from the civic sector, through which non-profit organisations engage in fundraising and provide support to public institutions in health or education. Through dialogue and exchange of information, government receives clues as to the needs and concerns of citizens. Joint bids for tenders give local and other government authorities access European Union funds that would otherwise not be available to either government or non-profit organisations. The contracting out of services can help the government to ensure effective service delivery without extensive bureaucracy. Legal and economic regulation of the non-profit sector is important, as the state can create an enabling or hindering environment for the civic sector and its work. Social participation and control are important, as the civic sector represents interests and demands of society towards government, or else acts as a transmission belt for the state towards society.

Government relations with civil society have been regulated by a variety of acts, programmes and strategies. Of these, the most important have been the government's civil society strategy 2002-2006, and the government resolution on planned measures 2006-2010, both of which can be considered to have been implemented. The implementation of these programmes has demonstrated that efforts to develop partnership between government and the civic sector have been considerable. Since 2002, the government's intentions and objectives have also been documented and discussed with the representatives of civil society. While not all objectives have been fully achieved, and some aims have had to be temporarily or definitively given up, the emergence of strategic thinking about government-non-profit partnerships is an important development.

This overview of the historical development of civil society in Hungary demonstrates that some progress towards the consolidation of democracy has been made since 1989. Current political developments in Hungary, however, are cause for much concern. In April 2010, a

¹⁰ Nagy, R., and Sebestyén, I., *Statistics of Non-profit Organisations 2009* (Budapest: Central Statistics Office, 2011) surveyed 72,860 non-profit organisations in 2009, of which 66,145 were active. 9 per cent of the organisations had ceased, suspended or not started their operations, most of them associations. Voluntary fire brigades closed down most often (16 per cent), followed by professional and economic advocacy groups and those engaged politics (10 per cent). By contrast, the educational sector appeared to be most stable.

'national conservative' government won a two-thirds majority, after a populist election campaign that was reminiscent of the promises made by state socialism. The key element of the new government's politics is a critique of the previous socialist-liberal coalition government and its programme consists largely of reversing measures passed by that government. As a result of its large majority, the new government has extensively changed legislation and eliminated many of the checks and balances established in Hungary's transition to democracy. This has not gone unnoticed by the civic sector, which has been subjected to measures based on mistrust and suspicion. The possibilities for citizen participation and the involvement of civic actors in decision-making have been extensively curtailed, and relations between the non-profit sector and the state are fundamentally changed. New legislation on civil society is under consideration and is likely to be adopted at the end of 2011. Although it remains unclear how this legislation will affect the functioning and development of civil society, many are seriously frustrated.

Those committed to democracy are deeply concerned about the current government's efforts to centralise decision-making and strengthen the power of the state, and its concomitant moves to weaken free media and human, political and social rights. The contemporary discourse is characterised by recourse to nationalism, populism and Hungary's past. While resistance to this government's approach is very likely to grow, it is also likely to be very difficult for ordinary people to differentiate between reality and manipulation as a result of the lack of long-term democratic tradition and people's desire for security and safety. This clearly shows how fragile Hungary's new democracy remains, and the extent to which there is a danger of regression.

Adding to the described evolution of civil society is the very specific meaning and reality of 'community' in post-Soviet and post-communist societies, such as Hungary.¹¹ The failure of the 'great socialist experiment' has done great harm to the credibility of community ideals. Citizens in these societies are deeply suspicious of anything termed 'communal', which became a synonym for 'socialist' as opposed to 'individualistic' or 'bourgeois'. The elimination of all opportunities for self-determination slowly smothered the ability of people to self-organise. Instead, ideological retraining, sham optimism, and a discourse of slogans created a very negative community experience for the majority of people. They gradually withdrew into the private sphere, the only area of life in which people believed they had scope for autonomous decision-making. Research conducted in the early 1980s points to the fact that Hungarian society was more 'individualistic' and lacked a sense of community more than other societies, including that of the United States.¹²

¹¹ Vercseg, I., *Közösség: Eszme és valóság* [Community: Ideal and Reality] (Budapest: Közösségfejlesztők Egyesülete, 1993); see also, for an English version, Deller, U., and Brake, R. (eds.), *Community Development – A European Challenge* (Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2008), pp. 284-298.

¹² Hankiss, E., Manchin, R., Füstös, L., and Szokolczay, Á., *Folytonosság és szakadás. A magyar társadalom értékrendjének leírása egy országos értékszociológiai vizsgálat alapján* [Continuity and Rupture. Description of

During the Soviet era, 'community' was defined as a 'quality group' tasked with carrying out the social objectives set by the political elite. Those objectives were determined by a mixture of ideology and social psychology, but the underlying conceptual idea behind the notion of community in the context of state socialism was never made explicit to people, who also had no role to play in the determination of social objectives. In the state socialist centralised and hierarchical system it was not possible to speak about the self-organisation of citizens, even though this is both the original and contemporary sense of the concept of community. Similarly to English, the Hungarian meaning of community includes being bound to both a locality and to a group of people. Today, Hungarian community development professionals usually interpret community as being rooted in a given locality. Taking a functional approach, a community exists to help its members in the most important areas of life: socialisation, economic welfare, social inclusion, social control and mutual support.

The concept of locality, or neighbourhood, which is commonly associated with community, should be considered separately. The concept of neighbourhood is primarily an urban concept. Neighbourhoods are supposed to be functional communities, systems of contacts based on mutual help, and their importance increases as a result of certain social phenomena, such as unemployment, demography and political changes.

The potential for development that is represented by communities has spurred extensive interest in the phenomenon of social capital, and it has placed the issues of trust and cooperation firmly on the public agenda. When a government is faced with the challenge of divided communities and of neighbourhoods virtually destroyed by violence, threatening behaviour and high levels of crime and drug abuse, finding ways of re-injecting social capital becomes a vitally important goal. Thus community becomes an essential part of the policy agenda as well as being at the core of civil society and community development.¹³

Case study I: Participative learning for rural communities in Northern Hungary

This case study presents how community participation, knowledge about local citizen participation and citizen self-organisation were enhanced, and the institutions of local citizen action established, through community development and adult education in five

the Scale of Values in the Hungarian Society Based on a National Value Sociology Survey] (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Science, Institute for Sociology, 1982).

¹³ Henderson, P., and Vercseg, I., *Community development and civil society. Making connections in the European context* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2010), p. 22.

small regions of Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, a severely disadvantaged county on the northern periphery of Hungary between 2005 and 2011.¹⁴

Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County is the second largest in the country, and borders on Slovakia and Ukraine. Its total population is 709,634, with 408,000 people living in urban areas. There are 358 local communities in the county, of which 25 are towns. 34 per cent of the local communities have populations under 500 persons. The standard of living in the villages is lower than that in the towns. The villages have less access to services, job opportunities, healthcare and care for the aged, as well as to public institutions. As for infrastructural development, running water, electricity, telephones and gas are available almost everywhere, but sewerage is missing in several places. Transport is excellent between Budapest and Miskolc, the county capital, by rail and highway. This said the availability of transportation to the small villages is variable.

The 1990s saw the county facing the consequences of economic transformation. The sudden collapse of heavy industry, such as metallurgy, mines and chemical plants, led to a structural crisis that caused high unemployment, the migration of qualified labour away from the county, the depopulation of whole villages, the ageing of the population, the withdrawal of public institutions and ghettoization. While the county caught up somewhat after 2003, the most recent economic crisis halted this development and further jobs have been lost since 2007. As a result, the villages lack services and public institutions, especially in the fields of health, education and culture. Postal services and locations for citizens to meet and exchange are also lacking.

The 'Common Knowledge' participatory learning programme was carried out in five micro-regions including 85 local communities, mostly villages, in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County. Starting in 2009, the programme was based on the assumption that the county's economic development could be influenced by community and social relations, as well as by active citizen participation in public issues. The programme built on the creativity, knowledge, self-organisation and cooperation skills of the locals, and it reached beyond local community limits, made training widely accessible and generated new cooperation.

The programme set out to improve the quality of locals' lives through participative learning processes, through formal and informal adult education. In local contexts, the transition to a democratic culture has been slower than the economic transition. Some of the social skills previously required have become obsolete, while those required by democracy have not yet been acquired. Until the community development process took place in these localities, the

¹⁴ This section is based on the work of Gyula Bakó, Béla Bereczky, Erzsébet Budai, Ferenc Dolgos, Gábor Erdei, Katalin H. Petkovics, Pál Hadobás, Kitti Kovács, Zsuzsa Mészáros, Aranka Molnár, Éva Olter, Andrea Sélley, Póta Mária Lázár, Géza Széki, László Tiszolczki, Anna Mária Tóth and Klára Tünde Ureczky.

citizens did not believe that they could act to improve their own situation. As a result, they were not motivated to act or to learn, and were shy and afraid of new things. The intervention of community developers grew new institutions of citizen participation that helped residents to see the value of civic engagement. The programme also increased the capacity of existing institutions for community organising and adult education (mostly cultural institutions, often at the forefront of Hungarian community development work).

In almost all rural areas in Hungary, learning for democracy and skills relevant to the contemporary economic and social context are deficient. Little has been done to provide free access to learning opportunities for rural residents, who are faced with having to transform their lives and communities. Apart from the local pedagogical institute or the organisation that re-trains unemployed people, there are almost no adult education institutions operating in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén County. Employers provide some training but focus on skills for specific jobs, rather than addressing life or community building skills. The most popular courses taken are driving lessons and language courses. Local cultural centres have not been able to seize the opportunity and specialise in adult education, due to a lack of supportive policies and financial resources.

The programme aimed to address some of these deficits, especially those related to education and community development. Although community development cannot solve structural unemployment, it can contribute to local economic development. One training element worked with community enterprises and local economic development, including trainings in community entrepreneurship, local guiding for hiking and culture, and community mentoring. Study circles were organised to compensate for the lack of opportunities for adult education. Another part of the programme focused on community capacity for self-help, aiming to motivate young people to stay in their communities, develop the sense of belonging, and strengthen mutual help and solidarity within the community and openness towards the outside world.

The idea of community development appeared in the county in 2001 when the Hungarian Association for Community Development (HACD) started a community development process in the micro-regions of Ózd and Putnok and in the villages of Királd and Hét. A few local professionals working in culture, NGOs or for social change took part in HACD's work and training activities, forming a core team that gradually worked towards the goals of community development. The county's Institute for Culture made community development an integral part of its work. Its members teamed up with like-minded professionals seeking community approaches to change and, in 2002, founded the Dialogue for Communities Association. These two key institutions cooperate with county cultural institutions and the institutions of higher education, especially as regards culture, social work and adult education. They engage these institutions in mobilising locals, conducting research and

training, and organising new services. Further cooperating partners are schools, family support and child protection services, institutions of healthcare and education, the business sector, churches, and the minority communities in the county. Above all, the programme sought to engage the residents of participating local communities.

Launched in July 2009 and completed in June 2011, the 'Common Knowledge' programme was implemented through the cooperation of local and county-level public institutions and NGOs (mainly organisations of community work and community development) in a consortium.¹⁵ Previous community development and learning processes served as valuable experiences, and active locals were engaged in the community planning process in two ways. Firstly, residents and their NGOs were invited to community planning workshops. Secondly, the process was continued during four professional workshops conducted by the staff of the cultural centres located in the county.

The consortium presented the programme to the wider public in the county including community activists, local and county press. Opening events were organised principally to motivate and engage new stakeholders in community development and adult education. Community organisations and focal points for local action were introduced to newcomers by their neighbours, reinforcing the engagement of those who had been involved for longer and inspiring newcomers to join in, learn and act. Presentations were made by experts on a variety of themes related to community development and adult education. Information was distributed to participants about training available and on-the-spot applications were accepted. These events reinforced the belief of the stakeholders in their work.

Accreditation procedures started for adult education in two institutions, the county Institute for Culture and the Cultural Centre, Library and Museum of Edelény. Several adult education programmes were accredited including a 90-hour community mentoring training, a 90-hour community entrepreneurship training, and a 90-hour local guide for hiking and culture training.

Several non-formal training activities were implemented through learning circles. A learning circle is a small democratic group which functions according to the principles of dialogue and engages the active participation of all its members. It is a free form of learning in which the participants (as equals) strive to understand the processes taking place in the society around them. The participants learn in a democratic manner, and have the opportunity to take part in building the community. They learn to communicate, cooperate and to participate in community, social, cultural and political life.

¹⁵ Led by the county's Institute for Culture, the consortium included the cultural centre, library and museum in Edelény; the cultural centre and library in Hidasnémeti; the cultural centre in Tiszakarád; the cultural centre and library, Sajókaza; and the ÁMK community centre and library in Mezőcsát.

The study circles took place between December 2010 and March 2011, with five circles in each of the five regions in the county. They were organised on themes including agriculture, computer skills, traditional Hungarian embroidery, English and German language, etiquette and ballroom dancing, folk songs, cookery, handicrafts, local history, medicinal plants, and vintage motorcycles. Study trips were included and experts invited, tools and textbooks were purchased, and cooperation with partners was established to create prospects for continuity beyond the programme. The leaders of the study circles received training from community developers to ensure a positive learning experience for participants. An important concern was to involve as many local communities as possible, so each meeting was held in a different local community. The programme supported the transport costs of the participants to ensure maximum participation. As a result, a total of 1,102 people participated in 25 study circles.

The programme included various events to inform the residents of the county the opportunities offered. 22 such events were held along with several smaller meetings and press conferences for the local and county media. These events also served to establish continuous dialogue with beneficiaries of the programme about its results, further steps and possibilities for participation. The closing event that presented the results of the project was a true celebration involving all stakeholders, and giving all participants an opportunity to voice their feedback.

The success of this programme can be attributed to several factors. It united the resources of all the cooperating partners, and it drew on existing institutional capacity: the county Institute for Culture managed large scale funds, ran professional programmes, achieved accreditation and provided administrative support, and its staff came with prior experience in community development work. Positive cooperation existed between community developers and the Department of Cultural and Visual Anthropology at the University of Miskolc, which developed the research tools to identify training needs. The researchers built on the knowledge and social network of the community workers active in the area, and the students conducting the survey contributed fresh perspectives. Local community developers and their NGOs working in the county supported the programme, with their awareness of what could or would not work in the local context. The programme was based on a culture of discussion and dialogue, with all decisions taken together among concerned stakeholders and participants. Finally, the facilitation of the educational dimension of the programme was a true example of participation, as the curricula were developed according to the needs and knowledge of the stakeholders, while the training methods were those of adult education, built on the work and life experience of adults, and developed each topic through the broadest participation possible.

The programme did, however, also encounter a number of obstacles. Community and regional identity was weak among locals. They understood community more in administrative terms than in terms of a sense of belonging, and they have little interest or motivation to get involved in community affairs. Local NGOs tended to have limited horizons and few contacts beyond their villages. Given that the programme placed considerable emphasis on inter-community cooperation and partnership, much time and work was required to expand horizons. One of the greatest challenges, however, was to ensure continuity and sustainability. The programme certainly succeeded in increasing participation and citizen activity, and in building awareness of the importance of self-help and self-organising among participants. Nonetheless, the programme remained just a beginning in terms of real citizen activity.

Although the programme prepared members of the community to address problems they identified themselves, many of those problems could not be solved. Community enterprises are a case in point. Some viable business plans were drafted but project carriers lacked confidence to implement them and expected others to deliver solutions. In addition, discrepancies remain between social and citizen participation. The study circles demonstrated that interest in cultural traditions dominates over interest in the development of a modern democratic lifestyle and active citizenship, with handicrafts more popular than English language or computer skills. This problem extends to cooperation with the local governments and 'real' citizen action, such as participating in decision-making, advocacy or lobbying, which are not yet on the horizon for most resident groups. People living in these communities continue to know little about the mechanisms of democracy. Some participants of the educational activities also found it hard to work with the non-frontal and participatory training methods used, not surprising perhaps given the rigid educational system they had learned in earlier.

Mistrust persisted despite the fact that examples of good practice accumulated. Some of it can be traced back to the phenomenon of anomy, which is said to be greater in new democracies.¹⁶ Mistrust is also nurtured by the experience that reality is becoming more complex and uncertain, and many people find it hard to see where they fit in. In this project, this was manifest in the reluctance among some participants to share their contact information and to participate systematically in the study circles. In sum, this programme clearly demonstrated that the social environment for community participation remains challenging in rural areas.

¹⁶ The [Central European Opinion Research Group](#) has been researching public opinion in the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary on social issues, including anomy, since 1999. Research has included dimensions of anomy, such as loneliness, lack of orientation, powerlessness, alienation, breaking norms, lack of relationships among members of society, and indifference towards other people's problems.

All the same, there have been substantial results. Working with local knowledge and understanding through the participation of local people in planning this programme helped to build the self-confidence of locals to engage in adult education. Most of them, like other people of low qualification, were afraid of adult education because they thought that they would not be able to learn, let alone teach. The broad base of cooperation established during the programme broadened the view of all stakeholders on opportunities they can create jointly, and improved their self-confidence and comfort in working on community issues, cooperation with 'ordinary' people and facilitating mutual learning.

While it is not usual for cultural institutions to conduct adult education and community development, or to base their work on local demands and engage residents, there are technical and mentality barriers to this approach. Examples of such encountered by the institutions that joined the programme include the need for flexible working hours and for adaptation to developments in the community.

It can be concluded that the programme presented here has achieved what could be achieved under the specific circumstances in which it was rolled out. Although its results are partial, they can be turned into a solid foundation for future development if the actors of the three sectors – government, NGOs and business – can muster the energy needed for systematic, continuous and long-term work, and the vision to take their co-operation onto a larger scale of socio-economic developments in the county.

This is not an easy task in contemporary Hungary, given the general lack of resources, the difficulty of accessing development funds, their bureaucratic nature and the project-based approach preferred by funders. Funds granted are generally available for the short-term, they do not necessarily address goals defined by the locals concerned, and there is no guarantee they will be continued once the project is finished. In the same vein, this programme presents examples of the main problems of community development in rural areas. Participation in public issues and community development are not yet incorporated into the local culture. Skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for managing modern, democratic societies are lacking, and policy-makers have not taken the necessary steps to fill the gaps. Instead of institutional frameworks securing development, NGOs and local government institutions are struggling to meet contemporary challenges without suitable instruments. In sum, the mechanisms supporting development by communities for communities are not yet established in Hungary.

It must also be admitted that community development and civil society (no matter their will and persistence) cannot compensate for the state and its policies. The attitude of government authorities towards citizen initiatives is often problematic. Hobby groups, which do not present alternative opinions, are well liked and in exchange for small-scale

support, they readily legitimate the authorities' approach. In turn, citizen initiatives working for change, engaging in advocacy or taking an alternative position to the official line of those in power, do not receive support. What is more, development remains the privilege of those whose work corresponds to the priorities identified in the national development plan financed by the EU. No national or local resources are available to finance local development. Local governments struggle to make ends meet, even when it comes to their core tasks, while local development has become a task for others, especially the EU. In the local context, the short-term logic of the project-based approach means that after 18 months of employment, people return to unemployment. If the mobilised residents cannot access the tools needed for the realisation of their plans, like free and accessible adult education, affordable community development assistance, capital to start up companies or the resources necessary to make applications for external funding, and if these are not available into the medium-term at least, then development will remain the cause of an enthusiastic few rather than many.

Case study II: Infrastructure for citizen education – the Civil College Foundation

It is Friday afternoon and a group of men and women, younger and older community members, have gathered for a weekend training at the Civil College Foundation. A group of eight arrived from villages nearby and seven others represent the community development association of Békés County in Eastern Hungary. A third group of seven are from Vas County in the West of the country. They drop their luggage in their rooms and before even taking a proper look around, they go to work on their first assignment – an exhibition of five typical objects from the area where they live for presentation to the other participants. Flyers from NGOs, a toy car, a miner's lamp, potatoes, two bottles of wine, a bowl of fruit, home-made cookies, a brochure of a local cooperative, a photomontage of a city, documents from fieldwork conducted by a university, diaries from associations, a CD of local radio programmes, tourism brochures – the objects speak volumes about the places where the participants come from. This is the typical way a community training starts in the training centre of the Civil College, in Upper-Kiskunság, Kunbábony, some 70 km south of Budapest. It is also the first step towards establishing cooperation between three faraway places in Hungary.¹⁷

In presenting the work of the Civil College Foundation, this case study demonstrates the role of empowerment in community interventions, and of the informal and formal learning processes that come with it.¹⁸ These are to raise awareness among citizens, develop the scope of their action, and clarify their roles and relations with the government and the

¹⁷ This section is mainly based on the work of Máté Varga. For further information on the Civil College Foundation, see Henderson, P., and Vercseg, I., *Community development and civil society. Making connections in the European Context* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2010), pp 157-163.

¹⁸ For detailed information, see the online presence of the [Civil College Foundation](#).

business sector. They transmit the importance of taking on these roles of advocacy and human rights defence, motivate learning of relevant techniques of citizen action, and help citizens to appreciate the wider context of their actions. Learning processes also highlight the importance of networks and cooperation for harnessing opportunities for community development.

From time to time, it is necessary for active community members to step back from their day-to-day involvement with their own communities, and to take a look at their lives with some distance and through the eyes of others. This enables self-reflection and prompts thinking in terms of the broader context, and it helps to understand what community, participation, democracy and civil society mean, and how actors of the governmental, non-governmental and business sectors can contribute to local development by the community.

An adult education component has been part of Hungarian community development from the very beginning. Nevertheless, this idea of occasionally taking the necessary distance was incorporated only in the early 1990s. In 1994, the Hungarian Association for Community Development (HACD) launched the Civil College Foundation, an NGO aiming to support the necessary skills for empowerment and local action.¹⁹

Every citizen needs to learn democracy, no matter whether they were socialised in a new or an older democracy. Even when supported by an enabling democratic environment and relevant socialisation, life-long learning, through exchange of information, adult education and community action among others, is vital. However, the institutions of learning democracy remain weak in Hungary. The institutions of public education should develop elementary democratic attitudes and practices, and should prepare its students for active citizenship. Adult education should concentrate on continuing or supplementing this process, that is, to empower individuals and their communities based on local needs and existing experience, so that they understand and develop their roles and act as citizens. New kinds of training programmes, methods and trainers experienced in community work are required to implement such adult education. Hungary has few adult education initiatives that work outside of the traditional framework of purely theoretical or market-oriented responses to the problems of society, or that integrate training and practical work with citizens and communities, so that the starting and the end points of development work are organically embedded in contemporary local realities.

In Hungary, the development professions (whether in the community, rural, cultural or social fields) do not dispose of the necessary instruments or competences to discharge their

¹⁹ Further information about the Hungarian Association for Community Development (HACD) is available from the organisation's [website](#).

functions to the best potential.²⁰ This partly owes to the limited political will and resources available from the state, the NGO and business sectors. It is hardly surprising, then, that opportunities for civic and adult education have remained few and far between.

In this context, the Civil College Foundation is a remarkable establishment. It is principally a national-level institution, although it also serves the community development processes of the region in which it is located. While Hungary is in the process of learning democracy, new institutions for training and adult education that broaden the knowledge and practices required for everyday democracy have not been established – with the exception of the Civil College. The first of its kind, several factors motivated the establishment of this institution.

In general, the experience of political change suggested that lifelong learning for democracy should be organised more systematically and professionally. On the one hand, there was evidence that people were eager to seize new opportunities for local action, as manifest in the rapid growth of the NGO sector in Hungary and in vibrant election contests on the local level. On the other hand, however, citizens that wished to engage faced obstacles that originated in their limited knowledge about democratic procedures, a deficit the Civil College was to address. A second motivation was with the weak capacity of the Hungarian NGO sector to influence political decision-making, and one of the objectives of the Civil College was, therefore, to empower NGOs to reach their goals through democratic cooperation in formalised relationships with local authorities. In so doing, it helps to bridge the gap between NGOs and local authorities, and emphasises the necessity of partnership building between both on the basis of mutual interest and understanding. Thirdly, there was a lack of formally recognised and professionally run training opportunities to help citizens find solutions for specific practical problems. It is difficult to motivate citizens to engage in adult education if they cannot see immediate practical outcomes that benefit their daily work and lives, or if the quality of the training is poor. Finally, qualified training staff was also needed. Some training offers existed for non-profit organisations but few, if any, were available for participants of local community development processes.

From the outset, strengthening participation and encouraging civic action have been a major priority for the Civil College. It is mainly active in economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged areas and local communities of Hungary. In the first ten years of its work, it was active mainly in training to bolster community development fieldwork and to support Hungary's community development experts. Since 2007, however, increased emphasis has been put on national and international networks, movements and interdisciplinary

²⁰ As an illustration, there are no mid- and long-term funding schemes to support structural and social development, and that would cover the costs of community programmes and experts.

cooperation related to community development. This has considerably broadening the activities and reach of the Civil College to include new target groups and training themes.²¹

This evolution has enabled the Civil College to act on multiple levels and to react to the problems and situations experienced by local communities. It is in direct contact with citizens active on the local level. It develops interdisciplinary cooperation and networks, participates in lobbying activities, engages in broad international cooperation, and it offers training to local communities and individual citizens, with the aim of strengthening civil society, local participation and community action.

The Civil College was founded and developed on the basis and experiences of similar education and community development initiatives in Europe. Exploratory study visits were conducted in the early 1990s to similar organisations and colleges in Yorkshire in the United Kingdom. Considering their experience, as well as the Hungarian context, and with the support of the Hungarian Association of Community Development (HACD), a host-town was found for the establishment of a training complex for community activists and civil volunteers.

A one-time elementary school located in Kunbábony was converted into an educational and community centre and opened in June 1997. The building has eight rooms with bathrooms, a classroom, and a large living and dining room, and it can accommodate 32 in-residence training participants at any one time. It is surrounded by a park, which can be used as a campsite in summer when more accommodation is required for larger events. The reconstruction of both the building and the park area was funded by Hungarian firms and foreign foundations.

The opening of this educational and community centre was accompanied by getting to know the locals and the context. The Civil College began a community development process in the area, which continues to this day and through which local activists from surrounding communities receive training. Civil society in the region has developed considerably since the opening of the Civil College in 1997. Community radio and local media have been supportive to Civil College efforts, and the College hosts regular meetings between NGOs and visitors from other parts of Hungary and abroad.

The Civil College Foundation is a social organisation with public benefit status. In 2003, it received state accreditation as an institute of adult education. Participants in its training activities are civic and community activists, often from marginalised or vulnerable social

²¹ Examples include experimental community development programmes, and interdisciplinary summer university, national and international networking, and co-organisation of the annual '[Citizen Participation Week](#)'.

groups, such as Roma or unemployed people. With the help of a syllabus based on the principles of participatory adult education methodology, they learn to think from their community's point of view, while at the same time acquiring skills for civic action. The number of participants in a course varies from 14 to 32. Each year, some 700 to 800 people enrol in training courses at the Civil College.

Initially, college trainers were rather community developers than trainers or facilitators of learning processes, and it was necessary to prepare them for their new training functions. In 1995, ten Hungarian community developers participated in a training course on the methodology of adult education at the Northern College in Yorkshire. Two years later, the Civil College offered five weekend training courses on general themes, including community, civic activism, democracy, local economy, and community media. Besides these standard trainings, activities were organised to meet specific needs within on-going community development processes, often in cooperation or with the support of partners.

In 2001-2002, the Civil College began to organise international trainings, starting with an 80-hour training of trainers' programme for 55 participants from Poland, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary. A few years later, a professional training programme in community development and community work was developed, with modules ranging from 45- and 60-hour supplementary trainings to a 120-hour basic-level course and a 300-hour trainer qualification. Most recently, the Civil College was involved in developing even more advanced training offers. Jointly with the Hungarian Association for Community Development and the Department for Social Work and Social Policy at ELTE University in Budapest, it designed and accredited the professional courses in civic studies and community organising, and an MA level course on Community and Civic Studies.

The Civil College also organises three to four national or international seminars, conferences and workshops each year. It is a member of three international networks: the Central and Eastern European Citizens Network, the Training and Learning Community Development Network, and the pan-European E-Participation Network.

Since 2007, the training programme of the Civil College has been revised and adjusted in approach and orientation. Participants are now given the opportunity to compile and build their own training curriculum based on their needs. Each weekend course is considered as a module. As a result of the internal credit system, those completing five modules can apply for an examination and receive a basic-level degree in community development. Participants receive a certificate and an index containing the courses they have completed and the credits they have acquired. Online technologies are used for the communication and organisation of training courses.

The Civil College aims to provide professional support for active local people. Its training system is to enhance community development and citizen action with long-term sustainability. It does so by linking community development with adult education, which allows for activities to be adapted to actual local and social processes, and ensures that the involvement of target groups is not undertaken on a once-off or short-term basis. The topics covered by training courses assume a conscious and lasting commitment and include community development, participation, advocacy, civic organising, partnership, local media, economic development and enterprise, digital literacy and the development of Hungarian democracy.²² The following brief example illustrates how this approach by the Civil College translates into work with local groups of citizens.

Budapest's 10th district (Kőbánya) was once an important working class area but traditional industries have been in decline for much of the last 20 years, with negative effects on employment and the neighbourhood more broadly. In this district, a project was launched by the Hungarian Association for Community Development (HACD) in 1996 to create alternative services for child day-care, to encourage and help young parents to find ways to get into contact with each other, and to help them manage their lives in the community through a identifying common needs, cooperation, and mutual support. Local parents were to organise themselves and to generate community-based services. Until 1999, this effort was supported by eight training courses run at and by the Civil College.

A first outcome was the establishment of a new local association, the Parents' Association, in autumn 1997. The association's responsibility, roles and contribution as well as a work plan for the first two years were defined in a training session, and three further trainings were held for staff of local nurseries on alternative models of providing public services.²³ Five courses were held for active local residents and for the Parents' Association, with a focus on planning, computer skills, registering and managing an association, running meetings, negotiating with decision-makers, and fundraising, community and voluntary work in the neighbourhood.

As a result of the trainings, two project proposals were submitted to the local council and to its different committees at the beginning of 1998, for the improvement of the neighbourhood's environment. Representatives of the association were invited to three committee meetings responsible for parks and playgrounds. By the end of the year, a

²² Varga, Máté, Benedek, G., Bodorkós, B., Giczey, P., Gyenes, Zs., Kovács, E., Mészáros, Zs., Peták, P., Péterfi, F., Pósfay, P., Varga, M., and Vercseg, I., *The new training system of the Civil College Foundation* (Budapest: Civil Kollégium Alapítvány, 2008).

²³ Alternative models of providing public services are those that do not exclusively rely on professionals but are based on the participation of local people. One key element of the trainings was preparation for more open cooperation between caretakers and parents.

renewal programme for the parks and playgrounds of two neighbourhoods was started with the participation of local people.

However, the most valuable outcome was not the renovation itself, or the sharing of the work among the local government and the residents, but the fact that the Parents' Association managed to constructively regulate the use of public spaces and to avoid confrontation with the authorities. Instead, everyone got the space and possibilities they needed, from playgrounds suitable to each age group (toddlers, children), to sports facilities for young people and space for leisure-time activities for parents and the elderly, to a designated area for dog-walking. The Parents' Association and the local government also agreed and planned the joint maintenance of public spaces.²⁴

Such positive experiences notwithstanding, the last years have been taxing for the Civil College and its partners in local communities across Hungary. The economic crisis has left the Civil College strapped of financial means and capacity, and forced it to abandon some of its plans. Available resources have had to be ploughed into on-going obligations, and there have been fewer and fewer opportunities for accessing other or new resources. By the autumn of 2011, the Civil College Foundation was no longer funded at all from Hungarian sources, and there was no perspective of European funding in the short-term. Meanwhile, new challenges that required immediate reaction in form of training offers emerged. Under the current conditions, the Civil College finds it hard to intervene, and its priorities are fundraising and management related.

Adding to these difficulties is the fact the governmental sector is thoroughly indifferent to the efforts and work of the Civil College, despite its vital and proven importance. Planning takes place without organisations like the Civil College, community groups and citizens at large. Local government officials neither see the need for partnership nor are they willing to engage in training. In short, participatory decision-making remains a distant prospect in Hungary today.

Thus less successful domestically, the Civil College has seen more effective cooperation on the international level. Its involvement in strengthening dialogue among politicians and citizens – through the People and Politics programme since 2007–2008 – in national and international awareness-raising of the importance of citizen participation – though the annual Citizen Participation Week since 2005 – are but two examples of the growing importance of international work for the Civil College Foundation.²⁵

²⁴ For more detail, see Deller, U., and Brake, R. (eds.), *Community Development – A European Challenge* (Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2008), pp. 61-64.

²⁵ For detail, see the websites of the [People and Politics](#) programme and [Citizen Participation Week](#).

Its somewhat mixed experience notwithstanding, the very existence of the Civil College Foundation ought to be considered a success. The continuous operation of such an institution at a high level of quality is significant in a social environment where no real government support exists for adult education, and learning for certificates remains more important than learning for knowledge. Thanks to the voluntary commitment of many, the Civil College continues to advance social development processes and to pursue positive change. It does so by building community-oriented and democratic attitudes, trust, participation and cooperation among citizens – in short, social capital has been generally acknowledged as defining the social and economic success of a given area, region or country.

Case study III: The long fight of citizens against a military radar in the Mecsek

A protest movement to prevent the construction of a NATO radar station is the subject of the following case study.²⁶ Lasting from 2005 to 2010, and carried by the Istenkút Community Association, the Civil Movement for the Mecsek, its campaign and its impact on the political environment can be seen as a rare example of success in the politics of contention in Hungary.

Pécs is a city of almost 160,000 people located on the southern slopes of the Mecsek Mountains in Southwest Hungary. This area has a large population as a result of coal and uranium deposits in the region that led, during the 20th century, to considerable industrialisation and urbanisation. However, economic restructuring after 1989 led to the closure of the mines and heavy industries. In part, Pécs has been able to compensate for its industrial decline by strengthening its cultural role, as the home of a university with some 30,000 students, as the location of important cultural heritage sites (early Christian tombs) that have earned the city UNESCO World Heritage status, and as a historically multi-ethnic and multi-cultural town. As a European Capital of Culture in 2010, Pécs underwent significant infrastructural development. These advantages notwithstanding, the city remains economically weak and local authorities struggle with large debts.

Efforts to construct a radar station in Pécs first elicited a strong and successful response from the Hungarian civic and environmentalist movement in 2004 when local activists and country-wide organisations prevented the construction of a NATO installation on the Zengő Mountain, the highest peak of the Mecsek mountain-range, and 16 km from Pécs. In 2005, the Hungarian government declared that the new location for the proposed radar station was the Tubes Hill, located within 1 km of residential areas and only 4 km from the city centre of Pécs. The building was to reach a height of about 60 meters, was to be

²⁶ This case study has been authored by Péter Peták.

accompanied by a diesel fuel tank and a wastewater container, and to be located in a protected forest in the water replenishment area of the city.

This announcement came without prior consultation with the residents of Pécs who were primarily concerned about the health and environmental consequences of the radar station. Not only the unknown long-term effects of exposure to microwaves gave rise to concern but also the planned placement of the radar above the most valuable source of freshwater of the city. Adding to this was fear of possible attacks on the radar, after all a military installation and thus a prime target. Some residents further opposed the radar as an infrastructure of war, while others objected to the non-democratic, top-down, and power-based approach that attempted to push the project through against the will of the local residents, as well as against building and conservation regulations. As it emerged, reprehensible mistakes were made during the decision-making process by the local government and the Ministry of Defence.

While these issues were of most concern to the residents and citizens, political factors relating to the identity of Pécs also played an important role in raising the profile of the radar case. At the time, Pécs was essentially governed in an oligarchic way. The mayor, a strong national politician from the Socialist Party, considered the city his empire. Rumour had it that the Mayor, who announced the relocation of the radar station to the Tubes Hill together with the Prime Minister, agreed to it in exchange for the title of European Capital of Culture. While these suspicions were neither substantiated nor refuted, they reflect the situation in the city, where citizens complained about despotism, behind-the-scenes negotiations, abuses of power, a puppet local government and the one-man administration of the city.

Another motive of the anti-radar movement relates to the vision for the city. After the collapse of the local industries and mining, Pécs chose health, environmental and cultural industries as focal points for its development. Consequently, locals were unhappy with the idea of a military object being erected above the city, as it would ruin Pécs' newly established image.

Organising against the construction of the radar station began in the winter of 2005-2006. The first public event was an 'open university' organised by the Union for Pécs Association, which also had representatives in the local government. Next a *Fidesz* parliamentary candidate called for a protest rally on Tubes Hill.²⁷ In January 2006, after a series of negotiations the Civic Movement for the Mecsek was founded. Its name referred to the Civic Movement for the Zengő, the movement that succeeded in preventing the

²⁷ *Fidesz*, or the Union of Young Democrats, is one of the major political parties in Hungary. At the time of these events, it was in opposition in the Hungarian parliament. Since 2010, it is the governing party.

construction of the radar at the original location. It also expressed that the aim of the movement was to prevent the construction of the radar altogether, and not to have it moved back to the original location. At the same time, the Ministry of Defence held a public forum in the community centre of Istenkút, the neighbourhood located on the slope of the Tubes Hill. This was the first opportunity for a mass protest, which succeeded and boosted the membership of the Civic Movement for the Mecsek. While it was impressive and created opportunities for action, this success was not favourable for strategic thinking and coordinated tactics.

The opposition party *Fidesz* convened an emergency meeting that was reported on the front page of the county newspaper under the headline “The citizens didn’t get their say”. The Civic Movement for the Mecsek organised a street petition action to make the local government hold a public hearing on the case of the Tubes radar station. In parallel, the Association for the Community of Istenkút held a press conference where they made public that the local government of Pécs had broken the law when they reclassified the Tubes Hill as a defence area the previous November – it was alleged that the local representatives were not aware of this fact. The Association, which had the right to express its opinion, appealed this decision and requested that it be rescinded, without any result.

Faced with an 8,000-signature strong petition, the Mayor immediately announced a public hearing. The case of the public hearing demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the Civic Movement for the Mecsek. On the one hand, the collection of the signatures was the movement’s first experience with campaigning and organising. It was an impressive effort, with several collection points and street actions taking place in freezing weather. Although difficult and slow, the signature collection was an excellent opportunity for engaging and mobilising new people. The campaign showed that it was important to give motivated citizens the opportunity to engage and join the movement.

On the other hand, the public hearing pointed at the weaknesses of the movement. Two people appeared to the press as spokespersons, one of them interpreted the event as a triumph, the other as having made a mockery of democracy. Ironically, both were right. The triumph was in that the public hearing was ensured by citizen initiative, and that the citizens of Pécs presented their views calmly one after the other. The mockery of democracy was in the way the local government and Mayor reacted. According to the Mayor, “there was no Tubes case”; the representative of the Ministry of Defence was dozing on the podium; and the passing of the resolution was sabotaged, with several representatives instructed not to attend or to abstain. These opposing views of the event reflect a lack of coordination, as well as internal conflict within the Civic Movement for the Mecsek. Eventually, the ‘militant’ dominated over the more ‘political’ approach, which favoured an organised structure, regulated decision-making, and planning.

In the summer of 2006, the political situation in Pécs changed substantially, after the Mayor was incapacitated in a car accident and with local elections forthcoming. The Civic Movement for the Mecsek, in agreement with the Union for Pécs Association and the Association for the Community of Istenkút, decided to initiate a referendum on the radar station. This was to press political parties to take a stand on the case in their election campaigns. The referendum initiative was, however, late and when the collection of signatures could finally begin, the local election campaign was almost over. As a result, the political parties paid lip service to the case, saying only that they would await the result of the referendum before taking a position.

The collection of the signatures for the referendum was an almost impossible task for the team, which was not much bigger than for the petition for the public hearing. It had to collect signatures from 10 per cent of eligible voters in Pécs within one month. Eventually, nearly 19 thousand signatures were submitted to City Hall and after their verification, a local referendum was announced for March 2007.

While the campaign made extensive efforts to publicise the referendum through various media and other methods, it disposed of minimal private donations and remained almost invisible throughout the city. Neither the local party organisations nor the Ministry of Defence made an effort to engage in the referendum campaign. As a result, only 32.5 per cent of eligible voters participated, and the referendum was declared invalid. 94.3 per cent of those who cast their vote rejected the radar station, however. With this result, both sides claimed success. For the authorities, it was proof that the people of Pécs were not against the radar station. In turn, the Civic Movement for the Mecsek considered the result a victory for their campaign, as the overwhelming majority of votes that were cast were against the radar.

In any case, the referendum represented a political turning point. Until then passive, the Ministry of Defence launched the approval procedure for the construction of the radar. The Socialist local government became concerned that, while they were expected to cooperate with the national government, their own voters were against the radar. The referendum also brought the case to the attention of national media, although their coverage followed party lines, and the dominant story was that the campaign failed as a result of indifferent citizens. Local politicians, however, knew that this was not the case, as the new Mayor had attracted fewer votes than the campaign against the radar station. The whole episode triggered a storm, both in local politics and in the civic movement.

The people who considered the referendum a failure panicked and the campaign was stepped up extensively. A wave of demonstrations put pressure on the local government,

which eventually organised several rounds of discussion on the modification of the local construction code. However, this was nothing but political manoeuvring. The construction codes were modified appropriately only after the issuance of the building permit for the radar station, the construction ban demanded by the protesters was not ordered, and the local governing coalition suggested that the radar station be moved back to the Zengő Hill.

Representatives of the Civic Movement for the Mecsek and the Association for the Community of Istenkút travelled to the Czech Republic to exchange with the *Ne Zakladnam* movement that protested the installation of the US missile defence system there. Following this, two further campaigns were conducted by the Pécs movement, using more carefully planned marketing and design tools. One campaign brought together nearly 4,000 property owners living in and around Pécs who declared that if the construction of the radar station would go ahead they would sue the state for loss of value on their properties. The other campaign was a large demonstration called 'Unarmed Forces Day', attended by representatives of foreign and international organisations and protesters from Budapest.

At this point, the advocacy battle on the legal level began. NGOs, local individuals and the city administration appealed against the building permit issued for the radar station by the Minister of Defence. While the Budapest Municipal Court decided against the locals, the Supreme Court annulled the building permit in its review process in 2010.

The years of legal battle were anything but uneventful, although the campaign did not organise highly visible events, which weakened the Civic Movement for the Mecsek. Activities during this period included frequent but not mass actions, visits to the Tubes, marches distributing flyers, an event on the main square of Pécs celebrating partial successes in court, letter-writing actions to decision-makers, among others. In expectation of a negative decision by the courts, Greenpeace activists ran a training at the Istenkút community centre, teaching activists methods of active non-violence, so that in case of need a blockade of the Tubes could be organised.

The movement received an important boost when, on 30 March 2008, a national meeting of environmental organisations closed with a joint declaration of 39 organisations stating "... the undersigned organisations join the objectives of the Civil Movement for the Mecsek and ask the decision makers to take into account the implications on the residents and nature and do not build the planned radar station on the Tubes, nor on the Zengő, nor in any other protected areas of the Mecsek". This statement meant the recognition of the power of the Pécs movement.

Meanwhile, politics in the city took another unexpected turn. In January 2009, by-elections were held to elect a new Mayor. The Socialist Party, weakened at the national level as well,

presented a candidate that was well known and popular nationwide. Together with the other lead candidate of *Fidesz*, both contenders made the issue of the Tubes radar station the central theme of their campaigns and spent their campaigns trying to trump each other with promises to protect the city from the threat clearly represented by the construction of the radar station. The *Fidesz* candidate won the elections and soon had to make good on these promises.

By this time, the local government did not dispose of any credible instruments for preventing the construction from going ahead, given that the final building permit had already been issued. The new Mayor resorted to strong symbolic gestures in order to express the city's determination, including some radical forms of civic protest such as closing the dirt road leading to the designated radar site and setting up a tent camp with his friends from the party. This lent the case enormous media attention and generated sympathies nationwide. Locally, the Mayor increased his popularity.

The Supreme Court ended the standoff. The Association for the Community of Istenkút submitted an appeal against the building permit, ensuring that until a further decision of the Court, construction of the radar station could not begin. On 17 March 2010, the Supreme Court rescinded the building permit.

In terms of support, the movement was able to mobilise internal resources and to build on the commitment of volunteers – even the experts and lawyers involved in the campaign worked for free. Small-scale funds for potential expenses were raised from the members of the movement, and the campaign received several donations in kind. No major fundraising was necessary, because it was possible to decentralise costs through the membership network: the members photocopied, phoned, travelled or purchased poster glue and stickers at their own expense. NGO funding was also received in the form of grants, but these remained small in scale. One of these grants supported the publication of a book; another financed the 'Unarmed Forces Day' demonstration. Serious, organised fundraising took place during the real-estate depreciation campaign, as this initiative originated in a circle of organisers who acknowledged that such campaigns require money. They used a uniform corporate image and billboards at a cost of some 2 million forints (approximately 7,200 Euros), which was raised by about forty people. The capacity of this campaign to raise this level of funding was interpreted by the city administration as a further indicator for the strength of the movement. However, the availability or lack of money was not what defined the possibilities of the movement. More important were the offers of support in kind that came spontaneously: the café where a separate room was offered for meetings and press conferences; the artists who contributed with their creativity and shows; the celebrities that publicly expressed their support during the referendum campaign.

Local media, closely related to Pécs' political elites, were passive or supportive according to who was in power in the city administration. Only the county newspaper supported the movement consistently within the limits demanded by the unbiased objectivity of the press. The Pécs radar case reached the national public only with the referendum, but on this level the information provided was partial, politically motivated or opinionated, rather than supportive or hostile to the campaign. At the national level, the joint declaration adopted in 2008 by environmental organisations was of serious moral support. More practical external help was received from the Humanist Movement, Greenpeace and the Ombudsman for Future Generations. The political atmosphere in the city also became more supportive over the years.

The most powerful resource, however, were the citizens of Pécs, who mobilised personal networks and made the movement part of their lives. This ensured the greatest level of access and the largest capacity to mobilise possible. It provided for the rapid transmission of information and eventually created the critical mass that became a political factor.

In terms of obstacles, neither the government, nor the Ministry of Defence, nor the scarcity of resources proved to be most challenging. Rather, organisational difficulties and the polarised political environment hindered the effectiveness of the movement. The sudden growth of the organisation and the immediate taking on of high-risk activities, in particular, caused the team to neglect efforts to develop a mature organisational structure and a regulated decision-making process.

As such, something of a chaotic situation became business as usual. Meetings did not have agendas. Although there were issues to be decided, it was unclear who should address which question when. There were offers and independent pledges but rarely was there a clear mandate. However, eventually shared responsibilities emerged and individuals took on specific tasks. Meetings seemed more like quarrels over multiple issues than discussions, but this created decentralised operations in which small circles came up with ideas and initiatives, and in which detailed arrangements were decided upon. The meetings of the broader team, then, served the clarification of the main directions.

This process was emotionally stressful and consumed a lot of resources, but proved effective in developing cooperation among committed people. Although not a conscious strategy, this approach helped the movement to keep its openness, and it offered people the possibility of joining a variety of activities. Even membership was not formalised – it was not always clear whether a given person considered themselves a member of the movement or were considered members by the others. This organisational approach weakened the movement especially in external communication, relations with other

organisations, and in terms of the uniformity of the campaign image, and in some cases, it even had negative effects on personal relationships.

A special challenge to overcome was the tendency in public opinion and the media to consider the anti-radar protesters as a selfish rebel minority with political motivations. Even in some of the better-informed Budapest circles, the situation was seen as a classical case of 'not in my backyard'. The media presented statements to the effect that the radar was necessary and had to be built.

Adding to this was the political polarisation of Hungarian society. Simplified interpretations of every public issue were common, and the challenge in the Pécs radar case was to argue in unison against the positions of local and national authorities, both Socialist, without scaring off left-wing sympathisers. Following national trends, voters in Pécs moved to the right, and accompanied by the anti-radar rhetoric of the local *Fidesz* party, this shift weakened the independence of the Civic Movement for the Mecsek. The prolonged struggle over more than five years wore the movement down, and by the end of the campaign, party interests were indeed at play in the movement. This disappointed those who valued the independence of civic action.

The greatest achievement of a protest movement is when it succeeds in preventing what it was protesting against. In this case, the Civic Movement for the Mecsek succeeded in preventing the construction of the radar station at the Tubes location. A spontaneous and issue-based initiative, the campaign did not develop into a sustainable organisation, however. Once it reached its goal, the movement ceased to exist. The broad network of relationships that it developed, however, remained and may be mobilised later and for future issues, if only partially.

Citizen Education, Municipal Development and Local Democracy in Norway

Kirsten Paaby

The worst terrorist action since World War II struck Norway on 22 July 2011 and gave this author a deeply tragic impetus for writing about local democracy and active civil society. Even though the act of an individual, the explosions in Oslo and the shooting of innocent young people taking part in a summer camp of the Labour Party on the island of Utoya, was an attack at the heart of Norwegian democracy and values. It confirms the importance of strengthening efforts towards openness, participation, dialogue, inclusivity and international understanding – a key task of civic education. In response, a good part of the population of Norway took part in spontaneous flower marches – a resounding statement of popular will not to answer hatred with hatred, but to stand up for the fundamental values of an open, active, democratic and caring society. With backing from all political parties, Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg made the following statement: “Our response is more democracy, more openness and more humanity”.¹

This chapter reviews active and practical citizen education for living local democracy in the Norwegian context. It discusses Norway within the framework of what is commonly referred to as the Nordic social model and the implications of the Nordic tradition of citizen awareness and education. One special tradition for creating community solidarity is ‘*dugnad*’, a form of collective work on common tasks. This and the overall importance of the voluntary sector in creating an active and values based local democracy are discussed. The chapter also presents the main institutional and legal frameworks for citizen participation, and some of the national programmes that have in recent years supported it. We provide a picture of the Norwegian administrative system, of civil society institutions, and of how local authorities and municipalities work with civil society in their recognised task as ‘community developers’. Thereafter, we present a selection of typical issues raised by local community initiatives and organisations.

The values of democracy and civil society participation are deeply rooted in Nordic societies.² The ‘Nordic model’ has long been a trademark and focus of interest for those with social-democratic leanings, far beyond Scandinavia. More recently it has kindled interest

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¹ Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg in his remembrance address at Oslo Cathedral, 24 July 2011 ([full text of the speech](#)).

² This section is based on Hille, J., [The Nordic model – is it able to sustain?](#) (Oslo: Ideas Bank Foundation, 2006).

even among economists. Not least, this is because all the Nordic countries regularly rank highest in terms of economic performance and competitiveness.

This said the exact substance of the Nordic model is less clear. All are welfare states with strong social security systems, reflecting a consensus on the need for income redistribution. However, this is not unique to Scandinavia. Bismarck introduced pensions to the German Empire fifty years before Norway; the first well-developed welfare state was introduced by New Zealand; and the term welfare state originated with the post-World War II government of Clement Attlee in Great Britain. In the early 1990s, the Ideas Bank received a visit from an advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev's, then General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In the half an hour he had to spend at the Ideas Bank he wanted the recipe for the Nordic model, apparently hoping to introduce it back home. With typical Russian determination he wanted to know which attributes all the Nordic countries, in contrast to all others, had in common. Various suggestions were made, but failed the test of commonality; one was not applicable in Finland, another for Denmark, another could equally be found in Canada. Rightly or wrongly, the common denominator that could be found between all the Nordic countries was the strong degree of local democracy. It was also difficult to name other countries where municipalities played such an important role in the political system and where local democracy was so firmly anchored. Our Soviet guest may not have been too satisfied, since our answer suggested it might be difficult to achieve local democracy by decree from Moscow!

The journal *Monday Morning* of October 2005 was asked by the Nordic Council of Ministers to describe what the Nordic countries have in common and what has made the region the 'global winner' it is perceived to be. Select interviews revealed eight main points:³ *Equality* means that people in the Nordic countries take care of each other. This is not seen as conflicting with freedom, but rather as a condition for it. One result is the fairly good degree of gender equality in Scandinavia. The extent of equality in society has led to a high degree of *trust*, both between individuals and between individuals and authorities. This has been confirmed time and again by surveys. *Flat hierarchies* are important in that the distance between ordinary people and those with political and commercial power is short. *Social inclusion* is central, and participation is both legally enshrined and expected from members of society. Added to this are *flexibility* and *respect for nature, aesthetics* as Nordic societies appreciate simplicity and harmony, and not least what sociologists have long come to call the *Protestant work ethic*.

The report also states that these eight characteristics stimulate competitiveness. In egalitarian societies the consequences of failure are bearable, so people dare to take risks and innovate. Where there is trust, transaction costs are low. Where there is a short distance to those with economic power, employees will show initiative and take

³ See the English summary of Lindholm, M.R., Prehn, A., and Højgaard Jønson, A., [*The Nordic region as a Global Winner Region. Tracing the Nordic Competitiveness model*](#) (Copenhagen: Mandag morgen, 2005).

responsibility rather than just waiting for orders, and so on. In societies lacking these attributes, conflicts between competitiveness and generous welfare provision are more common.⁴ The study also emphasises the high level of education in the Nordic countries and the equality with which it is accessed, delivered and used. There are few geniuses or elite schools, but also few unqualified workers.

Few Scandinavian words are used in other European languages since Viking times, but two exceptions have social significance. One is *Ombudsman*, a social institution with the task of ensuring fairness that has been adopted in many countries. The second is '*Folkehoegskole*', translated as *Volkshochschule* or institution of popular education – literally, People's High School – created to enhance the education level of ordinary people. Democracy and civil society empowerment have been cornerstones of the People's High School since their inception in the 19th century. The 'founding father' of the People's High School, Danish priest N.F.S.Grundtvig, saw communication between equals as a basic principle of civil society: '... Not teaching people what to think, but awakening them to reflect and qualifying them to be active participants in democracy'.⁵

In the Nordic tradition, public awareness raising and civic education are conducted by the People's High Schools and by a variety of associations for adult education, study circles, local NGO's and other voluntary groups. These continue to play an important role in educating new generations of citizens and in developing awareness and skills for democracy. They combine theory, practice and value-orientations. They have their own statutes and goals, including that of fostering active citizenship as a basis for both democracy and sustainable development.

A further particularity is the ancient '*dugnad*' tradition that goes back to the 11th century farming society. The concept includes various forms of exchange and work where everyone comes together and works on tasks of common interest – often accompanied by social gatherings or festivities. The Norwegian word '*dugnad*' has a double meaning. It refers to both a *well-performed deed*, and a *duty*. Perhaps the closest English language equivalent is that of 'barn raising' – a rural tradition in the United States (especially among the Amish) in which the whole community is actively involved in some capacity in the building of a barn or other building, usually within one day. A leading researcher on volunteerism and civil society, Haakon Lorentzen, wrote that "... the connection between '*dugnad*' and *well performed deed* shows how the '*dugnad*' idea was founded not only on practical needs but

⁴ Wilkinson, R. G., and Pickett, K., *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

⁵ Læssøe, J., "Folkeoplysning om bæredygtig udvikling – en historie om afradikalisering og bagvedliggende uklarheder" [Civic education on sustainable development – a history of de-radicalisation and the uncloudiness behind], in: Holm, J. (ed.), *Økologisk modernisering på dansk – brud og bevægelser i dansk miljøpolitik* [Ecological modernisation – breaches and motions in the Danish environment policy] (Copenhagen: Frydenlund, 2007); see also Læssøe, J., "[Education for sustainable development, participation and socio-cultural change](#)", *Environmental Education Research*, vol. 16, no. 1 (February 2010), pp. 39-57.

also in morality”.⁶ The manifestations of ‘*dugnad*’ are many, including new forms, influenced by contemporary social media through which voluntary networks organise, decisive for the development of social solidarity as a way of living.

In contemporary Norway, ‘*dugnad*’ is still key to the formation of a sense of community and to democracy as a way of life. The three case studies included in this chapter demonstrate this. However, civil society’s efforts, typified by a multiplicity of groups and organisations, are also under threat in the modern welfare state. Drawing on Habermas, Lorentzen discusses the tendency towards a “... colonisation of the civil society”,⁷ where the borders between state, market and civil society blur or break down. For when the welfare state appears to no longer be able to meet all needs, and as neo-liberal market economics gains in influence, there is a tendency to pass responsibility to the voluntary sector. At the same time, increased budget support to the voluntary sector can increase its dependence and reduce its autonomy.

In Norway, more than in other Nordic countries (Sweden for example), closer ties between the state and the voluntary sector have steadily weakened their role as a system-critical counterweight to public power. Humanitarian and cultural organisations now provide services to municipalities and are hence obliged to conform to professional standards and rules which, according to Lorentzen, “... give less room for idealistic, amateur contributions”.⁸ Umbrella organisations distribute state funding locally, and this means that even small local organisations begin to function according to market-type management structures. In his article titled “Free us from the amateurs” Lorentzen further notes that “... the role of civil society cannot be reduced to that of a provider of services for the state. Civil solidarity means a lot for democracy. It is through participation in organisations, debate and dialogue with others that political interest and activism is maintained. Civil society groups are also important for our sense of belonging, both for a community, our neighbours, those who are different, and those who are less fortunate. Social solidarity can simply not flourish unless there is civil society praxis”.⁹

Against this background, important questions emerge as to how healthy local democracy in Norway really is and more broadly, if the country’s democracy is undergoing demise or renewal. The Norwegian political system embodies representative democracy at both the national and local levels, meaning that the people give their elected representatives the right to make decisions on their behalf, and elections take place to 19 county parliaments

⁶ Lorentzen, H., and Dugstad, L., *Den norske dugnaden. Historie, kultur og fellesskap* [The Norwegian ‘dugnad’. History, culture and community] (Oslo: Norwegian Academic Press, 2011), p. 21.

⁷ Fjeldstad, O., “Kan sivilsamfunnet overleve de rødgrønne?” [Will the civil society survive the red-green government?], in: The Ideas Bank, *Mulighetsrommet, Aarbok 2006 Stiftelsen Idébanken* [The room of possibilities, Ideas Bank year book 2006] (Oslo: Ideas Bank, 2007), p. 77.

⁸ Interview with Haakon Lorentzen in 2005 based on his article “[Free us from the amateurs](#)”, *Samtiden* no 2/2004, pp. 77-78.

⁹ Op. cit., p. 78.

and in the 430 municipalities: "... The value of directly elected politicians lies in their being accountable at the next election. To achieve legitimacy over time, it is essential that the people participate in democracy".¹⁰ Voting rights are constitutionally guaranteed for all Norwegian citizens who are 18 years of age or turn 18 during a given election year. All non-Norwegians who have resided in the country for at least three years can vote in local elections. Both parliamentary and local elections take place every four years, with the local elections taking place in each second year between the parliamentary ones. Voter participation was 76.4 per cent during the 2009 parliamentary election and 61.2 per cent during the last local elections. However, participation in elections is on the decline: the figure in 1985 for parliamentary elections was 84 per cent and in 1983 for local elections 72.1 per cent.¹¹

The right to participation is also enshrined in other political processes, such as the right of workers to have their say in relation to health, environment and safety issues in the work place, and for citizen participation in all planning processes. Municipalities have a particular obligation to ensure active participation by groups such as children, young people (too young to vote) and others who are unable to participate directly, such as disabled people, people suffering from mental illnesses, drug addicts, and people with literacy difficulties. Laws relating to municipalities, education, social services, child care and other fields also prescribe various forms of participation both for individuals and representative organs such as school boards, boards for the handicapped, pensioners, health service users, and so on.

Throughout Scandinavia, and Europe more broadly, there has been concern over falling levels of voter participation in elections and in political parties, in which there are fewer active members and more and more tasks are fulfilled by a few 'experts'. Surveys further point to falling membership in civil society organisations.¹² Various public commissions and research programmes have evaluated the state of democracy as well as efforts to strengthen it.¹³ State funds have been allocated to try out ways of increasing citizen participation between the elections. Most of these have been implemented under the auspices of the Ministry of Local and Regional Affairs and/or the Ministry of the Environment, in cooperation with the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities.¹⁴

¹⁰ Parliamentary proposition no. 33, 2007-08 "[Eit sterkt lokaldemokrati](#)" [A strong local democracy], p. 6.

¹¹ Saglie, J. (ed.), *Det nære demokrati – lokalvalg og lokal deltakelse* [The close democracy – local elections and local participation] (Oslo: Abstrakt, 2009), p. 144.

¹² [Makt og demokrati. Sluttrapport fra Makt- og demokratiutredningen](#) [Power and democracy. The final report from the Norwegian public study on power and democracy], Official Norwegian Report no. 19/2003; [Det lokale folkestyret i endring? Om deltaking og engasjement i lokalpolitikken](#) [Local democracy in change? On participation and commitment in local politics], Official Norwegian Report no. 7/2006.

¹³ "[Eit sterkt lokaldemokrati](#)", op. cit.

¹⁴ Examples include the Local Agenda 21 programme supported by the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities that aimed at building partnerships between local governments, civil society and the local private sector (see [detail](#)), and the "Frontrunner communities programme" implemented by the Ideas Bank in 2001-2004 to revitalise local democracy was one of three ambitious goals (see [detail](#)).

Norway has ratified the Council of Europe's Charter on Innovation and Good Governance. In 2009 Norway also signed the added protocol on the right to participation in local affairs, stating that "... Norway hereby recognises the principle of civic participation and supports the many 'new' EU member states who desire a shared legal instrument for the development of democracy".¹⁵ As one of 20 pilot countries to have tested a tool for developing democracy, Norway has the basis for a democracy database allowing local communities and their inhabitants to compare themselves with other communities.¹⁶ A comprehensive survey was carried out in 2010 based on the EU charter, in which good governance was characterised by reliability, responsibility, effectiveness and a short distance to those in power. The results indicate that most people are satisfied with local services, whilst underlining that good local democracy is more than services; it is also a question of the citizens' ability to influence local politics, and in that regard there is a clear need for improvement in the Norwegian context. Increased and more open dialogue between local politicians and the people is needed. Some of those interviewed consider that special interest groups prevail over 'the silent majority' and that participation is of little use.¹⁷

Recent years have seen a major reassessment of the role of municipalities in community development, in particular, in relation to local planning. Local plans comprise a spatial and a social dimension. This goes well beyond the traditional responsibility of the municipality as a provider of services, and entails partnerships and collaboration with other agents such as local civil society organisations as well as local business.¹⁸ Several recent national programmes have initiated new approaches to the theme of local community development. In the recently completed five year programme entitled 'Liveable Communities', the environment ministry and the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities worked "... to renew awareness and strengthen skills towards environmental and social development in the municipalities".¹⁹ More than 200 municipalities participated in networks devoted to various themes in the field of sustainable community development. A core objective was "... to develop proactive policies, in close collaboration with citizens, voluntary organisations, business, regional and national authorities".²⁰ Two of the municipalities we present in the case studies included in this chapter, Oevre Eiker and Trondheim, participated in this programme.

¹⁵ Translation by the author (see [original](#)); within this framework, see also the [Norway Action Plan for implementing the Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance at Local Level](#).

¹⁶ A [detailed report](#) is available in Norwegian.

¹⁷ Survey conducted by Oslo University with interviews of 22,600 citizens and 2,136 local politicians in 82 municipalities (as quoted in *Aftenposten*, 16 February 2011).

¹⁸ Ringholm, T., Aarsæther, N., Nygaard, V., and Selle, P., [Kommunen som samfunnsutvikler. En undersøkelse av norske kommuners arbeid med samfunnsutvikling](#) [The municipality as a community developer. A survey on the work of Norwegian municipalities on local community development], NORUT report no. 8 (Tromsø: Northern Research Institute, 2009).

¹⁹ See [Livskraftig. Fagrapport fra programmet Livskraftige kommuner – kommunenettverk for miljø- og samfunnsutvikling](#) [Livable. Professional report from the program Livable Communities – network of municipalities for sustainable community development], p. 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Norwegian civil society comprises a wide variety of recreational organisations, sports clubs, teetotal associations, church congregations, charities, ideal foundations, cooperatives, trade unions, patients' organisations, environmental groups, local associations and so on. An umbrella forum, called '*Voluntariness Norway*'²¹, was set up in 2005 with the goal of strengthening dialogue with the authorities including developing the bases for volunteer work and the formulation of future policies. The forum also aims to build skills and improve management within the volunteer sector. It has over 250 member organisations, representing over 50,000 associations. The forum is very active in European networks such as the European Network of National Civil Society Associations (ENNA) and the World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS).

The range of issues these organisations are involved in locally is equally broad. It includes everything from the preservation of old buildings to traffic issues and urban planning, as discussed in the case study about Svartlamon. There is also work directed at prevention, an example of which is an initiative called the 'Night Ravens' – volunteers who patrol the community especially at weekends to keep an eye out for violence or vandalism. Another example is that of the Vaalerenga football club in Oslo, which initiated an anti-racism campaign under the banner of 'Rainbow Football', which then spread to other clubs. An organisation representing people who spent time in state care as children has fought to be recognised as a consultative body for this issue and has developed its own proposal for a new law on improved child care regulations and services that it has recently delivered to the government. There are many local protest actions against centralisation and the closing of local services such as schools and hospitals. Other movements address environmental issues such as the treatment of the wolf population, the location of windmills and nature reserves. Much local volunteer activity is related to concerns over rural depopulation. Village youth organisations and family associations have been central in the struggle to maintain active, sustainable local communities.

Many organisations work to improve the status and dignity of persons who for various reasons struggle with housing, employment, education, narcotics or psychological problems. An example is the socio-political 'Welfare Alliance', which unites a range of organisations and groups working for the disadvantaged. The Alliance is affiliated to the European Antipoverty Network (EAPN) and has been a key player in national politics on the issue of poverty. In 2003, the Alliance succeeded in lobbying for the establishment of a publicly funded centre for organisations seeking to address issues of poverty and social exclusion. Named 'Battery' and run by the charity *Kirkens Bymisjon* (The Church City Mission) with a government mandate, it is now a nationwide resource centre with offices in Oslo, Kristiansand, Bergen, Trondheim and Bodo.²² It assists groups and organisations to become more effective in their work with poverty and exclusion. A central goal is "... to strengthen

²¹ For more information, refer to the website of [Frivillighet Norge](#).

²² For more information, see the website of [Kirkens Bymisjon](#).

democracy by stimulating dialogue between those at the margins of society, far from political processes and the authorities”.²³ The centre’s services are free, and promote “... help towards self-help”.²⁴ Services include the provision of meeting space, courses, and advice on setting up organisations. ‘Battery’ also has an annual meeting with the Minister of Labour.

The Ideas Bank Foundation documents and promotes examples of best practice from all over Scandinavia, examples that show democracy and sustainability in practice in local communities. For 20 years, it has provided advice and developed knowledge locally and nationally where dialogue between authorities, business and civil society has been central. This has included the national Local Agenda 21 initiatives as well as, more recently, the national ‘Liveable Communities’ programme referred to above. All of this work refers to global processes of democratic development. The 1992 Earth Summit, or United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, declared that participation is a precondition for sustainable development. It also acknowledged that many of the solutions needed can only be achieved through shared efforts in civil society, cooperation across sectors and dialogue between an active civil society and the authorities.

The three case studies included in this chapter, Sagene, Oevre Eiker and Svartlamon, have been chosen from among any number of examples of good practice known to the Ideas Bank Foundation because all three have a fairly long history, and hence experience to be learned from. They are not once-off initiatives – it is possible to observe in these cases deliberate development over time, although not without resistance and conflicts, and they demonstrate a willingness to learn from the process. The three examples also complement each other in various ways – geographically (urban and rural), and in their main approach (‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’). Two of the examples involved very broad discussion across all sectors, one initiated by the right wing and one by social democrats. The third illustrates how a grassroots self-help initiative can approach and influence the administrative system.

Case study I: Sagene – democracy not only for the initiated

The urban district of Sagene in Oslo provides an innovative example of cooperation between local authorities and civil society. It demonstrates how action across sectors and interest groups leads to creative thinking. With the local community centre as one of several activity hubs, the municipality together with local interest groups has shown the importance of public arenas for fostering both wellbeing and dialogue.

²³ Klemsdal L., and Svare, H., [Batterieffekten. Metoder for selvhjelp i organisasjoner](#) [The Battery effect. Methods for self-help in organisations] (Oslo: Kirkens Bymisjon, 2008), p. 14.

²⁴ From the [mission statement](#) of Kirkens Bymisjon.

Sagene community centre is the hub for Local Agenda 21 (LA-21) activities, in which the district has been particularly active. One main aim of its democracy work has been to reach and involve those groups who are seldom heard. The work has been methodical, using various techniques and approaches that foster inclusive participation. Sagene also illustrated the difficulty of maintaining creative community-building efforts and services in times of major budget cuts. The following will focus in particular on the way the community centre has functioned as an arena for democratic planning, exemplified by an art project and the development of one public square in the district, Arne Gjestis Plass.

Sagene is one of Oslo's 15 urban districts. Each is governed by an elected District Council. The councils are responsible in particular for kindergartens, health services, social and child care services, environment and local parks. Comprising 33,000 inhabitants within an area of just over three-square kilometres, Sagene is one of the most densely populated districts in Norway. It is changing rapidly, with population influx as well as fairly high population mobility. It also has the highest proportion of municipally owned housing in Oslo. This typifies former industrial worker areas that are transforming into modern, multicultural urban environments.

The community centre was opened in 1979, but received a new lease of life in 2001 when the district decided to make it the hub for LA-21 and for new, local democratic processes to supplement the established institutions of representative democracy. The district council wished to explore new roles and more active civic participation. This political goal was partly fostered by the fact that Sagene has many poor people, often living side by side with the residents of new, high cost housing.

The process was initially part of a ten year project, largely financed by Oslo and the state in a citywide programme for the improvement of old inner city areas. The main objectives were: improved housing conditions, a better environment for growing up, good public spaces and security, support for drug addicts, those needing psychiatric care and the homeless, environmental quality, improved public transport and the strengthening of local volunteer activities.²⁵

To achieve these goals, the employees at the community centre had to abandon the traditional sectoral approach and think outside the box about their roles as service providers and enablers. Today, there is a section for sustainable development comprising four persons; 40 percent of this work is dedicated to running the centre so as to reach all segments of the local population, and 60 percent to maintaining and developing local parks and outdoor spaces so that they can be accessible to all and used for outdoor activities all year round. It is

²⁵ For an evaluation of the programme, see Holm, A., [*Nærmiljøetsatsing og levekår. Evaluering – Handlingsprogram Oslo indre øst*](#) [Local environment and living conditions. Evaluation – Program of Development for Oslo's East-Central Districts], NIBR report no. 12/2006 (Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, 2006).

the stated policy of this section to develop multi-professional projects, networks and methods to reach the most marginalised groups in social housing. The section also has the task of developing methods for integrating culture, environment and local democracy; a sustainable community is seen as one that builds health.

Section leader Susan M. Guerra says, “Our fundamental working approach is what the Dalai Lama calls ‘a policy of kindness’ and a focus on collective values, ... or I am because we are. Our methodological foundation is that of ‘community development,’ which I have worked with for many years both in Texas and in Oslo. It’s not easy to translate the word ‘community’ since it has several shades of meaning, including the local society as a whole, togetherness, shared interests, and groupings that lie outside the main body of society or the institutional establishment. We aim to create a ‘living tissue’ that connects all these different aspects of ‘community.’ We attempt an anthropological approach by making ourselves available, by listening and by being analytical. I have many person-to-person conversations; I move around in the district meeting people where they are, talking about their living conditions, what issues they feel are important, and what they might like to contribute with. We want to bring forth their narratives. These have been documented in several ways including photo exhibitions and storytelling evenings. It’s all about doing simple things in ways that are close to them. When the centre became the hub for LA-21, what we did both figuratively and literally was to open doors, draw back curtains and build a stage for dialogue”.²⁶

One of the very first events was a ‘Future Scenario Workshop’²⁷ where the majority of participants were individual citizens and representatives of various local groupings, and an ‘Open House’ event with local politicians. Since then various dialogue methods have been applied, including face-to-face conversations and public meetings employing creative approaches, such as café dialogues and art projects.

Guerra relates enthusiastically how the plan for developing the local area started: “We generated interest for a public meeting by distributing a ‘future newspaper’ based on the results of the workshop. It described in words and pictures what the area around the centre could look like in future, before inviting everyone to the meeting. Then the talk really started! People thought it was a real newspaper. 150 turned up at the meeting and

²⁶ Paaby, K., “Demokrati ikke bare for de innvidde” [Democracy – not only for the initiated], in: *Ideas Bank Year Book 2006* (Oslo: Ideas Bank, 2006), p. 88.

²⁷ A ‘Future Scenario Workshop’ is a method aimed at generating practical, collective ideas about the future. Participants can be thought of as ‘social architects’, shaping their future through concrete images and plans of action. The method was originally developed by futures researcher and journalist Robert Jungk in the 1960s; see Jungk, R., and Müllert N., *Future workshops: How to create desirable futures* (London: Institute for Social Inventions, 1987); Paaby, K., “The future scenario workshop – learning for democracy”, in: *The Ideas Bank, Signals. Local action – success stories in sustainability* (Oslo: Ideas Bank, 2011), pp. 72-76.

participated actively including in follow-up. Many of their ideas were adopted, including the development of the nearby square and the Wall Art project.”²⁸

‘The parks and town squares are peoples gardens’ was the idea behind the development of local open spaces as meeting places and democratic arenas. Based on inputs from the public meetings, concrete plans were developed for the public space and park in front of the community centre. The State Housing Bank provided partial funding. These funds were administered by the LA-21 Forum²⁹, on which the council is also represented, but the council was deliberately not given a leading role. “We must dare to take a hands-off approach”, said the then council leader Tone Tellevik Dahl. “As a decision maker and participant in complex, sectorised and time-consuming processes of change, the aim was to provide resources and administrative support for local initiative to flourish”.³⁰ The park, which had been bare and often vandalised, and which many felt to be unsafe, has been transformed into a lively meeting place where there is seating, skating, table tennis, an occasional market, exchange markets and many other activities, as well as attractive plantations.

One important partner, the organisation Change the World, provided a creative input in the form of perma-culture sculptures. Inspired by a visit to an eco-village, they led a team of young people in constructing pyramids, spirals and horseshoe shaped plant beds with a variety of vegetables, flowers, medicinal plants, herbs and berry bushes. Recycled materials including car tyres, construction waste and organic waste were used. These innovative and ecological concepts helped to show how barren urban areas can be transformed into more attractive, sociable and productive spaces.

The work attracted a lot of attention and led to many interesting conversations between the young people, passers-by and inquisitive residents. Many wanted to copy the idea, others offered to water and maintain the plants, even more when they were told that they could collect flowers and herbs themselves. “It’s a kind of hands-on civil education activity that has inspired us and has been applied elsewhere since”, says Guerra.³¹

Whilst developing the community centre, Guerra and her co-workers have been particularly attentive to issues of communication. “We are continually seeking new ways to communicate: can we find forms of expression that can express the commonality of interests amongst all the varied opinions and views of the users of the community centre? This led to the idea of the Wall Art project – a signal that ‘You can come in!’ The idea was

²⁸ Paaby 2006, p. 89.

²⁹ Following the Local Agenda 21, many cities in Norway created such arenas co-operation between the politicians and elected officials, public administration, citizens and civil society, and the private sector.

³⁰ From the input by Tone Tellevik Dahl on “Democratic improvement. From local practice to implementation in the national policy”, Ideas Bank seminar “Refurbishing Democracy”, 27 October 2005.

³¹ Interview with Susan Guerra, Sagene Community Centre in Oslo, 25 August 2011.

inspired by the mural artists in Mexico City in the 1930's, who used public spaces to give a voice to population groups who had not previously been heard.

The LA-21 forum invited some of the nearby housing associations to six workshops over the course of a year. After showing them the work of the Mexican *muralistas*, they were asked: "What makes a good and safe neighbourhood?", "What does Sagene mean to you?" and "What is art?". Participants then produced sketches expressing how they felt about the neighbourhood, their experiences and their wishes for the future. Participants represented many different ages and backgrounds. At times it was a challenge to avoid individuals trying to control the process; one person left because he felt he was an "expert" on art who should be listened to by the others!

After the first three workshops participants became impatient to realise their project, so a local architect and an artist were found to lead the process of expressing all the ideas that the workshops had produced. They produced 12 suggestions as to how the wall could be painted. This led to discussions and a process of elimination, in a consensus building exercise, and the final result as it is today.

An environmental element was included through the re-use of old cups and ceramics from a local tile supplier. The LA-21 forum wished to engage as many people as possible in the project and arranged an open workshop at the annual Sagene Environment Day, where 100 white tiles were painted with individual contributions. The event attracted quite a crowd with enthusiastic suggestions from all sides.

The early phases of the project had external financing and it was a challenge to identify a sustainable model for on-going upkeep and operation given tight local budgets. Despite several attempts to wind down the project, local political processes and keen user involvement have led the local council to continue supporting it. This has in turn fostered awareness of the importance of local democratic development based on integrated thinking and connections between different sectors of activity.

A form of co-ownership has now been set up, with interesting economic models enabling cooperation between public services, commerce and civil society organisations. The social capital becomes an important resource. Interest in the community centre is rising steadily, as witnessed by increasing numbers of users, visitors and volunteer hours.

Susan Guerra concludes: "This has been a process of identity building. We have generated local leadership, good alliances, and support to local initiatives from the people. Not least, the Wall Art project is a publicly supported display of participation and local narrative. The challenge has been to be aware of our role, which is not to control or be the experts but to enable, assist and use our professional skills in a constructive way. We have seen how

qualitative processes need time. And new challenges keep arising where we wish to increase local learning and democracy. We are also planning a course on democracy now; on how the political system functions and how citizens can influence it. This is something each new generation really has to learn anew. Hence it is important to have concrete, practical and enjoyable results to point to as well”.³²

Case study II: Value-based development with citizens in Oevre Eiker

A socially active municipality for over 15 years, Oevre Eiker has shown both the will and the skill to implement planning and development together with its inhabitants. Applying various methods of dialogue, a variety of forums for interaction and partnership have developed. Equally, municipal recruitment policy has focused on all employees having an active role in social development. Many have been trained in participatory methods. Processes have also focused on a self-critical attitude – “we should be doing many things much better”.³³ Here we describe a recent project aimed at increasing the participation of young people in a development plan for the town centre.

In view of the recent tragic events in Norway it seems useful to highlight the values manifesto developed by the municipality together with local associations and formally approved in 2000, ‘Building Oevre Eiker Together’, in which the municipality committed itself to participation, on the basis that “values are what connect us and foster active participation”. In addition to the town plan, these words have been put into action by, amongst others, the following projects. The ‘*Citizen Academy*’ is a yearly event where the municipality meets the population and discusses key issues such as what motivates local participation, new partnerships and how to increase community participation amongst local minority groups. Creative workshops have combined discussion with informative and inspiring talks. Concrete proposals have been followed up.

The ‘*Flower Parliament*’ is a joint event involving the municipality, the chamber of commerce and volunteers. The pedestrianized main street is converted into a beautiful space in the decoration of which all have participated. As spring approaches, funds and tasks are allocated for planting and decoration. A spinoff effect has been that young trainees now produce plants and flowers for sale to the event. The ‘*Grandparents Conference*’ is an event organised in the municipal kindergartens every second year where the older generations are invited to contribute their skills and life experience. Activities include guiding, maintenance, reading and adult support.

³² Ibid.

³³ See [Unqdom i sentrum. Unqdom som aktive deltakere i byutviklingen. Metoder og erfaringer fra Hokksund](#) [Youth in the centre. Youth as participants in the development of the city centre. Methods and experiences from Hokksund].

Oevre Eiker municipality with its 17,000 inhabitants covers 456km² and is situated in the Drammen river valley about 60km from Oslo. Half the population live in the main town, Hokksund. In addition to agriculture and forestry, major industries include a paper mill, tourist enterprises, a glass museum and a farm specialising in local organic produce. Many people commute to Kongsberg, Drammen or Oslo, and there is frequent public transport. In recent years the population has been increasing by around 3 per cent per annum.

The municipality's website lists no less than 207 associations and groups. Central to long-term development are the six neighbourhood associations and that of Hokksund town. These were established following a political declaration in 2004, entitled 'Developing our dream of the good life'. They represent public interest groups and participate in municipal affairs: they are consulted in planning processes, forward their own proposals, arrange public meetings, organise various voluntary initiatives, and are partners in activities such as the setting up of public forums, nature conservation, maintenance of public spaces and other matters relating to quality of life. They have similar statutes, and boards of seven members elected locally at annual meetings. Each association is provided with a small budget and it is their task to promote the ideas and concerns of the public through participatory processes. In order to ensure regular contact, each association has a specific contact person on the municipal Planning Committee. This also ensures that all voluntary initiatives are well integrated.

Oevre Eiker has participated in many of the national programmes aimed at sustainable development and local democracy; some of these have been mentioned above. This has brought in state funding for some activities. Local sources say that two key events in 1994 led to the strong focus on participation. First, the municipality had already started restructuring, based on a visioning process aimed at demonstrating long-term thinking and the aim of "passing our community to the next generation in a better state than it is today". Second was the emergence of a local neo-Nazi group. A rock festival arranged by this group attracted a large group of radical squatters, who are strongly anti-racist and anti-Nazi, and a street battle broke out in Hokksund. The municipality found itself in the headlines, dubbed as 'Nazi Oevre Eiker'. Immediate reaction from the public led to a huge protest march with over 2000 people under the banner 'Oevre Eiker shows its Face'. This led to a civic movement with the same title, and a values manifesto was drawn up together with local organisations and groups. The key intention was to ensure inclusiveness and solidarity in Oevre Eiker. The municipal authorities joined in, and passed a resolution stating that the manifesto "... shall be obligatory for all municipal services and development plans. Each politician and employee shall strive to achieve the values and goals stated in the manifesto". This led to a series of initiatives aimed especially at young people, which continue to this day.

“Our conviction is that it is essential to go and talk to people, meet them where they are, talk to them face to face. Setting up a Facebook page on the municipal web site isn’t going to save the world!” Those are the words of one enthusiastic municipal planner, Anders Stenshorne.³⁴ Work on the development of the town centre included a project to increase the role of youth in shaping the future. With support from the State Housing Bank surveys, in-depth interviews and a workshop ‘Hokksund 2030’ were conducted. Top of the wish list was more outdoor, informal meeting places. The young people complained, “... every time there is an empty site, waiting for development, it is turned into a parking place. Why can’t we make temporary meeting places?”³⁵

After participation processes, quick follow up is critical. The municipality acted immediately, setting up a ‘container park’ on an empty site in summer 2011. It was to be open daily, and the local library relocated some of its activities there; other ideas included simple catering run by the young people themselves, Internet access and a sand volleyball court. Quick planning, cross-sectoral cooperation and volunteer help soon made it a reality, and the process was documented on a DVD by students from a nearby high school, entitled ‘How to make a meeting place in 24 hours’. At the opening celebration all members of the Local Council were present.

“We started by listing the good reasons for doing this, rather than all the reasons for not doing it”, says Stenshorne. One main objection was financial – some people complained about the loss of parking space. Others feared noise and trouble from the young people. The project was made as cheaply as possible using recycled materials, training slots, volunteer inputs and the reallocation of existing funds. “Aided by the outreach worker, the police and the childcare services, there is always an adult contact. The business community and others support the idea too. It has been a great success and we hope to do something similar next year”, Stenshorne concluded.³⁶

Case study III: Svartlamon – the neighbourhood that refused to die

The experience of the Svartlamon neighbourhood in Trondheim is one of democratic development, but it started as a highly conflictual protest led by residents to preserve their area. Plans for new housing and industry were strongly resisted, and the road from demonstrations and occupation to lobbying, dialogue and preservation has been long, taking over 20 years. Svartlamon was one of Norway’s first urban ecology pilot projects. Today it is a neighbourhood organised on “principles of sustainable development, with ecological

³⁴ Telephone interview with Anders Stenshorne, 15 April 2011.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ From a presentation by Anders Stenshorne on citizens’ involvement projects in Oevre Eiker on 30 August 2011.

solutions, a democratic structure and transparent financial management, with a low standard and cheap rents”.³⁷

The fight to preserve Svartlamon and develop it in this way shows how determined local energies can influence the big players. From being a defensive, closed micro-society, Svartlamon has become a significant actor in the development of Trondheim city. There is now a formalised collaboration between the residents’ association and the municipality; it is no longer conceivable to eject the residents and this cooperation, often driven by conflict, has created a values debate in Trondheim about how good local democracy should function. The story of Svartlamon combines interesting elements of advocacy, service, self-help and local development.

Trondheim is the third largest municipality in Norway and a city experiencing rapid growth. Amongst the city’s 174,000 residents there are 30,000 students, and 8.4 per cent of the population are immigrants. The city has participated in various national programmes including the aforementioned “Liveable Communities”. The Svartlamon neighbourhood covers 3 hectares, situated between the railway and the eastern part of Trondheim harbour. It included 19 municipally owned rental apartment buildings, mostly old and dilapidated worker housing from around 1890, as well as premises belonging to an automobile dealer. There was a controversial debate during the 1990’s as to whether the area should be redeveloped with new housing or industry. The debate culminated in 1996-98 with a decision to demolish many of the buildings and sell the land to the car dealer. The plan brought residents together in opposition, with additional support from many personalities and interest groups in the city.

Harald Nissen, who lived in the area for 23 years, was one of the leaders of the Svartlamon movement, and has been one of the central spokesmen for its cause. He relates how the movement began as a revolt amongst young, often unemployed people in 1987, including setting up an autonomous Youth Centre called “Uffa” in what was initially a building illegally occupied. “It was the No-future-generation”, he says. “We said: ‘Things here are going to hell but we’ll try anyway’.”³⁸ More people from the Uffa crowd moved into the area, as did young artists, musicians and political activists. They demanded that the old timber buildings be preserved. They wanted a place where they could live an alternative lifestyle, with a strong social and ecological perspective. Keywords were affordable housing, workplaces, solidarity, social inclusion, reduced consumption and sustainable lifestyle. In 2003 Nissen and others stated the following: “Building million dollar apartments on the sunny side just

³⁷ See the presentation of the neighbourhood on the dedicated website svartlamon.org.

³⁸ From a presentation given by Harald Nissen at the Nordic seminar “Exchange of experiences: The success criteria for the development of sustainable local communities”, 4 January 2011.

serves to underline that there's a need for us too. We also have the right to Trondheim. We want a more varied city, and if you can't live with us, then the city has lost".³⁹

After a period of conflict, a more constructive though difficult process of dialogue with the municipality began. The activists were granted an initial sum of NOK 100,000 per building for essential maintenance and upgrading as they themselves thought fit. At the same time, the car dealer applied for permission to demolish some houses and expand business, and expulsion orders were sent to residents. In the meantime, some of the residents had already been developing ideas and proposals for an ecological, alternative development of Svartlamon. More negotiations with the municipality led to the formation of the residents' association in 1991. It is a democratic body, holding monthly meetings where all participate equally in important decisions.

An area plan was finally approved by the city in 2001, designating Svartlamon as a pilot project area: "... an alternative neighbourhood with room for ideas and experimentation in relation to housing solutions, social cooperation, participation, energy and ecology, public services, arts, culture and business".⁴⁰ In the same year, management of the housing stock was transferred to the Svartlamon Housing Foundation, which is run jointly by residents and the municipality. The municipality holds a nominal majority but in practice it lies with the residents. All main decisions are taken at monthly meetings. At the time of writing, the Foundation had three employees.

Since then many works have been carried out, in accordance with the goals of the area plan. Residents, organised in task groups, have done the work, including constructing a noise barrier along the adjoining railway line planted with fruit trees; the planting of vegetable gardens and the creation of a small dam for frogs; as well as much of the neglected repair work on the buildings and replacement of the old single pane windows. In 2005, the Residents Association approved a comprehensive Environmental Plan as well as an Energy Plan including solar and bio-energy, and three years later, a dam for wastewater recycling was built.

There is a Free Shop where people can deposit articles they would otherwise have discarded. With increasing popularity, it is now open two days every week. Across the street lies Café Ramp, which serves ecological and fair trade food. In the summer of 2010, the Svartlamon Cooperative shop opened, run by 30 volunteers and open seven days a week. It is organised as a workers' cooperative where members have both rights and duties. Administrative tasks are shared amongst the members and operations are decided at members' meetings. As far as possible all produce is ecological or fair trade, and prices are low, since the work is free.

³⁹ "[Sol over Svartlamoen](#)", *Adresseavisen*, 3 May 2001.

⁴⁰ See the resident survey 2009 by the social community group at Svartlamon: *Bomiljø, engasjement og mobilitet på Svartlamon* [The residential environment, commitment and mobility at Svartlamon], p. 5.

Most of the buildings are municipally owned, but in 2005 residents themselves took responsibility for two new buildings with accommodation for more than 30 people. These were constructed ecologically using massive timber. Since none of the local architects showed interest, the residents contacted the architecture school – and the impossible became possible. An innovative and ecological five-storey timber building was constructed at low cost, much less than half the price of upmarket flats in Trondheim, and it has since won several international prizes – apart from launching the careers of two young architects (Brendeland and Kristoffersen) that were hardly out of architecture school.

There have been exciting social and cultural initiatives too. In 2006 the premises of the car dealer were taken over by the Svartlamon Culture and Commerce Foundation. The buildings comprising around 3,000 square metres have been refurbished using ecological materials and function today as a multi-purpose community centre, including an art and cultural kindergarten established in cooperation with the municipality. This is organised more in keeping with the visions of the residents, where ecology, participation, recycling and art should play a central role. It was planned during a series of workshops with the children and inspired by the Reggio Emilia educational approach. Another part of the premises, the ReMida Centre for Creative Recycling comprises space rented to sustainable businesses. The former workshop hall has been converted into a concert venue seating 600, which has, since 2009, staged a wide variety of events including theatre, dance, rock concerts, art exhibitions and literature seminars.

After 23 years at Svartlamon, Harald Nissen considers that the greatest achievement is that it is still a pilot area and an experiment in alternative ways of living. “One must first test out new ideas at a small scale to see if they could work at a large scale”, he says. “That requires some idealists who are willing to make the effort, as well as a long time scale”. His own commitment – from squatter to elected politician – is an interesting illustration of the process of democratic awareness building which a project like Svartlamon fosters. “For the past seven years I have been on the city council, representing the Greens, participating in formulating city budgets. An interesting and enriching experience!”⁴¹

In 2009, a residents survey was carried out under the title “Living environment, commitment and mobility”. As the area has undergone a generational shift, the objective was to investigate how the current residents experience life in Svartlamon, their reasons for moving there, to which degree they feel committed to and identify with the area, and what they see as future goals.⁴²

⁴¹ From a presentation given by Harald Nissen at the Nordic seminar “Exchange of experiences: The success criteria for the development of sustainable local communities”, 4 January 2011.

⁴² See the resident survey 2009 by the social community group at Svartlamon: *Bomiljø, engasjement og mobilitet på Svartlamon* [The residential environment, commitment and mobility at Svartlamon], p. 5.

Svartlamon was born of conflict, a social experiment that began as a “wall of resistance”. The struggle for the preservation of the area has been won but is there anything new to fight for, a new common platform? This was one of the main questions. The result suggests that the good quality of life there has been a decisive factor. Most people answer that they moved there because of the degree of autonomy and self-determination – the political and ideological context. Sociability, neighbourliness and sense of identity were no less important, as “the kids have lots of uncles and aunts all around them. When they go outside, we know someone will watch over them”.⁴³

Yet the survey also revealed challenges. They relate particularly to the varied population and how the ideological project should be pursued. Svartlamon is based on an idea of tolerance and inclusivity; this can be both a strength and a weakness. Some remarked that “there are some weirdoes here, but that is also positive”; others that “there’s a bit too much focus on partying and some dope issues”. Some residents have problems and little energy to give to the community, which poses a problem for a community that is based on a large degree of cooperation and voluntary efforts. On the other hand, uniquely, a community such as Svartlamon protects and supports people who are “on the margins of society” in a way the official social safety nets usually do not. In addition to its experimental value, Svartlamon can also be seen as having an important welfare function.

Conclusions

In an annex to the Local Democracy Commission’s report, Professor Audun Offerdal posits four fundamental considerations for democracy: “The first basis for a democratic form of governance is that people can indeed govern – that they can shape the society they live in. It is not blind forces that govern. Neither gods nor demons, neither fate nor coincidences decide. People can shape, and reshape, societies... Secondly, and perhaps as self-evident but worth repeating: democracy is about a shared community of people. It is about *us* and *ours*, not about *me* and *mine*... Thirdly, and some people have trouble with this, the normative basis for a democratic system is that everyone is competent to participate in governing. No one is incompetent to have an opinion about how the community should be governed. There are no experts in democracy who can tell the others what the problems are and which solutions are right... Fourthly, in continuation of the last point, politics is an important conflict solver in democratic systems. Politics is democracy’s way of solving problems, or at least of living with them”.⁴⁴

This quote highlights the importance of awareness building and civic education as part of the continual project that is democracy. This is relevant for most of the activities connected to

⁴³ Ibid., p. 21.

⁴⁴ See the [2006 Report on Local Democracy in Norway](#) (in Norwegian) and its [English-language summary](#).

the UN Decade for Education for Sustainable Development.⁴⁵ Not least, permanent efforts are necessary to develop processes and methods that can cater for all those who do not have the right to participate, such as marginalised and disenfranchised social groups.

The Ideas Bank has been instrumental in launching a campaign in Scandinavia called '*Balanseakten*' to advance such efforts and strengthen the connections between education and local political work.⁴⁶ A similar position has also been adopted by those many Nordic organisations that pursue civic information as inspired by Grundtvig and his belief in everyone's competence and participation. It is in no small part this commitment on the part of the voluntary sector that created the basis for the Nordic model of society. It is imperative to constantly renew this basis, so that it takes on forms that are adapted to the challenges of tomorrow.

⁴⁵ This is spelled out in more detail in the official presentations of the [UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development](#).

⁴⁶ For more detail, see the official website of "[The Balancing Act](#)".

Public Consultations and Participatory Budgeting in Local Policy-Making in Poland

Łukasz Prykowski

Civic participation seems to have been gaining significance in Poland in recent years. Not only is the need to involve citizens in decision-making becoming more obvious, but the idea that civic participation is key to the quality of democracy, present and future, and a prerequisite for guaranteeing citizen influence on governance and an effective way to consolidate national sovereignty seems to be gaining ground.¹ For the purposes of this chapter, civic participation shall be understood as the conscious participation of citizens in public life, public discourse, decision-making, as well as their cooperation to achieve common goals.

Nevertheless, participation is defined variously and is often understood quite differently. One can distinguish between two types of participation – vertical and horizontal. Vertical participation refers to the relationship between the state and its authorities, and citizens. Horizontal participation refers to the cooperation of all sorts of groups and citizens, with the aim of achieving their own common goals. An example is the cooperation of different organisations dealing with the issues of disabled people.²

This chapter focuses on vertical participation and instruments that enable the involvement of community members and citizens in decision-making processes in Poland. It will concentrate on the relationship between the authorities and citizens at the local level, because the way in which local level participation is organised has a significant impact on the quality of life in local communities.

The chapter includes a presentation of the instruments that exist to involve citizens in decision-making processes in Poland, and the problems these can sometimes entail. It further presents two examples of grassroots participation. They demonstrate the role that such initiatives can have in changing the relationship between citizens and public authorities, and in fostering the development of public participation.

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¹ The principle of sovereignty of the nation is described in the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, which states that “the nation is exercising authority by its representatives or directly.”

² A practical resource on citizen participation in Poland is the web portal partycypacjaobywatelska.pl.

Before proceeding to a discussion of the need to further develop civic participation, the situation of democracy in contemporary Poland shall be briefly examined. This will serve as a backdrop to the situation of and prospects for the development of civic participation later in the chapter.

Poland became a democracy, in formal terms, with the political transformation initiated by the fall of communism in 1989, at which time the first free elections in its the post-war history took place. The newly elected authorities started to implement many substantive changes and reforms, beginning with the amendment of the constitution, from which articles regarding the leading role of the communist party and friendship with the Soviet Union were removed. New political principles were enshrined, of which the most important are the principles of a democratic state, social justice, and economic freedom.

21 years have passed since the fall of the communism, but Poland can still be considered a 'new democracy'. The state still does not function fully effectively.³ The reasons for this include the lack of a consolidated party system, a lack of competence in the bureaucracy and public administration, a low level of social capital on the part of the population (measured on the basis of the confidence indicator), and a low level of self-organisation and social activity in society.⁴ Although many Polish people perceive democracy as a better system than communist dictatorship, they do not evaluate its condition positively. Recent research points to the fact that close to half of Poland's inhabitants are not satisfied with the way democracy works in the country.⁵ Further, public institutions in Poland do not inspire great confidence among the general public, and few people trust the public institutions responsible for policy and law making. Thus, only 21 per cent of Poles express confidence in the Polish parliament, and only 14 per cent in political parties.⁶

This dissatisfaction with the state of democracy is one of the reasons for Poles' reluctance to participate in elections at both local and national levels.⁷ Many elected representatives are viewed with suspicion, and many citizens do not trust the political system and its authorities. It is also notable that approximately 42 per cent of Poles think that members of parliament represent only the interests of their political factions or groupings, and that only around 10

³ A 2010 survey ranked Poland 48th among the world's democracies, and placed it among 'flawed' democracies; see Economist Intelligence Unit, [Democracy Index 2010 – Democracy in retreat](#) (London: EIU, 2011).

⁴ Michałowski, S., "Demokracja bezpośrednia w samorządzie terytorialnym – formy i ich realizacja" [Direct democracy in local self-government – forms and their realisation], in: Marczevska-Rytko, M. (ed.), *Stan i perspektywy demokracji bezpośredniej w Polsce* [The state and perspectives of direct democracy in Poland] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2010).

⁵ CBOS Centrum badania opinii społecznej, [Opinie o funkcjonowaniu demokracji w Polsce](#) [Opinions about the functioning of democracy in Poland] (Warsaw: CBOS, 2009).

⁶ CBOS Centrum badania opinii społecznej, [Zaufanie społeczne](#) [Trust in society] (Warsaw: CBOS, 2010).

⁷ Since regaining democracy, Poland has rarely ever had a turnout in parliamentary elections that was above 50 per cent. Only in 1993 and 2007, this mark was passed.

per cent of them represent ordinary people and issues of concern to the general public.⁸ There are similar problems on the local level where confidence in local authorities is low.⁹

In other words, representative democracy is going through a crisis, as it does not seem to effectively guarantee that citizens can influence decisions having an impact on their surroundings and lives. Even the instruments of direct democracy, like national or local referenda, hold little promise. For referenda, thresholds for participation are so high that they can rarely be passed: for local referenda to be considered valid, participation must be over 30 per cent of eligible voters; on the national level, the threshold can be as high as 50 per cent. The right of citizens to initiate legislation is no less illusory, given that a minimum of 100,000 signatures has to be collected in only three months before legislation can be proposed; using this tool, citizens hardly have significant influence on law-making.¹⁰ The situation is similar for civic legislative initiatives at the local level. This option is in application only in some municipalities, and even in these, it is rarely used.¹¹ Therefore, this instrument has little influence on the quality and quantity of political participation. Citizens do not use it, and municipal councils often explicitly reject civil resolutions directed at them.¹² It is, then, not surprising that a clear majority of Poles do not think they can influence developments at the national or local level.¹³

This goes hand in hand with a withdrawal from active public life on the part of citizens, a lack of responsibility for public property, and an increasing reluctance to act in favour of others. According to research carried out by *Klon/Jawor* in 2010, only 12 per cent of Poles were members of different NGOs or associations, and 16 per cent devoted their time to some form of volunteer work for these, while 54 per cent supported them financially.¹⁴ These rather low figures provide yet another indication that there is an urgent need to re-connect

⁸ Indraszczyk, A., "Demokracja bezpośrednia - mit czy realna możliwość?" [Direct democracy - myth or real possibility?], in: Marczewska-Rytko, M. (ed.), *Stan i perspektywy demokracji bezpośredniej w Polsce* [The state and perspectives of direct democracy in Poland] (Lublin: UMCS, 2010).

⁹ SPLOT and PBS/DGA, *Mój samorząd* [My Self-Government], survey conducted in 32 cities across Poland (Warsaw: SPLOT and PBS/DGA, 2009).

¹⁰ Out of 56 civil projects, which were received by the parliamentary sessions of the Sejm since 1999, only 8 were accepted.

¹¹ In many cities in Poland, local governments set a high threshold of signatures for civic legislative initiatives: in Lodz, the threshold is 6,000 signatures, and in Warsaw, it is 15,000. Civic legislative initiatives are regulated by law of 24 June 1999 (*Ustawa o wykonywaniu inicjatywy ustawodawczej przez obywateli*).

¹² Theiss, M., "System pozornie otwarty. O instytucjonalnych uwarunkowaniach lokalnej partycypacji politycznej w Polsce" [A seemingly open system. On the institutional conditioning of local political participation in Poland], in: Schinler, J., Skrzypiec, R., and Lewenstein, B (eds.), *Partycypacja społeczna i aktywizacja w rozwiązywaniu problemów społeczności lokalnych* [Social participation and activation in solving local social problems] (Warsaw: Warsaw University, 2010), pp. 61-80.

¹³ In 2009, 72 per cent of Poles asserted that they have no influence over the important issues affecting the country, and 55 per cent asserted that they have no influence over the important issues for their cities or communities; see CBOS 2009.

¹⁴ Przewłocka, J., *Zaangażowanie społeczne Polaków w roku 2010: wolontariat, filantropia, 1%. Raport z badań* [Social engagement of Poles in 2010: volunteering, philanthropy, 1 per cent. A research report] (Warsaw: KLON/JAWOR, 2010).

Polish citizens with the workings of democracy in their country. Existing mechanisms of citizen participation need to be overhauled, and new instruments that can enable citizens to exert an influence on decision-making processes need to be developed. In taking steps in this direction, the local level seems to be particularly promising.

One such mechanism is public consultation with citizens about important issues for their communities. Public consultation is an organised way of accessing the opinions and positions of people and institutions, which are directly or indirectly affected by the decisions proposed by policy-makers and the public administration.¹⁵ Public consultation can be an excellent tool for dialogue between the local government and citizens. Thanks to such consultations, citizens have the opportunity to present their arguments and ideas, and the authorities have a duty to take them into consideration. In order for public consultation to truly fulfil its role, citizens must be treated as partners, and their influence on decisions made by authorities must be real. Public consultations are an important dimension of Polish law. The constitution states that the country's legislation emerges "... based on cooperation between authorities and citizens, on social dialogue and on the principle of subsidiarity, reinforcing citizens and their community."¹⁶ The legal provisions contained by the act on local self-government (*Ustawa o samorządzie gminnym*) also establish the necessity of consulting with citizens on decisions of local importance. This law states that "... consultations about the priorities of the community can be conducted with its members on its territory."¹⁷ Further legislation specifies that consultations should be conducted when urban development plans are on the table, and when investments and developments might have detrimental effects for the environment.¹⁸ Public consultations, therefore, have legal grounds. It is the role of local governments to effectively implement them.

In Poland, activities that seek to understand the needs and to listen to the opinions of citizens, and to consult them on important decisions, remain something of a novelty. Nevertheless, local governments have begun to conduct public consultations with citizens with increasing frequency. Many Polish cities have already decided to include consultation with citizens in their local law. Examples of such regulations regarding consultations include those passed by cities such as Słupsk, Łódź and Cracow.

This kind of legislation provides the basis on which local level participation can flourish. This said it is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for ensuring that participation

¹⁵ Długosz, D., and Wygnanski, J. J., *Obywatele współdecydują. Przewodnik po partycypacji społecznej* [Citizens co-decide. A guide to public participation] (Warsaw: FIP, 2005).

¹⁶ From the preamble of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland.

¹⁷ Act of 8 March 1990 about municipal self-government (*Ustawa o samorządzie gminnym*).

¹⁸ Relevant acts include the Act of 27 March 2003 on planning and spatial planning (*Ustawa o planowaniu i zagospodarowaniu przestrzennym*), and the Act of 3 October 2008 access to information about the environment and its protection, the participation of society in environmental protection and environmental impact assessments (*Ustawa o udostępnianiu informacji o środowisku i jego ochronie, udziale społeczeństwa w ochronie środowiska oraz o ocenach oddziaływania na środowisko*).

mechanisms will function effectively. Goodwill on the part of the authorities for putting such legislation into practice is key, and current practice among local authorities in relation to public consultations demonstrates that they do not yet function effectively. On the one hand, local authority officials demonstrate little understanding for the idea of public participation, a lack of adequate preparation for public consultations and even a lack of goodwill to involve citizens. On the other hand, citizens lack a culture of discussion and are reluctant to take part in the process.

The poor quality of actual consultation practices is associated with many factors, the most important of which are the lack of qualifications among local authority staff responsible to actually lead and run them, and the poor functioning of the units within the local administration that are responsible for dialogue with citizens. At present, such units exist in 9 per cent of urban and just 2.5 per cent of rural communities.¹⁹ In places where suitably qualified structures for the implementation of public consultation exist, there is often too few staff to ensure adequate coverage of the workload involved. Further, among officials there is a clear lack of awareness as concerns the 'social' dimension of their role and responsibilities towards citizens as public servants.

Public consultation is a complex process. It requires adequate implementation at every stage, from the promotion of the consultation among the members of the public, through the correct selection of the participants, choices regarding an appropriate consultation method and how long the consultation should last, and the preparation of the report including feedback from the participants. The appropriate realisation of all these elements has an important impact on the quality of the process of participation. Vice versa, when these elements are not appropriately implemented, public consultations can disappoint and discourage citizens from participation.

Many local authority officials do not have the competence for preparing and implementing public consultations. They experience typical pitfalls including the use of passive forms of information to tell citizens about the consultation, the use of technical, bureaucratic and administrative jargon in their communication with citizens, inadequate provision of information about the theme of the consultation process, methods of consultation that do not provide opportunities for debate and deliberation among and with citizens, no provision of feedback to citizens, etc.²⁰ Research conducted among local authorities in 2010-2011 shows that the main reason for conducting public consultations in Poland are the formal legal requirements placed on local authorities to do so (69 per cent). Only 46 per cent

¹⁹ Pracownia Badań i Innowacji Społecznych Stocznia and SMG/KRC Poland Media S.A, [Raport końcowy z badania efektywności mechanizmów konsultacji społecznych](#) [Final report from research on the effectiveness of social consultation mechanisms], Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of the Republic of Poland (Warsaw: MLSP, 2011).

²⁰ Ibid. In 30 per cent of cases of public consultation in Poland, feedback is not provided; in 54 per cent of cases, no justification is provided for why inputs received from citizens are adopted or rejected.

indicated that consultation was needed to find out more about the needs and expectations of citizens.²¹ It is rare for public consultations to be conducted based on the voluntary will of the local authorities to get to know citizens' needs, and there are very few examples of local governments that conduct regular consultation with citizens as part of their programmes.²²

These factors often lead to situations in which consultations are conducted, but without sufficient effort, competence or conviction to ensure that citizens are 'really' consulted or to ensure their effective participation. This creates a kind of pseudo-consultation, by which authorities conduct consultations because the law stipulates they must or because they need to 'save face' during difficult political times. They go through the motions of local citizen participation and responsibility for the lack of effectiveness of public consultation is shifted onto the shoulders of citizens, who often see through such ploys on the part of the authorities and simply stay away.²³ Citizens do not feel they are treated like partners by the authorities, and worse still, they sometimes feel like they are being manipulated. Participation under such circumstances is counter-productive, creates social dissatisfaction and spreads doubt among citizens.

Understandably, citizens are most motivated to participate when they are convinced they will have an influence on the final decision and when their concerns and recommendations are taken into account. This is best reflected in mechanisms of direct democracy, such as participatory budgeting. Participatory budgeting provides citizens with the opportunity to decide about how the local government uses its budget. In contrast with public consultations, the decisions made by citizens through participatory budgeting are binding and have to be put into practice by the local administration. In Poland, the only example of participatory budgeting in which citizens have a direct say is the so-called village fund (*Fundusz Sołecki*).²⁴ The legislation pertaining to such village funds allows the rural administrative unit (a subdivision of the rural community) to assign a specific portion of its budget for allocation and disbursement based on decisions made by citizens.

This mechanism has been in place since 2009 but to date, its functioning and effects have not been evaluated. Nevertheless, the village fund represents an opportunity for strengthening local citizen participation in Poland. It is also a form of participatory budgeting

²¹ Pracownia Badań i Innowacji Społecznych Stocznia and SMG/KRC Poland Media S.A, [Raport końcowy z badania efektywności mechanizmów konsultacji społecznych](#) [Final report from research on the effectiveness of social consultation mechanisms], Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of the Republic of Poland (Warsaw: MLSP, 2011).

²² A rare example of planned consultations has been provided by the City of Warsaw; see the dedicated web portal on [public consultations in Warsaw](#).

²³ A recent case of controversy is the debt crisis of the city of Poznań. The authorities proposed a poll among local citizens on the budget for 2012, focusing on planned budget cuts rather than spending priorities. Critics claimed that the authorities were trying to avoid their responsibility for the debt crisis by consulting citizens; see Erbel, J., "[Cyniczny gest prezydenta Poznania](#)", *Gazeta.pl*, 14 May 2011.

²⁴ In Poland, this mechanism has been determined by the Act of 20 February 2009 on Village Funds (*Ustawa o funduszu sołeckim*).

whose application would be relevant for urban areas. All the same, attempts to pilot participatory budgeting have until now been few and far between and tend take place through the isolated projects of non-governmental organisations.²⁵ So far, the only city in Poland that has implemented participatory budgeting is the city of Sopot. However, as this mechanism is currently being phased in, the extent of its effectiveness or its sustainability remains unclear. This said the decision of the city of Sopot to introduce participatory budgeting is of enormous significance. It has the potential to increase the responsibility of citizens for the common public good and their social capital. Examples from other parts of the world in which public distrust in local authorities and civic passivity were overcome through the implementation of mechanisms of participatory democracy, including and especially, participatory budgeting abound. It is currently estimated over 200 cities in Europe are using participatory budgets.²⁶ According to research carried out in the United Kingdom, participatory budgeting has also been effective in the regulation of public spending (making it more responsive to citizens' concerns and issues), in developing social cohesion, in building local community and in increasing social trust.²⁷ Many of these issues are also concerns in Poland.

In developing participatory initiatives in Poland, non-governmental organisations and civic groups have taken the lead. These organisations advocate for change in the mechanisms that regulate the development of citizen participation.²⁸ They monitor the extent to which and how local authorities are implementing laws that oblige them to engage in public participation, and they consider the quality of the methods of consultation used and propose alternatives for improvement.²⁹ They also provide capacity building to local government, as they often dispose of more knowledge and competence on public participation than public authorities. In so doing, civil society injects a much needed grass-roots perspective that promises to both change the perception of public participation by local authorities and broaden the space for genuine involvement of citizens at the local level.

²⁵ Examples include the project [Dwa bieguny](#) [Two Poles] in Rybnik that was carried out by the Centre for the Development of Citizen Initiative (CRIS), and the project [Głos łodzian się liczy](#) [The Vote of Łódź inhabitants counts] that was conducted by the Centre for the Promotion and Development of Civil Initiatives (OPUS) and involved citizens in the decision-making on expenditure of five city districts.

²⁶ Sintomer Y., Herzberg C., and Allegretti G., [Learning from the South: Participatory Budgeting Worldwide – an Invitation to Global Cooperation](#), Dialog Global no. 25 (Bonn: InWEnt, 2010).

²⁷ Participatory Budgeting Unit, [Ten years on: The case of the participatory budgeting](#) (Manchester: PBUnt, 2010).

²⁸ An example is the [Centrum Inicjatyw Obywatelskich](#) [Centre for Citizen Initiatives] in Słupsk that implemented civic legislative initiatives and regulations of public consultations.

²⁹ The initiative [Łodzianie Decydują](#) [Inhabitants of Łódź Decide] has conducted such monitoring of the regulations of public consultation in the city, and has publicised irregularities in their implementation.

Case study I: From urban development to participatory budgeting in Sopot

Sopot has a population of 38,000 and is located by the Baltic Sea between two big cities – Gdańsk and Gdynia. It receives approximately 2 million tourists every year, being well known in Poland and around the world as a seaside health resort.

The Sopot Development Initiative (*Sopocka Inicjatywa Rozwojowa*)³⁰ has been active in the city since December 2008. It was formed by a group of a dozen or so Sopot citizens who believed that it was important for locals to have the opportunity to co-decide about city development projects. Its initiators are Marcin Gerwin and Maja Grabkowska. From the beginning, its main objective was to ensure the regular participation of citizens in decision-making about city issues. Sopot's citizens are generally quite active and participate in civic life; the consistently high turnout for local elections and for other activities attests to this favourable civic climate.³¹ There are some possible reasons for this including that Sopot has a higher than average level of education and a higher than average standard of living. These are commonly associated with a higher level of political and civic awareness and activity. However, and while consultations and other meetings concerning the future of the city often attract a large turnout, and the basis for the democratic management of the city exists, the opinions of citizens are rarely taken into consideration, according to Marcin Gerwin.³²

One of *Sopot Development Initiative's* first undertakings was *Grodowy Park*, the town park. A public consultation was conducted on an urban planning study of the area where the park is located. Citizens made it clear they wanted the park area to remain green and that it should not be built on. The authorities assured residents that the decisions taken at the consultation would be binding, but as it transpired the land was divided in plots and prepared for sale. The results of the consultation with citizens were not considered. The matter of the park mobilised residents and new people joined the *Sopot Development Initiative*.

In October 2009, the *Sopot Development Initiative* launched a campaign called "*Demokracja to nie tylko wybory*" (Democracy is more than elections). The campaign aimed at demonstrating to the citizens that they have the right to decide about what happens in their city, and not only through voting for their representatives during local elections. Its main objective was to get the city to implement measures enabling co-decision making by citizens about issues of concern to the community. Marcin Gerwin explained the motivation behind the campaign: "The key to change is systematic solutions, not once-off actions. The

³⁰ For further information, see the website of the [Sopot Development Initiative](#).

³¹ As an indication, the last presidential elections in Poland in 2010 saw the largest turnout, with 57 per cent of the electorate, in Sopot.

³² Interview by the author, 16 July 2011

discussion with citizens has to be conducted in ways that ensure that their opinions actually count”.³³

The first phase of the campaign, launched together with residents of the neighbouring community of Gdańsk Wrzeszcz, focused on guaranteeing citizens the right to launch a civic legislative initiative. The Sopot Initiative suggested that the city statute should be amended following the example of other cities. As it turned out, this idea was accepted by almost all Sopot councillors. After just three months the city statute was amended. By virtue of the new law, the residents of Sopot now have the right to draft resolutions, and if they manage to collect a minimum of 200 signatures in support of their proposal, to present it to the city council. In order for this mechanism to be as understandable as possible, the *Sopot Development Initiative* prepared a guide to the new law for citizens.³⁴ The next step in the campaign was the preparation of draft regulations for public consultations, that is, the rules guiding a dialogue between the president and councillors with residents. In order to do this, the *Sopot Development Initiative* used the new law – the civic legislative initiative act – collecting 200 signatures in support of their proposal from citizens of Sopot. The action to collect the signatures started in July 2010, and the reaction of the local public in Sopot was very positive. Many supported the idea that citizens should have the opportunity to express their points of view about important issues and decisions in the city and that they should be better informed about important meetings by the relevant authorities. Marcin Gerwin noted that “[d]uring the conversations we had while collecting signatures, it became crystal clear that the residents of Sopot want to have an influence on what is happening in the city and want to be better informed by the administration”.³⁵

The required signatures were collected relatively quickly, but problems emerged during the drafting of the document. The legal adviser to the local government questioned the correctness of many regulations contained in the document, which significantly slowed down the process of approving the document. At this point, the initiators of the campaign decided that the regulations should be as comprehensive as possible, and pushed for the inclusion of a broad set of contents. In parallel, the campaigners discussed the contents of the document with city councillors, who also proposed amendments. This process of consultation and amendment naturally took its time. Even a year after the draft had been submitted, the new law still had not been passed.

In autumn 2010, the elections for both the Mayor and the City Council took place. The third phase of the campaign was launched with the aim of bringing about a discussion on the issue of participatory budgeting. The *Sopot Development Initiative* conducted a series of interviews with the mayoral candidates, as part of an action called *Skaner Obywatelski* (Civic

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Sopot Development Initiative, [Inicjatywa uchwałodawcza mieszkańców Sopotu](#) (Sopot: SIR, 2010).

³⁵ Interview by the author, 16 July 2011.

Scanner). Its main purpose was to engage candidates who understand democratic city management, and to ensure that residents of Sopot vote in full awareness of the issues. A questionnaire was addressed to the candidates for councillor positions and sent out to all electoral committees. The results were collated and presented on the website of the *Sopot Development Initiative*.³⁶ Thanks to the information collected, residents could check the extent to which candidates supported the right of citizens to initiate public consultations, participatory budgeting, and actions in favour of a sustainable development of the city, etc.

Well before the elections, the *Sopot Development Initiative* raised the need for the establishment of participatory budgeting. The elections were the appropriate moment to raise this issue and propose its implementation, through which city residents would have the right to voice their opinions on how the city budget is spent. According to Marcin Gerwin, “[t]he need for this law is not-self evident to everyone. Some think that only some ‘authorities’ can decide on it, because they know best. Meanwhile in a democracy it is the citizens who are supposed to be the authorities, and the Mayor and city council are only supposed to be the organs through which the citizens exercise their authority”.³⁷

The campaign convinced many candidates of the relevance of participatory budgeting – four of the five mayoral candidates to be exact. Nevertheless, the one candidate that did not support the proposal won the election. This did not deter the campaigners who began discussions with city councillors. Despite the fact that some Sopot councillors continue to be against citizens having the right to decide directly on the city budget, the Sopot city council passed a resolution on enforcing participatory budgeting on 6 May 2010. Ten councillors voted in favour, five were against, four abstained and two were absent. By virtue of this decision, the city council has assigned three million Polish Zlotys (approx. 1 per cent of the city’s budget), over the use of which citizens have the right to decide fully and directly. This was a crucial vote and it represents a new departure in the history of democracy in Poland. This was the first time a city in Poland voted to implement participatory budgeting, and Sopot has become an example of good practice for other cities.

The proposal from the *Sopot Development Initiative* was that decisions to allocate funds from the civil budget should be taken after discussions in a residents’ forum. The invitation to participate in the definition of the civil budget is to be sent out to all households in Sopot. At the start of the residents’ forum, participants are to be introduced to what participatory budgeting is all about and what a civil budget looks like. For an effective process, it was suggested that participants should be divided into focus groups covering each of the different elements of the civil budget: ecology, culture, education, local health and safety, etc. In these groups, local citizens work towards the development of specific projects within the framework of the civil budget. Another meeting will ensure that the proposals of the

³⁶ For detailed results, see the [Skaner obywatelski](#) website.

³⁷ Interview by the author, 16 July 2011.

citizens are analysed and that the most necessary projects for the community are chosen by the end of the process. The participants vote on the necessity of the projects, which are assessed on a scale from 0 to 5, with 0 referring to unnecessary and 5 referring to most needed. A temporary committee monitors the civil budgeting process. The *Sopot Development Initiative* also proposes that it should be the participants of relevant meetings to decide about how those meetings should be conducted, rather than the Mayor and Councillors.

The *Sopot Development Initiative* held its first open meeting to present its ideas and proposals in February 2010, with the attendance of some councillors and the Deputy Mayor. According to Marcin Gerwin, “[i]t was very helpful that the councillors attended from the very beginning. They did not know it was possible to cooperate so closely with citizens, and it appealed to them”.³⁸

Convincing the majority of councillors of the need greater citizen involvement was a long process. While the implementation of the Civil Initiative Act was no problem, the introduction of the civic budget was not as easy. Direct discussions with the councillors by members of the *Sopot Development Initiative* were crucial to improving relations with them and to convincing them to support participatory budgeting. Today, many councillors are more amenable to the idea of direct citizen participation in municipal decision-making, including the chairman of the Sopot City Council, Piotr Meler. It was also indicative that it was one of the councillors that proposed the civic budget of three million Polish Zlotys – the representative of the social partners had only proposed two million Polish Zlotys.

Nevertheless, sceptics remain. Among these is Mayor Jacek Karnowski who dislikes the form of civic budget chosen for Sopot. He proposes that councillors collect proposals for investment from residents in the districts. On the basis of these proposals, the administration would prepare a catalogue of investment priorities and a questionnaire for citizens. However, the mayor and councillors would decide on the distribution of funds to each area of investment.³⁹ In this model, citizens’ opinions would be non-binding and advisory only.

In June 2010 the Mayor explained his proposal as being directed at the involvement of the largest number of people as possible. Magdalena Jachim, spokesperson for the municipality, said “... we want the broadest possible community to give its opinion about suggested projects, avoiding that only those who attend consultation meetings decide”.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Grzenkowska, K., „[Karnowski pisze w sprawie budżetu obywatelskiego](#)”, *naszemiasto.pl*, 16 June 2011.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

The fact that the Mayor does not support the implementation of participatory budgeting in its proposed form is one of the main impediments preventing it from becoming a sustainable reality in Sopot. The Mayor has at his disposal the entire public administration of the city, which has an important role to play in the implementation of the civic budget. At the moment councillors are responsible for preparing meetings, but they do not dispose of extensive staff, and when the City Council wants to send invitations to citizens for consultations or meetings, they must apply to the Mayor for financing. His lack of support means that the City Council spends time doing tasks which would normally be done by staff of the administration. It has also led to the emergence of a peculiar situation – just as the councillors decided to organise the residents’ forum in June 2011, the Mayor announced that he would conduct his own consultations on the same day. Many risks are associated with such manoeuvres. On the one hand, it can be the cause of confusion among citizens. On the other hand, it could be the cause of anxiety among councillors. In the end, the councillors decided to postpone their residents’ forum until September 2011.

Nevertheless, the *Sopot Development Initiative* is the only informal group in Poland, which has managed to achieve change in the field of civic participation in such a short period of time. Above all convincing councillors to accept the resolution on the civic budget was a significant achievement. Whereas civic legislative initiatives and regulations on public consultation function across Poland, Sopot was the first (and to date last) city to implement participatory budgeting. Initiating these changes would not have been possible without the determination of the *Sopot Development Initiative*, and the extent of community work done by its members was significant. The *Sopot Development Initiative* can be an example of good practice to many grassroots groups in Poland that are seeking inspiration to change their communities. The information available on the *Sopot Development Initiative* website is a useful compendium for local governments looking for guidelines about citizen participation practices. Interpretations of the law, descriptions of methods and techniques for public participation, and reference to examples from abroad can all be found on this site. In a word, the *Sopot Development Initiative* is a must visit for everyone who is interested in public participation, and who plans to implement it.

Case study II: Public consultations in the regeneration of Toruń

Toruń is a city located in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie Voivodship of Poland and has 200,000 inhabitants. Toruń, together with Bydgoszcz, performs the functions of regional capital. Toruń is located on both sides of the river Vistula and is well known for its unique gothic architecture. The city is one of the oldest and most popular with tourists in Poland.

Citizen participation in urban development is not a permanent policy in the management of the city (as in many other cities in Poland). Attempts to involve citizens in the decision-

making process have often been confined to participation in compulsory consultations (as demanded by EU law).

A local foundation – the *Sustainable Development Workshop (Pracownia Zrównoważonego Rozwoju)* – took an interest in the quality of the consultations being conducted.⁴¹ The main aim of this organisation, established in 2007, is to lobby for sustainable development in the region. Hence, the *Sustainable Development Workshop* began to monitor the quality of public consultation relating to investments that might be detrimental to the environment. Members of the foundation noticed that consultations with citizens were often conducted late in the process, when there was little chance to influence or change anything. According to Krzysztof Ślebioda, one of co-founders of the *Sustainable Development Workshop*, consultations through which members of the public could really decide about something did not happen. Consultations were not preceded by broad efforts to inform the public (only occasional information appeared in the media) and the turnout was notoriously low (about 15-20 people usually participated in meetings).⁴²

While members of the *Sustainable Development Workshop* proposed their ideas and recommendations during such consultations, they were not satisfied with the quality of the dialogue between the authorities and citizens in attendance. They were not pleased with the way in which the consultations were led, and they expected meetings to provide more opportunities to citizens to voice their concerns and to demonstrate their competence. Noting their shortcomings, the *Sustainable Development Workshop* has often proposed changes to the consultation methods used to involve more citizens. It sought ways to change the fact that consultations in Toruń are being conducted without the real participation of its citizens. One of its proposals was to make it possible for citizens to organise consultations on their own initiative.

This is how the idea for the Toruń Participator (*Partycypator Toruński*) was born, a project in which the main role was played by the citizens themselves. The initiative began with the idea to develop a concept for the spatial development of one of Toruń's parks, woods on the Vistula's escarpment, an area that according to the initiators was not being exploited to its best potential.

The implementation of the project began in June 2010, and was made possible with the financial support of the Stefan Batory Foundation.⁴³ The project had two phases. First was research into the ways in which citizens were using the space of the park. Second, was the work of a group of citizen representatives on the concept for the development of the park. During the research phase, the organisers tried to answer questions such as in what way

⁴¹ For more detail, see the website of the [Sustainable Development Workshop](#).

⁴² Interview by the author, 30 July 2011.

⁴³ Detailed information about the [Stefan Batory Foundation](#) is available online.

people were using the park; what functions was it serving; what social needs people had. Residents were also asked about their proposals for the changes they would like to see in the park, in order to find out what they felt was needed for the space to become more user friendly.

A group of a dozen or so volunteers conducted the research. Various methods were used including interviews and surveys with residents, the summarisation of the needs of the users of the park, and trailing their tracks (for example, all rubbish left behind was identified and classified, which helped the organisers to understand which places in the park were most used and for which purposes). Spatial research was also conducted, to check whether the street furniture, park entrances, paths, benches, and waste baskets were appropriately located; to check what the space offered; whether some events were taking place; whether these were being planned consistently and whether one could see that the space was being managed and that somebody was responsible for it.⁴⁴ Further, a behavioural mapping was conducted. Using a special form, the park's surrounding locations that are most visited and the activities that are most popular with users of the park were identified. In this way the project identified who was coming to the park and for what purpose, how often and what role the park played for those living in nearby housing estates. According to Krzysztof Ślebioda, the project coordinator, "[w]e tried to get to know whether people want something to change. There would be no need to change the space, if it was suitable to everyone's needs".⁴⁵ The results of the research showed that there was a need for changes and spatial adaptations to the park.

In the implementation of this project, the *Sustainable Development Workshop* used the experience of other organisations and the knowledge of specialists. In part the project was inspired by the concept developed by an American organisation called *Project for Public Spaces Inc.*, which specialises in planning on the basis of user needs.⁴⁶ The surveys and questionnaires used in the research process were prepared by researchers at the Institute of Sociology at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń.

The research was conducted over four months, during the 2010 holiday period. It concluded with the preparation of a report, which became a reference for the park development work. The research results were presented at a public debate in October 2010. About 60 people attended the meeting, which is not a high turnout, but the attendees' attitude to the project was very positive. Attendees heard that they were essential to the planning of the space and to figuring out its future. For some it was the first time they heard how significant the park is for the citizens.

⁴⁴ Pracownia Zrównoważonego Rozwoju, [Raport z badań. Partycypator Toruński](#) [Research Report. The Torun Participant] (Torun: PZR, 2010).

⁴⁵ Interview by the author, 30 July 2011.

⁴⁶ For further information, see the website of the [Project for Public Spaces Inc.](#)

During this meeting the recruitment of a group of citizen representatives to work on the development of the concept for the park was announced. Their work was supposed to become the guideline for the architects, which would re-design the park. 23 people volunteered to join the committee, and although it was supposed to be smaller, the organisers decided to exploit the social potential represented by the volunteers and all of them were asked to join. Over a period of some months, the committee met to plan the concept. Before starting their work, the committee learned about the history of the area and the conditions applying to the conservation of any relics or antiquities. They also visited the area and got to know its most essential features. They worked with the map of users' needs and the categories of user groups. In this phase, the project organisers also consulted experts. Wojciech Kłosowski, a specialist in the field of strategic planning and in urban revitalisation, conducted meetings with residents.

Officials from various departments in the city administration took part in these meetings. They pointed out the opportunities and pitfalls for implementing the residents' ideas. In a way, the officials became members of the group, which had an important psychological impact. They saw that their work was being taken seriously, which was extremely important, since some residents were sceptical that their participation would effect any change.

The project initiators were aware that such a small group could not be representative of the opinions of a district in which 80,000 people live. Therefore, the group was expected to consult with local residents, neighbours and family members about the ideas being discussed in the meetings. In this way, the number of ideas for developing the park rose and more residents could be included in the process.

The process concluded with a public presentation of the park development concept that took place in February 2011, during which it was discussed with residents. This concept assumed the form of guidelines for the special development plan of this area, which at the time of writing was under preparation.

From the beginning of the project, the *Sustainable Development Workshop* knew that the city administration needed to be involved. Thinking long-term about consultations in the city meant to engage those who would be responsible for conducting them. In this relation, the media played an important role. Toruń's various media – newspapers, radio, web portals, television – were involved from the very beginning and were positive about the project. The media paid attention to whether and how the quality of consultation with citizens was changing so that citizens would have a better chance to voice their opinions. The 'good press' was an important motivator for the city to cooperate. According to Krzysztof Ślebioda, "[t]he city noticed that media liked it and also that such a form of conversation is convincing for the people. I think that then a transformation in structures of the office began".⁴⁷ The

⁴⁷ Interview, 30 July 2011.

project was very well received and perceived in the public. It has been repeatedly referred to during later consultation meetings in Toruń, and the city administration was asked why it does not practice the same kind of consultation techniques as the *Toruń Participator*.

The project organisers made a point informing and communicating with decision-makers, for example, city councillors. At the beginning, these did not demonstrate extensive interest, although some got very involved. The greatest interest of decision-makers was noticed when residents prepared the concept for the development of the park. Almost half of Toruń's councillors, the Deputy Mayor and several directors of departments of the city administration attended the meeting where the concept was presented.

By the time the project ended, the city of Toruń was preparing for consultation with citizens about another development plan – the revitalisation of a historic park in the suburbs of Bydgoszcz. When the *Sustainable Development Workshop* found out that work to prepare a park development plan was supposed to start without the active participation of citizens they reacted. They warned the city that without the participation of citizens the project would never obtain their social acceptance. The *Sustainable Development Workshop* pointed out that if residents were involved in the process of planning from an early stage, it would be more effective in the long run.

The city accepted these arguments and proposed to prepare consultations with citizens with the support of the *Sustainable Development Workshop*. The city proposed to use the model used by the *Toruń Participator*. People knew the method, so the first meeting organised in March 2011 already met with great interest. About 150 people attended. So many people volunteered to be part of the representative group that an election had to be held. People wanted to be involved in the project, knowing the influence of the *Toruń Participator* had in previous cases. This time around the organisers did not have to convince residents that the consultation made sense; the project ran without encountering many obstacles and the guidelines prepared were largely accepted.

Upon completion of the *Toruń Participator* project, the *Sustainable Development Workshop* started thinking about the creation of regulations for public consultation in Toruń. According to Krzysztof Ślebioda “[w]e thought that without such regulations we would never be certain for the future of consultation in our city.”⁴⁸ The *Sustainable Development Workshop* followed the example of regulations adopted by other cities, at the same time as not wanting to impose anything. It wanted to introduce regulations for consultation using participatory methods, and it filed an application for funding to the city administration. In so doing, it paid particular attention to drafting regulations, which would simultaneously be friendly to citizens and simple for officials to apply.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

The *Sustainable Development Workshop's* application for funding was not accepted. The city declared that it would prepare the draft regulations by itself. At this time, it was announced that the city was establishing a special unit responsible for conducting consultations with citizens. At the time of writing, the work on the draft regulations continues and the contents of the document are supposed to be consulted with citizens in the near future.

The municipal Department for Social Communication was established in the first half of 2011. At the very beginning officials invited the *Sustainable Development Workshop* to cooperate and to assist with the improvement of the process of social consultation and citizen information. Officials claimed that citizens were unwilling to participate in consultations and if they did participate, they had hostile attitudes. In their opinion, one of the first actions of the department should be to inform citizens about what public consultation was for and why it was worth participating. In their view, a promotional campaign should be a priority of the city.

Representatives of the *Sustainable Development Workshop* did not entirely agree with this approach. They pointed out that perhaps the reason for the low turnout was that citizens doubted that they could gain anything by taking part. They pointed out that even when citizens were consulted, their opinions were not being adequately taken into account, and the feeling of a lack of influence often determined the low level of citizen participation. The *Sustainable Development Workshop* postulated that the fact that residents were not given chance to become really involved in decision-making might be the main problem. They also pointed to the problem that many officials employed by city administration departments could not see the need to involve citizens in co-decision making. Officials are often experts in their fields, and do not believe that lay people can help them. In the opinion of the *Sustainable Development Workshop*, an educational process for officials in the public administration of the city should be one of the first steps.

Deliberations and discussions resulted in a joint initiative between the city and the *Sustainable Development Workshop*, and in an application for a partnership project under the Swiss-Polish Cooperation Programme.⁴⁹ The project reconciled the expectations of both sides – on the one hand, it included an educational programme for officials of the city administration; on the other, it included actions involving citizens in decision-making and the conducting of public consultations in a participatory manner.

Through its activity the *Sustainable Development Workshop* quickly became an important institution in the field of public participation in Toruń, and the city began to rely on its opinion. This was the outcome because, among other things, the organisation did not only criticise the public consultations led by city administrators. It offered alternative solutions and was open for sharing its knowledge and cooperation with the city. Thanks to this open

⁴⁹ See the web presence of the [Swiss-Polish Cooperation Programme](#).

approach, public participation in the city began to emerge on the basis of the ideas of local people, with the inclusion of various sectors and with prospects of further systematic development.

Although changes in the area of public participation in Toruń are clearly visible, representatives of the *Sustainable Development Workshop* still have their reservations. They readily point out how much work still needs to be done in the city. Krzysztof Ślebioda concluded that "... it is hard to say that Toruń changed. After all, only two projects involving citizens so directly have taken place. We didn't reach everyone. In order to convince everyone of the need for participation, work over several more years is needed".⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Interview, 30 July 2011.

Public Participation Strengthening Processes and Outcomes of Local Decision-Making in Romania

Oana Preda

Ever since the violent revolution of December 1989, resulting in the fall of totalitarian communism, Romania has struggled with its democratic transition. After years of repression, Romanians are still in the process of understanding how to make use of their regained rights. A few years of enthusiasm gave way to nostalgia for the old regime: in the face of economic hardship, many forgot the repression that characterised the communist regime and remember only that their basic subsistence was guaranteed. Politicians have proven unable to guide the country to a healthy democracy. Incompetence and corruption have led to deep mistrust of government, political parties, democracy itself. While appreciated by citizens, joining NATO and the European Union are not considered a major accomplishment, because ordinary people do not register significant improvements in their day-to-day life conditions as a result of these affiliations. The latest survey results for trust in the current government indicate that only five per cent of respondents consider the government competent to solve the problems facing the country. Only nine per cent consider Romania on the right course of development.¹ This lack of trust in government goes hand in hand with satisfaction or rather dissatisfaction with life conditions. Less than 20 per cent of Romanians interviewed for the *Life in Transition Survey II* consider themselves satisfied with their lives. It is notable that this figure has decreased since the last survey – in 2006, over 30 per cent of those interviewed considered themselves satisfied.² Further, surveys find that Romanians mistrust the institutions of state in general, while four fifths of respondents invest their trust in the Church.³

The early 1990s saw the development of a new and important, but rather timid, social actor. With a lot of external support, NGOs began to emerge. Human rights protection and the strengthening of democracy were among the first issues on the agenda of Romania's nascent civil society, and community development, service provision, education and entrepreneurship soon followed. As of 2011, 62,680 NGOs were registered in Romania, with approximately 40 per cent of them estimated as active.⁴ Judging by the number of

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¹ Romanian Institute for Social Studies, *National Survey*, July 2011.

² European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Life in Transition. After the Crisis* (London, EBRD 2011).

³ IMAS Marketing and Surveys, February 2011, as cited in *Adevarul*, 17 February 2011.

⁴ This estimate is based on the number of NGOs that submit their annual accounts to the Ministry of Finance; see *Romania 2010. Non-governmental Sector – Profile, Tendencies, Challenges* (Bucharest, Civil Society Development Foundation, 2010).

employees and the level of their income, NGOs acting in the area of education are the most active in Romania, while those acting in the areas of sports and entertainment are the most numerous.⁵ The *NGO Leaders Barometer 2010* indicates that 30 per cent of NGOs are involved in activities such as civic education for citizens, advocacy or watchdog activities.⁶

While Romanian civil society seems strong in numbers and diversity of action fields, it can be considered weak in terms of constituency. Only 3.35 per cent of the NGOs responding to the *NGO Leaders Barometer* survey indicate that they have more than 1,000 members, while most of them (49.6 per cent) have less than 10 members.⁷ As for volunteering, and while it has obviously increased in the last years, survey data indicates that only 3 per cent of respondents have volunteered for an NGO more than once. By contrast, some 15 per cent declare that they have volunteered more than once for Church or community organisations.⁸

Among different forms of participation, involvement of citizens in decision-making remains highly problematic as it depends to a great extent on the responsiveness of the state administration and its willingness to listen to the people they represent or nominally work for. Exacerbating the negative effects of the lack of responsiveness of the authorities is the distrust of citizens, their reluctance to get involved and even their lack of awareness of their rights. More or less successfully, NGOs are addressing both the political establishment, pushing for more transparency and accountability, and the citizens, encouraging their participation in decision-making processes. In the contemporary Romanian context, an important milestone was the enactment of legislation requiring transparency from public institutions and giving citizens the possibility to get involved in the decision-making process.

Romania is today among those countries that have a *Freedom of Information Act* (FOIA) and a special law dedicated to public consultation, known as the *sunshine law*. While FOIA covers almost all the institutions managing public funds, the *sunshine law* refers to "... authorities of the central and local public administration, elected or appointed, and also to other public institutions that use public financial resources".⁹ Technically, almost any authority, from City Hall, county or local councils, to government ministries and the Supreme Magistrate's Council, falls under the provisions of the *sunshine law*. However, important exceptions are the national government and the Parliament.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Civil Society Development Foundation, [NGO Leaders Barometer 2010](#) (Bucharest: Civil Society Development Foundation, 2010).

⁷ Civil Society Development Foundation, [Romania 2010. Non-governmental Sector – Profile, Tendencies, Challenges](#) (Bucharest: Civil Society Development Foundation, 2010), p. 84.

⁸ Ibid., p. 85.

⁹ Law 52/2003 regarding Transparency of Decision-making in Public Administration.

Existing legislation considers some of the standards of citizen participation established by international recommendations, such as the *Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation* of the Council of Europe or the *OECD Policy Brief – Engaging Citizens in Policy Making: Information, Consultation and Public Participation*.¹⁰

Hence, legislation acknowledged that information is an essential prerequisite for citizen participation and theoretically FOIA and some other legal provisions guarantee access to the information citizens need to be able to inform themselves about decision-making processes and their contents. For example, draft decisions must be made public by institutions several days prior to their adoption. Information on budgets and the structure of institutions, etc, is public and one can request almost any information related to or resulting from the activity of public institutions.

Consultation and active participation, the second and third prerequisites for public participation in policy-making, are also regulated by law.¹¹ Institutions have to provide a minimum of ten days to receive suggestions from the public on decisions to be taken, and are required to organise public debates on the draft decision at the request of any legally registered association. Further, citizens have the right to attend the meetings of the public authorities.¹² Other provisions mentioning the obligation to consult the citizens relate to local budgets, or to decisions concerning the business environment. Special legislation, following the *Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters*, also stipulates citizens' right to be consulted and informed in decision-making that affects the environment. The law provides detailed procedures for consulting the public, deadlines and means of information.¹³

At the regulatory level, therefore, public participation is both allowed and encouraged in Romania. Laws have established the principles underlying and the terms under which such consultation takes place. In practice however, and despite quite appropriate legislation, the number of consultations held and their level of effectiveness is rather poor, and by extension, so is the condition of participatory democracy. A report issued by the National Association of Citizens Advisory Bureaus (NACAB) shows that during 2008, an average of 285 citizens participated in an average of 14 local council meetings (organised by the 41 City Halls included in the survey). In 69 per cent of cases the citizens did not express their

¹⁰ Conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe, [Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process](#) (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2009); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, [Engaging Citizens in Policy-making: Information, Consultation and Public Participation](#), Public Management Policy Brief no .10 (Paris: OECD, 2001).

¹¹ Law 52/2003 regarding Transparency of Decision-making in Public Administration.

¹² Law 215/2001 regarding the Local Public Administration, Law 52/2003 regarding Transparency of Decision-making in Public Administration.

¹³ United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, [Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters](#) done at Aarhus, Denmark, on 25 June 1998.

opinions.¹⁴ Research published in 2007 shows that public meetings of the local councils are the most frequently used consultation method.¹⁵ It might be concluded that people do not care or do not have differing opinions on the decisions at stake, but it might equally be concluded that such public meetings are organised in ways that do not allow for or encourage citizens to provide input into the decisions being taken. The same NACAB report points to the weak use of available information and communication channels by the city authorities to inform citizens about such initiatives. Asked about the number of channels of communication with citizens they use, the same 41 City Halls (all of them in big cities) indicated a maximum of only three channels, including websites and newsletters.¹⁶

It is clear that legislation is a necessary condition for citizen participation, but the above also points to the fact that it is not a sufficient condition for ensuring quality consultation processes. The lack of political will on the part of the authorities to communicate proactively and in a genuine manner with the public, has generally led to formal consultations, organised too late in the decision-making process, in which ‘gate keepers’ always monopolise the central role and in which citizens inevitably have little real impact. Authorities treat legislation in this field as a formality. While authorities generally comply with FOIA (as a result of numerous projects implemented by NGOs), the *sunshine law* has no clear sanctions for non-compliance and is only randomly respected. The general rule is that when an authority has a stake in hiding information or in keeping a decision from public scrutiny, that institution finds ways not to make it available to the public.

This situation is also corroborated by empirical research. The *2010 Democracy Index* positions Romania 56th in its ranking of democracies worldwide. Romania is termed a ‘flawed democracy’, with respect for basic civil liberties guaranteed but with “... significant weaknesses in other aspects of democracy, including problems in governance, an underdeveloped political culture and low levels of political participation”.¹⁷

The attitude of the authorities described is only exacerbated by the broad lack of concern of citizens for the decisions being taken and by their general reluctance to get involved in decision-making processes. Experts and practitioners in the field explain this phenomenon in different ways: the effects of long years of dictatorship, which encouraged a culture of obedience and resulted in a general silence in relation to authorities and their actions and a lack of critical thinking and the requisite communication skills for active participation.

¹⁴ National Association of Citizens Advisory Bureaus, and the Resource Centre for Public Participation, [Political Representation, from Citizen to Local Councillor](#) (Bucharest: ANBCC/CeRe, 2010), p.24.

¹⁵ Resource Centre for Public Participation, [Public Participation in Romania, Reality or Fairy Tale?](#) (Bucharest: CeRe, 2007), p. 31.

¹⁶ National Association of Citizens Advisory Bureaus, and the Resource Centre for Public Participation, [Political Representation, from Citizen to Local Councillor](#) (Bucharest: ANBCC/CeRe, 2010), p.30.

¹⁷ The Economist Intelligence Unit, [Democracy Index 2010 – Democracy in retreat](#) (London: EIU, 2011).

Further, citizens do not necessarily feel responsible for the decisions being taken with a tendency towards a 'let the others do that' attitude. As part of the general distrust of the citizenry towards democracy, its institutions and the power-holders within it, the citizens do not trust that participation has the power to bring about change. Thus, the number of people considering democracy as preferable to any other system decreased to 43 per cent over the last 5 years.¹⁸

In this author's experience, of the forms of citizen participation that can be observed among those Romanians that get engaged, volunteering with clear and immediate results benefiting the volunteer and their immediate community (like cleaning a park, refurbishing a public space or repairing a bridge to name some examples) seem to be most preferred and more active citizens do not tend to get involved in actions seeking to affect governance.

Most public participation initiatives, regardless of their form, come from NGOs. In fields like service provision, human rights, civic education, environment and good governance, however, civil society action did not develop naturally, but rather as a result of the encouragement and financial support of external actors. This external impulse ruptured Romanian civil society's ties with its natural constituencies, as it favoured non-indigenous forms of engagement. Sidney Tarrow and Tsveta Petrova explain that Romania, among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, displays stronger transactional and relational activism – generated by NGOs – than activism generated by individuals and constituencies of citizens. Transactional activism is defined as “... ties – enduring and temporary – among organised non-state actors and between them and political parties, power-holders, and other institutions”.¹⁹ The same research argues that civil society in Central and Eastern Europe is more developed in terms of building relations with and influencing state institutions than in broadening space for citizen activism. This characteristic of transactional activism may be comforting, but it is important to acknowledge that the scarcity of individual activism can lessen civil society's impact and create mistrust between citizens and the NGOs claiming to represent them.

Some NGOs are more proactive in trying to be a channel for citizen participation and in advocating for public administration to become more open to them. These efforts take many different forms, and the case studies below provide some examples of the kinds of initiative that do exist. All three of them are local level NGO initiatives. Two of them aim at increasing public participation regardless of the issues addressed and the third is a coalition building and advocacy effort developed for and with a marginalised group of citizens. Two of

¹⁸ European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, [*Life in Transition. After the Crisis*](#) (London: EBRD, 2011), p. 43.

¹⁹ Tarrow, S., and Petrova, T., „[Transactional and Participatory Activism in the Emerging European Polity. The Puzzle of East-Central Europe](#),” in: *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 40, Number 1 (January 2007), pp. 74-94, p. 100.

the stories are related to the public decision making process at local level while the third describes a 'let's do it by ourselves' initiative.

Case study I: Turning residents into a community in Bucharest's *Favorit* district

In Romania, one of the favoured ways in which NGOs have attempted to stimulate public participation and build activism has been community organising. The principles of this approach are used by the Resource Centre for Public Participation (CeRe) to challenge the apathy of citizens in Bucharest and to unleash their energy for citizen activism.²⁰ This case study is the story of one of the groups formed and assisted by CeRe through its Community Organising Programme – the Citizens Group *Initiativa Favorit*. It covers the group's development and activities, as well as the approach used by CeRe, the supporting organisation. *Initiativa Favorit's* story is as yet on-going, though, and CeRe continues to support it to develop, take over public issues and elevate them onto the political agenda; in other words, until it becomes sustainable.

As in other big cities, people in Bucharest lack a sense of community and rarely associate around common issues. In its community organizing work, CeRe decided to act in a few selected neighbourhoods, one of which is called Favorit. It is a typical neighbourhood for Bucharest, inhabited by middle-income people of all ages, mostly economically active and with busy lifestyles. The physical environment of the neighbourhood, comprising huge blocks of flats and few public spaces, is not favourable to communication among neighbours and collective action.

The area has between 3,000 and 4,000 inhabitants. It is part of the District VI with public services being provided by the District Hall and by City Hall.²¹ Communication between the citizens and the public administration here follows the same pattern described earlier: no permanent channels of communication exist other than a website of average quality. As a result, people do not usually take part in local council meetings, they do not initiate collective action, and local administration does not consult people in taking public decisions.

Before *Initiativa Favorit* was formed one of the community organisers active in the neighbourhood went door to door to discuss with a sample of some 120 inhabitants, asking about the problems they face and the improvements they would like to see, about how they saw their role as citizens and about what the role of public authorities should be. This

²⁰ The [Resource Centre for Public Participation \(CeRe\)](#) is a Romanian NGO whose mission is to act so that public decisions meet the needs and desires of social actors. CeRe provides support to NGOs and citizens' groups in their advocacy campaigns.

²¹ Bucharest has six districts. Each is managed separately by a Local Council and a Mayor, in addition to the central city administration (General Local Council and Mayor). Responsibilities for providing services are divided between both levels.

'listening' phase had a two-fold purpose – to learn about the neighbourhood and to identify potential leaders for *Iniciativa Favorit*. The main problems identified during this stage were a lack of parking spaces, street dogs, neglected green spaces, and the situation of the derelict Cinema Favorit which, although a much loved symbol of the neighbourhood, had become degraded and potentially a hazard. For many of the locals it was a shame that the place where they watched their first movie, the cinema of their childhood, the place they brought their first date to and the meeting point of their youth had fallen into such disrepair.

When the citizens' group first met, the community organiser shared the list of problems she discovered during the listening phase, and facilitated a discussion about those problems, validating her list and learning more about how people felt about each of them. The locals involved discussed each problem and collectively decided to begin the work of *Iniciativa Favorit* with reclaiming the Cinema Favorit for the benefit of the community. They defined their aim as to convince the local administration to refurbish the old building and to give it back to community as a cultural centre with a functioning cinema, library, space for gatherings and other events. The broader community confirmed this choice of initiative at a large event organised for all community members by *Iniciativa Favorit*. Judging by the broad attendance and endorsement obtained, *Iniciativa Favorit* felt confirmed in its choice of the cinema as a cause worth fighting for. This was an important step for a new citizen's initiative. It is a key element in community organising to get the legitimacy of the local community for actions conducted on their behalf.

Iniciativa Favorit is a small group of local people assisted by a community organiser. The first members of the group were identified through the listening phase of the initiative and invited to be part of an initiative group. The community organiser explained the opportunity to those that demonstrated interest, met with them separately in one-on-one meetings and then brought them together to discuss next steps more concretely. The first core group included seven people – some young, some retired, mostly women, all of them concerned citizens. During the process, some persons withdrew, and others joined. To this day, the group's membership fluctuates.

As mentioned above, the first meeting of *Iniciativa Favorit* decided to persuade the local authorities to refurbish the old cinema and to give it back to the local community. The most tedious and difficult step in the groups' campaign was getting enough information to design an effective strategy. The group had to struggle with complicated administrative procedures only to find out who owned the building and what the responsibilities of the local administration were in its regard. They were sent from one institution to another, receiving ambiguous and contradictory information, and had to use legal leverage to convince the administration to provide the information they needed. The process of developing the strategy was also challenging. The group did not have a very clear plan from the beginning

and a vision about their actions. To begin with, they decided on their next steps after each activity and after each response or non-response from the authorities.

The group also worked on legitimating their campaign, seeking the support of the wider community of neighbours. A first event was organised in August 2010 – ‘Favorit Awakens’ – to bring citizens together around the initiative to reclaim the cinema. The event was organised in front of the building and replicated those activities planned for the cinema once fully restored (library, senior’s corner, theatre and so on). The group further explained their ideas to the citizens, consulted them about what should happen to the cinema and asked them to sign a petition, collecting no less than 300 signatures and enlisting new volunteers for future activities. The authorities were also invited, and some of them even came to the event, including a Member of Parliament and two local councillors, who publicly stated their support to *Initiativa Favorit*.

However, a few months later the Mayor of the 6th District of Bucharest organised a press conference in front of the cinema presenting his plans for a future European Cultural ‘Mall’ to be established on the premises. *Initiativa Favorit* was invited to attend but not given the opportunity to speak. City Hall basically hijacked the initiative. *Initiativa Favorit* requested the opportunity to be involved in designing the new centre, but for several months after the official announcement nothing happened. The group’s petition went unanswered and no action was taken by the Mayor’s office. In May 2011, the group decided it was time to act. A second public event, this time a photo exhibition in front of the cinema, was organised. High school students took pictures during a photovoice process, with seven young amateur photographers – new members of *Initiativa Favorit* – participating in a two-month photo documentation process, meeting weekly to discuss and select images. The pictures were testimony to the degradation of the building and its surroundings. For each of the pictures selected to be shown in the exhibition, messages were crafted by the photographers to portray the accelerating decay of the cinema and its surroundings.

The exhibition was a new way to challenge the authorities, to show that the people wanted their cinema back and to demand that promises made would be kept. At the event, a set of recommendations was addressed to the local councillors and to the Mayor. The Mayor did not attend, but few local councillors and some of the Mayor’s staff did, and were confronted by citizens during the event. These pushed for clear answers about what would happen and when. People attending the event signed a new petition and wrote messages to the Mayor and the Local Council on postcards replicating the photographs exhibited. Later on, members of the group collected 1,000 further signatures in support of the plan to refurbish the cinema.

Iniciativa Favorit attended the next Local Council meeting at which it handed over the petition to the Mayor along with the signatures collected, 75 postcards with personal messages, and a few of the pictures exhibited. At first they received no clear answer from the Mayor, but finally they were informed that money had been allocated for a feasibility study and a technical plan for the refurbishment of the building to be made. After a year, the campaign led by the *Iniciativa Favorit* had its first clear success, and while the cinema has not yet been transformed into the community cultural centre the group wants, the first step in that direction has been taken. The group continues to work on persuading the administration to consider their recommendations about what such a community facility should offer in terms of services and public spaces and concerning the use and functionality of the building.

Iniciativa Favorit is a citizens' group formed and supported by CeRe, as part of its Community Organising Programme. CeRe's intervention followed the classical community organising approach comprising three steps: listening, documenting and acting. The listening phase consisted in door-to-door interviews in the neighbourhood, and culminated in the formation of the core group. A vital ingredient in a community organising process is consultation with and mobilisation of as many people as possible. Encouraged by the organiser, the core group organised a neighbourhood meeting to discuss key community issues and to select some that could be the initial priorities of the initiative. The community organiser helped the group to plan and prepare for the meeting, but resisted pressure to lead the process of engagement with the citizens. Since that first meeting, the community organiser has helped the core group to strategize, to document, to make further plans and to act. She supported the core group in developing its working practices and rules of engagement, and to build up their sense of ownership for the project, a common identity and their teamwork.

An important aspect of the support provided was the constant encouragement the core group received, especially whenever it seemed like the communication with the administration or engaging other people from the neighbourhood was not working. It was a challenge for the organiser to convince the group that they have the right to make demands of their elected representatives, and that there are other ways to do so than sending in petitions. Another very practical form of support was the information and training on citizens' rights (such as demanding information of public interest or participating in meetings of the local council), about teamwork, communication, advocacy and strategic planning provided. The group was also exposed to the activities of other civic groups and NGOs, as a way of showing them what they could do and achieve for their neighbourhood. Other members of CeRe stepped in and helped with specific aspects of the work being done. This helped the group to understand that CeRe, as an organisation, and not just the community organiser, stood behind their action and supported them.

The most important obstacles faced by *Iniativa Favorit* related to communication with the local administration – in making their demands for the refurbishment of the cinema and in getting information from the administration. Being sent back and forth by different public institutions challenged the group's courage and diminished their trust in their ability to produce change. The lack of openness of the local authorities, their empty promises, the ambiguous information they provided or their concealment of information requested only exacerbated the general sense of distrust that exists among ordinary people for such endeavours. It took much effort for the community organiser to convince the group to continue in the face of adversity and to think of new ways to communicate with the local administration.

Another set of obstacles related to the availability of the members of the group themselves for being involved and their capacity to lead the initiative. People have lives and jobs, and it is difficult for many of them to dedicate the time required by such activities. At the same time, while they may be able to take responsibility for specific tasks, they are less willing to coordinate and to lead. Few of the group's members had leadership skills, with the vision and the strategic thinking necessary to plan group's activities. Oftentimes, people refused to step forward and to assume leadership responsibilities. Fortunately, the group dynamic is very positive, and the group has managed to work together smoothly.

Another obstacle the group encountered was the unwillingness of the neighbours, to invest their time and energy, and to get involved in the group and participate in planning and organising actions. Even though the group was successful in gathering large numbers of people at their public events, it was harder for them to involve some of those people over the long term.

In an environment such as that of a Bucharest neighbourhood, where people usually do not get involved in collective action and do not challenge the authorities in any way, a group such as *Iniativa Favorit* can alter, and in this case has altered, the *status quo*. Before this initiative, there were people living in the area that had the potential to act as citizens but did nothing. Now, there is a small group that is aware of its power, has new civic skills and acts in unity towards the local administration. Through this group, the neighbourhood has gained an advocate to challenge the balance of power, to remind the authorities of their responsibilities, to bring new issues onto the political agenda, and to show that the residents of the neighbourhood care about what is happening to it.

In the short term, an important outcome is the decision of the local administration to commission a feasibility study for the rehabilitation of the cinema, although this does not yet seem like a real result for the residents of the neighbourhood. Only once they get their

cinema back, will they feel that they have succeeded. Hopefully, this will encourage them and strengthen their confidence in their ability to influence governance. The cinema will also be testimony to the fact that if citizens work hard enough, they can bring about change. While in and of itself, *Initiativa Favorit* is just a beginning, a critical mass of such initiatives over the long run can be expected to change the tendency of decision-makers to ignore citizens on whose behalf they make decisions. If numerous groups ask for information or demand to participate in local council meetings, important changes in the ways decisions are made should be possible.

The story of *Initiativa Favorit* is a good example of how to effectively address the distrust of citizens, their lack of participation and the opacity of local administration. How to transform disappointment into action is a recurrent question for CeRe. One possible answer is to go grassroots and to work one-to-one with people, coaching each of them, and then all of them as a group, to act. It is a thorough approach, taking much time and persistence, and one of the lessons drawn from this experience of community organising is that one has to be prepared for long-term intervention.

Finally, an important conclusion is that one needs to be very balanced to do this work: to push people enough for action but not as much as to usurp a leadership position. There are key moments when a group such as *Initiativa Favorit* needs to be pushed – these are moments when the group is stuck because of disappointment and paralysis. The inhibitions of people and groups emanating from the experience of authoritarianism and conformity have to be challenged, but this also has to be done gently, and without the risk that the challenger will take up a position of power that basically does not belong to them. A community organiser taking over a leadership position might bring some great results in the short term, for a particular campaign for example, but it would be disastrous in the long run. It would create dependency instead of empowerment. Building local leadership is a milestone. People in the neighbourhood taking the lead, planning, coordinating, inspiring other people are key achievements. Finding leaders – those that would open the group up to the larger community and not act as gatekeepers – is the challenge.

Case study II: A partnership to make Alba more accessible for all

One of the ways, in which civil society engages in the decision-making process, is through coalition building and advocacy. Gathering supporters in coalitions, NGOs build public awareness, get media support for social problems and use this energy to advocate for their issues. Even though this is not a traditional participation method in Romania, a fair share of good examples of functional coalitions can be found in the country. Working both at national and local level they are most active in the field of social services, human rights, Roma minority issues and environmental issues. Sometimes *ad hoc* or campaign-based

coalitions are built to address urgent causes. This case study describes efforts to build a local coalition to advocate for better access to public spaces for people with disabilities in the city of Alba Iulia, an average size town in Central Romania. The focus here is on the strategy of the local campaign, which was a partnership oriented advocacy approach.

Alba Iulia has approximately 70,000 inhabitants. Official statistics indicate that there are 200 registered NGOs, but it is likely that no more than 30 are really active. A wide range of issues and fields are covered by civil society in Alba Iulia, from working with disadvantaged groups to promoting education, culture or environmental issues.

After 1990, national and international NGOs started to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. International pressure for Romania to comply with international standards was felt once it became a signatory to relevant international agreements and conventions. It has taken some time for public institutions to comply, and NGOs have actively engaged in advocating for compliance and monitoring the government's actions in this field. In Alba Iulia, an organisation called *SM Speromax Alba* took the lead in making sure that people with disabilities have proper access to public spaces.

Romania is a very unfriendly environment for the disabled, and the city of Alba Iulia was no exception. Even though the Romanian Government adopted laws to make sure proper access is guaranteed, the way these laws are applied at the local level has been problematic. Whether buildings of public institutions, transport (e.g. buses), public utility providers and schools, access for people with disabilities is problematic. Most buildings do not have access ramps for wheelchair users, or if ramps exist they are not properly inclined. Public offices are often located in multiple-floor buildings without elevators, and service counters tend to be out of reach for wheelchair users. Access to public buildings and spaces is denied to people with dogs, including dogs assisting visually impaired persons. And even if access to public spaces is, at least in theory, regulated by law, access to private spaces – such as a block of flats – is not even considered. As a result, many disabled people live their lives in their homes, some have never left their building, and very few can work to earn their living. This lack of access to public life was named and framed in this campaign as a form of discrimination against people with disabilities that leads to isolation and exclusion.

SM Speromax Alba is an organisation of people with Multiple Sclerosis.²² Its members are no strangers to the problems mentioned above, as many use wheelchairs or have other special needs that are not considered by the public sphere. The organisation has regularly had difficulty to find suitably accessible venues for its events with beneficiaries and partners.

²² For more information, see the [Speromax](#) website.

As part of their campaign to raise awareness of the problems of accessibility to public spaces and buildings for disabled people, *SM Speromax Alba* organised a study to measure access for the disabled in approximately 30 buildings including schools, hospital, doctors' practices, City Hall, pharmacies, health insurance offices, local police, labour offices, electricity suppliers, and others. This research checked the existence of access ramps and their proper inclination and the height of counters among other aspects of accessibility. The study showed that there are a large number of buildings and spaces that do not offer proper access for people in wheelchairs, and that none of the means of public transport were accessible for people in wheelchairs. Similar problems pertain to offices of the central administration, while only 10 per cent of the public doctors' offices and a similar share of public order offices were accessible for the disabled.

Adding to these problems of accessibility and the unwillingness of public institutions to improve the situation, disabled citizens face widespread insensitiveness regarding their problems in the broader community. Very few people have any idea how radically their lives would change if they had to use a wheelchair. The problems faced by people with disabilities are largely invisible to other citizens and the authorities. Generally, it is NGOs who work with such invisible problems, aim to create awareness and, if successful, bring them to the political agenda.

SM Speromax Alba is a local organisation established mostly by Multiple Sclerosis (MS) patients in 2007. From 14 members initially, the organisation has grown to 120 members and is part of a national network – the Romanian Multiple Sclerosis Society.²³ Its mission is to work to increase the quality of life of people affected by MS, to advocate for people with MS, and to provide information and counselling to members and others affected. One of the most important dimensions of its work is to create awareness in the community and among medical practitioners regarding MS.

This particular campaign was not specifically related to MS but addressed the broader lack of access of disabled people to public spaces. The goal defined by the group was to create awareness among the local community and among public institutions regarding the large number of citizens living in the city of Alba Iulia and the surrounding Alba County that are *de facto* denied access to public spaces.²⁴ The final expected result was that the public administration and related institutions would be pushed to comply with current legislation on accessibility and to create a mechanism to oblige building managers to build ramps and other means of access. The campaign framed its demands in terms of discrimination against

²³ See the Internet presentation of the [Romanian Multiple Sclerosis Society](#).

²⁴ Official statistics indicate that there are 17,945 people living in Alba County with disabilities. These figures include all manner of disabilities, including those that do not impair the person's mobility. The total population of Alba County is 382,747. This indicates that 4,7 per cent of inhabitants is registered as having some form of disability.

people with disabilities and their isolation resulting from not having access to essential services. The idea was to get the issue on the public agenda.

The campaign organisers were sceptical if an upfront campaign to target institutions could succeed without prior public awareness and support for the issue. Therefore, the first step was to build a coalition, which was given the name 'Accessibility for Alba'. The idea was that the coalition should include NGOs as well as public institutions. In April and May 2010, ten NGOs agreed to join the coalition. Not all of these work on social issues but nevertheless consider the issue relevant for their city.²⁵ Two public institutions also agreed to participate: the General Office for Social Assistance and Child Protection and the Office for Public Health, while City Hall offered its honorary patronage to the campaign. Moreover, four private businesses offered their support. It took a further two months to agree on the charter of the coalition, but that time was considered worth the investment as the coalition was to last beyond this particular campaign.

The approach taken by the campaign was 'public administration friendly'. Although the issue of access resulted from a lack of responsibility among public authorities in providing for citizens with special needs, the organisers felt that they had more to gain if they involved state institutions as partners rather than approaching them as adversaries.

The campaign paid much attention to raising public awareness for the problem of accessibility in Alba and, therefore, focused a lot on getting media coverage. Its first attempt to attract media attention immediately followed the creation of the coalition, when it publicly presented its mission statement. Media interest was high, and journalists regularly sought stories about the lack of access of citizens. An important moment of the campaign was participation in the People with Disabilities' March, an event gathering 500 participants to raise awareness in the general public about what it is like to live with a disability. The campaign used its study on the accessibility of public spaces to inform authorities about what needed to be improved in their buildings, and which institutions respected, or failed to respect, the relevant laws. At a press conference in June 2010, at which the report was presented, the Vice Mayor publicly promised that the local authority would not release building permits unless standards for the access of disabled people were respected.

As mentioned, the strategy that the group decided for was partnership oriented. The organisers decided not to confront or point fingers, but only to release the facts and figures of the accessibility problem in Alba as reported in the study. The only attempt to directly

²⁵ Organisations included the Association Philanthropic Orthodoxy, Pro Youth, Support the Children, The Rotary Club, The Students League, Medical Express, The Society of Neuro-psychic Disabled, Diakonia Mutual Support Society, and the National Society of Physically Disabled.

approach an institution and to make clear recommendations was a petition to the County Social Inspectorate, a body that was soon closed down due to budget cuts.

Speromax was supported in this endeavour by CeRe through its advocacy assistance programme. It targets relatively small organisations, working at the local level, willing to develop and practice advocacy skills. Within this programme, *Speromax* received training on advocacy, public and media relations. In addition, tailored assistance was delivered to the coalition to help them shape their messages, strategize, organise events, and publish materials. Two members of *Speromax* participated in training seminars during which they learned how to develop a campaign strategy, to approach their targets, to craft their messages and to work with the media and with other NGOs. Throughout the entire campaign, CeRe's team visited the organisers and helped them evaluate progress and decide on new tactics. In terms of learning, *Speromax* also got to exchange experience with the other NGOs benefiting from the same programme, and it received modest financial support to cover direct expenses related to the campaign.

More valuable than this external support, however, was the support *Speromax* received from its local partners. One of the most important lessons learned from this experience concerns the value of working in a coalition and having trustworthy and committed partners. Asked about that, the group said that the one item that could have been improved was to have an even broader partnership base, especially among the media.

The most important obstacle mentioned by the campaigners was the closure of the County Social Inspectorate. The organisers had identified that institution as responsible for making sure that laws guaranteeing access for citizens with disabilities were respected. The coalition petitioned the County Social Inspectorate during the campaign but, before receiving a response, the institution was closed down. As of the time of writing, no other public institution has taken over the role of the Inspectorate, thus leaving the campaign without one of its main targets and interlocutors.

That said the campaign generated some important results. One of its main objectives was to ensure better access to public spaces for people with disabilities. As a result of the campaign, 42 buses have been equipped for wheelchair access and the bus stations have been fitted out with sound systems so that the visually impaired can receive information. The endorsement by City Hall and the promises of the Vice Mayor resulted in the accessibility of almost all newly built or refurbished parks and recreational areas. Nonetheless, the campaigners are far from satisfied. Many of the buildings covered in the study have still not been improved so that their accessibility is better. For this reason, the campaign continues and *Speromax* is now preparing a new report on the accessibility of public buildings. This study will provide the basis for a next round of awareness raising

activities, targeting high school students through discussion rounds on accessibility, among others. Although hard to measure, the campaign is thought to have created more awareness of the problem of accessibility among the wider public and among local authorities. Judging by the considerable media response and coverage, in particular, it is safe to conclude that the 'invisible' has become more visible in Alba.

An aspect worth highlighting is the partnership orientation of this campaign, which could have taken a much more confrontational approach, given the lack of accountability on the part of the responsible institutions. The reasons for this decision by the lead organisation are interesting. In part, they relate to a general reluctance among most Romanians to confront authorities, or as the old Romanian proverb goes: "The sword will not cut the head kept down". Another reason is that the campaigners themselves were, and still are, convinced that partnership with local authorities is more likely to lead to success than aggressive finger pointing. Finally, this approach might also reflect the unequal power relations between civil society and the authorities. A party that considers itself lacking in power or less powerful than their counterpart would sooner negotiate a partnership than enter into a confrontation they think they cannot win.

In sum, and looking at the bigger picture of citizen participation at the local level, this coalition-building exercise has created a strong advocacy voice on behalf of a large group of disadvantaged and disenfranchised citizens. The lead organisation and its partners improved their participation skills through learning by doing, and a coalition has emerged, scoring first successes that are likely to fuel its civic courage and conviction. In Alba, then, it seems that some foundations for future local participation have been laid.

Case study III: A day care centre as a catalyst for community-building in rural Romania

Public participation at the local level not only involves participation in decision-making processes, but is also fostered by direct citizen involvement in and contributions to the common welfare. Formal or informal groups typically feel they have two options: one is to advocate for the public institutions to deliver what they are responsible for and another is to make their own contribution to development or welfare, delivering it to their community by themselves. The first option might be more empowering for people and might create more sustainable change, but the latter can also succeed and offer those involved great satisfaction. In the following case study a local organisation chose the second option and decided to make its own contribution to the development of its community. It is the story of a how a village organisation succeeded in transforming a small public participation project into the foundations for a sustainable and lasting process of participatory community development.

Tiganesti in Teleorman County is a village in the South of Romania with less than 6,000 inhabitants. Relatively privileged by being close to a small town, the unemployment rate is below average, leading to an above average standard of living as compared to the general situation in rural areas across Romania. Nevertheless, most of its inhabitants earn their living from small-scale farming. As elsewhere in Romania before the economic crisis hit in 2008, many inhabitants temporarily left Tiganesti and went to work in Western Europe, leaving their children in the care of older relatives.

The Association for Education and Community Development (AEDC) was established in 2004 by a woman working at the local kindergarten and her family. In setting up the organisation she received the support of her daughter, a young professional working in Bucharest who had already been exposed to the nongovernmental sector. Her motivation for establishing the organisation was the lack of personal development opportunities available to children in the village.

No other non-governmental organisations existed in Tiganesti, yet the rural setting of their community was an advantage for building relationships of mutual support among people. It is commonly thought that community relations are easier to set up and work with in rural areas because of stronger ties between members of the community. At the same time, it is more common there for people to be envious and distrustful of neighbours. An old Romanian proverb, often used to describe the traditional rural mentality of people living in villages like Tiganesti, says: “My neighbour’s goat should die too” (or literally “If I can’t have it, then neither can you”).

The Association for Education and Community Development started as a small family association. Thus, the first issues they decided to address were identified based on the professional and personal experience of its initiator. Being a kindergarten educator, Mrs. Tudorache was deeply aware that a large number of children coming from single parent families, and/or from deprived families, faced an acute lack of extracurricular activities, few educational tools in the kindergarten and other deficits. Besides access to formal education, no other educational opportunities were available to children in Tiganesti. Thus, the first goal of the association was to gather resources to start a day care centre where the village children could engage in additional educational and leisure time activities during the summer months. Discussions with parents and the children’s caregivers revealed consensus that such a centre would be a great opportunity for them and for the children.

The approach embraced by the group was partnership-oriented, in that all actors in the community were considered as potential contributors to the development of the day care centre: the local school by providing premises to house the centre; parents by volunteering to help refurbish these premises; and educators and teachers by volunteering to conduct

activities with the children. Many new members joined the association. Some of them had a direct stake in the project, such as parents and teachers, while others joined because they understood that through their involvement in such a project, they could help to advance their community.

This initially small family initiative has, since its beginnings in 2004, grown into what is now a well established organisation and member of a national network, disposing of paid staff, benefiting from a variety of funding sources, involving many volunteers and broadening its scope of work considerably.

To begin with, AEDC developed a project entitled 'Extracurricular Club for Children'. It was an effort to gather resources to complement the public formal educational provision available to children. The Club was to accommodate 30 of the community's children, aged four to ten years. Activities ranged from education to entertainment. The children involved were from low-income families, or from families having other difficulties or challenges, such as large families with many children, single parent families, or families where the parents migrated to find work and left their children in the care of elder relatives. In addition, AEDC developed activities to promote itself and the community and to raise funds accordingly.

Two rooms were provided by the local school to house the day care centre. The first big activity was to refurbish and properly equip the centre. 17 volunteers, members of the organisation, beneficiaries, and some people sent by the local administration, refurbished the space provided. In order to make sure that the group gained the support of the local community, a committee was formed to advise and assist the activities of the newly established centre. The committee included the principal of the school, the vice-mayor, one teacher and five parents. 30 children were selected to participate in the activities of the centre, which met three times a week during the summer. The children learnt English, took computer lessons, and participated in different activities from dancing to singing and painting. To promote the project and itself as a community organisation, AEDC organised a public event that also served to raise funds from the local community, resulting in some 100 Euros received for the activities in the centre.

Beyond the benefits for the children using the centre, this project was a way to gather the local community around a common problem and for the community to 'learn' to come together and try to resolve its problems or address its needs using local resources. Teachers, parents, educators, and other members of the local community were able to contribute to a community development process by investing their time and intangible resources (such as their knowledge and skills) and at the same time to solve a local problem and ensure services not otherwise provided by the local authorities.

With this project, AEDC was part of the first group of beneficiaries of the 'Learning, Participation, Trust' Programme for Developing Community-Based Organisations in South Romania, administered the Partnership for Community Action and Transformation Foundation (PACT), which is a community development organisation located in Bucharest with activities in South Romania.²⁶ At the time it partnered with the Romanian Association for Community Development (ARDC). The programme was meant to support the development of small organisations, legally established NGOs and informal groups, by offering a combination of training, on site assistance and small seed funding to local initiatives. Two members of AEDC participated in trainings, learning how to identify, analyse and prioritise community needs, plan a (community) project, develop and write a project proposal, implement and manage that project, raise funds for their activities locally, make the organisation visible in the community (organizational communication), actively initiate partnerships and collaborate with relevant local actors, and create constructive relationships with local public authorities, with a view to advocating for common welfare and good governance. AEDC received support from PACT in the various steps it had to take in the direction of 'Learning, Participation, Trust', and eventually a small grant of approximately 1,000 Euros to implement the Children's Club project. PACT consultants travelled to Tiganesti to advise the organisation as needed and to monitor their activities.

Being an experiential learning programme, focusing on 'learning by doing' rather than a regular funding programme, the ultimate aim of 'Learning, Participation, Trust' was to ensure the sustainable development of local organisations that would become able to make a difference in their communities. Active participation of the community members in solving local problems was an important principle of its support. PACT further supported AEDC, by involving it as a partner in different projects. AEDC thus came to diversify its activities, building a community business plan, mentoring new community groups to follow its development example and to become community based organisations, developing their own facilities and community project competitions for others, promoting their activity locally and nationally, advising local public administration on good governance issues, advocating for good governance and so on.

The main obstacle encountered by AEDC in their project was the lack of responsiveness of the principal of the kindergarten when asked to provide a space for the day care centre. It was difficult and also disappointing for the group to understand this refusal, especially as the kindergarten would also have benefited. AEDC decided to turn to a different institution to help and, thus, the principal of the school agreed to offer the space needed. As the group's priority was to get the needed space, they saw no point in challenging the kindergarten. It might not be the case of this particular story, but it is noteworthy that more often than not it is easier for people to solve community problems by themselves than to

²⁶ For more detail, see the Internet presence of the [PACT Foundation](#).

challenge institutions to contribute. After a first refusal, it is common for such project carriers to give up or look for and find different ways to solve the problem.

An equally important obstacle was encountered in gathering community support and volunteers. It took a lot of effort for AEDC to convince others to join in. AEDC members' own example was a catalyst for some of the others to get involved; yet others had to overcome their own scepticism and lack of trust in civil society. And there was the collective mentality they had to confront, as reflected in the statement of one volunteer: "I have been volunteering here for a long time now and I am very well aware of what this organisation is doing. Still, I have preferred not to say that to others because they would have said I was stupid".

The most visible results in the short term were those that the project produced immediately: children got to participate in extracurricular activities during the summer time; they improved their skills, socialised, and visited new places; and they participated in activities that their families would not have been able to provide or afford otherwise. No less importantly, a refurbished space available to the local community was a concrete product of this particular project. In addition, the project helped to improve the relationship between parents and the local school, as one of the members of the organisation (a teacher) observed: "People used to see the teachers as being somewhere above them, and the idea of parents and teachers working together was not welcomed. After the club opened, the parents got closer, some of the mothers are helping, and their attitude towards the school has changed."

But most importantly, a small organisation managed to produce a model of participation that demonstrates that local citizens can solve local problems and contribute to the development of their community – what was expected to be done 'by others' was done by the citizens themselves.

By overcoming citizens' reluctance to volunteer and to participate, AEDC overcame an important barrier for a long-term community development process. Thus, besides a new facility for children, this small community gained an important new social actor – citizens willing to get involved in solving common problems. While the organisation started with three founding members, by the end of the project there were about 20 volunteers involved in its work.

The development of the group itself is an important outcome of this start-up project. One of the founding members said: "We have made such a long journey. We had not even thought about going so far".²⁷ From very humble beginnings, AEDC has evolved into a large

²⁷ Interview with Nicula Tudorache.

organisation, well known in their community and neighbouring villages, part of a national network, having an office, permanent staff, many volunteers, and a variety of funding sources. Huge progress has been made in terms of activities as well. It started with projects for children and has now expanded to include activities on many other community issues: environment, education, youth, and local governance (including the provision of counselling services to local public authorities in Teleorman County, to which their village and commune belongs). A very good relationship has developed with the local public administration and other community players, and the reach of AEDC projects is now far beyond the confines of the village.

People living in rural areas of Romania are disadvantaged because of limited economic opportunities, poor infrastructure and non-existent or low quality public services. With the recent economic crisis, local authorities have been left with minimal budgets and have become even less capable of addressing current problems in their localities. Therefore, the vulnerability of rural areas is increasing. In such deprived environments, one needs to find creative ways to solve local problems – such as mobilising local resources and volunteer work to solve pressing issues in the community. Work such as that of AEDC is a way for people to respond to such challenges and also an opportunity for them to get involved in their community.

If comparing different approaches to citizen participation, one can understand projects such as AEDC's as participation through direct contribution of the citizens to community welfare. People put together their resources, decide where and how to invest them and bring about change in their community. As a particular product of community development, community-based organisations, such as AEDC, are a vehicle for long-term citizen involvement. Besides the citizens' contribution, the organisation also provides space for citizens to practice decision-making as members of the community are most often those who decide on which projects will be implemented and how. People thus do feel they have the power to change the future of their community.

Citizen Campaigns in Slovakia: From National Politics to Local Community Participation

Kajo Zbořil

As in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, civil society and the non-profit sector in Slovakia have changed dramatically since 1989, when the Communist Party's monopoly on power was broken by the Velvet Revolution and Czechoslovakia started its slow transformation into a democratic state. Before 1989 civil society may have existed, but its role was reduced to the organisation of leisure-time activities and it was expected not to interfere in issues considered conflictual by the authorities.

Since then the situation has changed considerably, mainly as a result of the introduction of freedom of speech and freedom of association. Vaclav Havel, an opponent of the Communist regime and dissident, was elected President of Czechoslovakia in December 1989 by the Communist Party-controlled Parliament. The first free elections took place in 1990, which led to the formation of a democratic government. Censorship was abolished, new media were established and people gained free access to independent information. The legislative framework for civil society was established and many non-governmental, not-for-profit organisations were created or revived activities after periods of dormancy. These organisations focused on addressing environmental or social problems, improving the situation in schools and health care centres, developing communities, providing care and activities for young and elderly people and providing support to the vulnerable. Organisations whose main aim is building a pluralistic and democratic society also emerged.

In the Czechoslovakia of the early 1990s nationalism, which had been suppressed during Communism, reappeared and became an issue once again. The nationalistic disputes between Czechs and Slovaks were, however, peaceful and resulted in the dissolution of Czechoslovakia and the establishment of two independent democratic states in January 1993 – the Czech and the Slovak Republics. The dissolution of Czechoslovakia was decided by two main political actors on the basis of intense negotiations with each other, but without consulting the population in a referendum.

With independence, populist Vladimír Mečiar, the leader of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (*Hnutie za demokraticke Slovensko*, HZDS), who was to serve as Slovakia's prime minister three times, exhibited increasingly authoritarian behaviour and pursued a policy of complete control over the state. The period from 1993 and 1998 during which Mečiar was in power was known as 'illiberal democracy'.¹ During this time, Slovakia displayed an

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institutionalised pattern of politics that was deficient in democratic standards, human rights, and the rule of law and that was inconsistent with international norms. Thus, Slovakia was not considered for membership in either the European Union (EU) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). In 1997, during NATO's first post-Cold War round of enlargement, Slovakia was not invited to join, while the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland were. These countries became members of NATO in 1999, whereas Slovakia was only in a position to join in 2004.

This period of the history of the independent Slovakia was characterised by a lack of transparency on the part of the government, a lack of foreign investment, isolation from the international community, the active surveillance of independent media, NGOs and religious communities, the misuse of the intelligence services for improper purposes, and illegal activities, including the kidnapping of the son of then-President Michal Kovač.

The situation for non-governmental organisations also got worse during the Mečiar era. The nationalistic government blamed non-governmental organisations and their leaders for being 'against Slovakia's independence'. From one perspective this could be considered true. Public opinion polls held at the time showed only minimal support for the nationalistic ideas promoting the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. NGO leaders were accused of receiving money from foreign donors to continue their activities in opposition to the government and the 'independent Slovakia'. In response to independent NGO criticism of the political establishment and in an attempt to sideline the Gremium of the Third Sector (a transparently elected platform of representatives of independent NGOs, also known as G3S) the government created a network of pro-government NGOs and NGO platforms.

The aim of G3S was to develop partner relationships and coordination between representatives of the government, self-governments, the business sector and trade unions, as well as with national and international organisations. It was established in 1995 as a multi-member representative platform, and it organised annual cooperation conferences for the NGO sector in Slovakia, known as the 'Stupava Conferences'. The main tasks of G3S were to represent and pursue the interests of NGOs, to initiate public debates and advocacy campaigns, formulate common positions and issue common statements of the NGO sector, enter into cooperation agreements with other sectors, explain and popularise the role of the NGO sector, coordinate information and service activities for NGOs.² In the mid-1990's, Mečiar's government stepped up control over civic activities by passing new and more

¹ This misrule led Madeleine Albright, the then-U.S. Secretary of State, to call Slovakia a "black hole in the heart of Europe".

² Marček, E., "[Dialogue Between the Government and Civil Society in Slovakia](#)", originally published in Polish as: „Dialog między władzą i organizacjami pozarządowymi na Słowacji – lata 1992–2008, in: Makowski G., and Schimanek T. (eds), [Organizacje pozarządowe i władza publiczna. Drogi do partnerstwa](#) [Non-governmental Organisations and Public Authorities. Roads to Partnership] (Warsaw: Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2008), pp. 27-51.

restrictive laws on foundations, public benefit non-profit organisations and non-investment funds, using fabricated scandals as a pretext. The government entered into open confrontation with NGOs, which in turn stepped up their public advocacy and campaigning.³

G3S announced a *Third Sector SOS* campaign as a reaction to the preparation of the new law on foundations. The proposal was secretly prepared by the Mečiar's government in late 1995 and *G3S* was not invited to take part in consultations about it. The atmosphere became increasingly nasty – civil society organisations were accused of fraud and of financial misappropriations. The new legislation was presented as a means of imposing stricter control over foundations. In June 1995 the Central Tax Directorate decided to conduct audits in 331 foundations but found no major malpractices. *G3S* protested against constant attacks on the independent civil sector. More than 300 NGOs joined the campaign, which peaked with three protest gatherings in Košice, Banská Bystrica and Bratislava on the eve of the parliamentary debate over the law. More than 150 proposals for amendments were submitted during the debate, mainly by the opposition parties, but almost all of these were rejected and the law was passed with the support of the ruling coalition. Although the president returned the law to parliament, it was adopted after a repeat vote.

The *Third Sector SOS* campaign did not achieve its ultimate goal of stopping the new law on foundations from being passed, but it was the first coordinated protest of civil society against the government's increasing encroachment on the independent civic sector. It mobilised numerous actors and demonstrated that civil society could speak with a united voice against the increasingly autocratic style of the government. For the first time since 1989, and in a country with little experience of coordinated resistance against oppression, this advocacy campaign built the foundations for future initiatives. It encouraged others to voice their concerns and interests and catalysed further civic mobilisation.⁴

In 1997, the government announced that a referendum would be held on NATO accession and on the direct election of the President, which eventually failed amid massive political controversy and an opposition boycott. This and the fact that the ruling coalition adopted a new and more restrictive law on elections in advance of the 1998 general election, caused outcry among Slovakia's civic actors, mobilising them and many voters for change. In the second half of 1997, an NGO-led civic campaign for free and fair elections entitled *OK '98* was developed as an attempt to engage citizens in the election process, taking a clear non-partisan approach.

The Civic Campaign *OK '98* was an open NGO initiative, which aimed at increasing the awareness of voters about the parliamentary and municipal elections taking place in 1998,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bútorá, M., Fialová, Z., and Demeš, P., *Kampaň "Tretí sektor SOS"* [The Campaign "Third Sector SOS"] (Bratislava, S.P.A.C.E., 1997).

increasing citizen participation in the elections, increasing their influence on the preparation of election laws and ensuring civil supervision of the election process. The campaign was initiated by eleven NGOs, which felt the need for increased citizen participation and voter turnout. The campaign's non-partisan approach was reflected in its focus on free and fair elections rather than on particular parties, coalitions, movements or candidates. The campaign also supported the legitimate expression of citizens' free will, helped secure fair political competition in the pre-election campaign as well as civic supervision over the elections. Within the scope of the *OK '98* campaign, almost 60 independent information, education and monitoring projects were conducted. The majority of these were of a regional character, but there were also several larger projects with nationwide impact, many of which were oriented at young people.⁵

The impact of the *OK '98* campaign was huge, as it was key to returning democracy to Slovakia. What is more, its success inspired civil society in several countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where it helped to redefine post-communist democracy, including Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine.⁶ In the Slovak elections in 1998, turnout hit a record 84.24 per cent of voters, and despite the fact that Mečiar's party still beat the united opposition at the polls, he was not able to form a new government, being unable to find partners to enter into a coalition with him. The democratic opposition took power, Mečiar and the *HZDS* went into opposition, and a new socio-political era in Slovakia's modern history began. The new government, an anti-Mečiar coalition led by Mikuláš Dzurinda, the chairman of the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (*Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia*, *SDKÚ*), pursued critical economic and political reforms. This first Dzurinda government enabled Slovakia to enter the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), to begin accession negotiations with the EU, to close virtually all chapters of the accession *acquis* within a relatively short period of time, and to present a strong candidacy for NATO accession.

These civic campaigns, and the democratic change they contributed to, also altered the relationships between the NGO sector and the newly elected government. This was reflected in the adoption of changes in legislation regarding the civic sector to bring it into line with international standards. Thus, the law on foundations was changed to provide for legal entities that typically either donate funds and support to other organisations, or provide the source of funding for its own purposes. The legislative framework for civic associations and for non-profit organisations providing public benefit services was also changed to make it more transparent. Under its provisions, a civic association cannot be a political

⁵ Bútora, M., "OK '98: A Campaign of Slovak NGOs for Free and Fair Elections", in: Forbrig, J., and Demeš, P. (eds.), [*Reclaiming Democracy. Civil Society and Electoral Change in Central and Eastern Europe*](#) (Washington DC: 2007), pp. 21-52.

⁶ An overview of this wave of electoral breakthroughs, triggered by civil society, can be found in: Forbrig, J., and Demeš, P. (eds.), [*Reclaiming Democracy. Civil Society and Electoral Change in Central and Eastern Europe*](#) (Washington DC: 2007).

party, political movement, business organisation, church, religious community, trade union or state body, civic associations are associations of members, and the citizens of Slovakia have the right to form civil associations (unless they are militant in nature or aim at restricting the rights of other citizens). Further, a not-for-profit organisation providing generally beneficial services is a legal entity, whose primary activity is to provide such services under pre-determined and equal-to-all-user conditions and whose profit may not be used for the benefit of its founders, members of its bodies nor its employees, but must be fully used to secure public benefit services.

Despite the described successes, many observers point to the fact that the independence of Slovakia did not lead to the mass emergence of modern NGOs. The expectations of many that the introduction of democracy would help to increase civil society's impact on political decision-making and consolidate civil society as a key to quality control over decision-making were not met. Nevertheless, many foreign foundations, organisations, funds and governments contributed to building the basis for citizen participation and democratisation in Slovak society. The support of these institutions enabled the establishment of national NGOs in the fields of human rights, protection of minorities, women, ecology, etc. Further, the process of accession to the European Union was a major factor in Slovakia's democratisation process, as it obliged the government to enact various democratic measures.

The importance of civil society is not least visible in its promotion of citizen participation and the introduction of several key pieces of legislation. One example is the environmental movement, one of the few groups promoting citizen participation in decision-making even during communism. Since 1990 environmental groups, both Slovak NGOs and branches of international organisations, have played a significant role in promoting citizen participation and accountability on the part of politicians, and in changing legislation. As a result of their activities, and of their nationwide campaigning, the Slovak parliament adopted laws on Environmental Impact Assessment and subsequently a number of amendments. This impact of NGOs on legislation has strengthened, over time, their position in decision-making, broadened civic initiative, and improved the position of individuals and legal entities in terms of the right to participation.⁷

Another important piece of legislation, which can be used to promote citizen participation and strengthen the position of citizens in the decision-making process, is the Freedom of Information Act. Under this law, anyone can demand information from state institutions, organisations, municipalities, individuals and legal entities financed by the public budget. The adoption of this law was the result of a campaign on the part of NGOs that lasted more

⁷ An example for an NGO engaging in legislative matters is the association *VIA IURIS*, which promotes access to justice and broad participation in decision-making about public issues. Its teams of lawyers support citizens and civic organisations in their efforts to protect the public interest and to prevent non-democratic and non-transparent decision-making; for detail, refer to the website of [VIA IURIS](#).

than a year. In 1999, a group of NGOs established the informal *Civic Initiative for a Good Freedom of Information Act* and launched a campaign to get the national parliament to adopt this act. They were motivated by the many negative experiences of citizens and NGOs in trying to access information from public authorities and municipalities. They further hoped to improve the transparency of the public administration.

Civic Initiative identified nine principles of a good Freedom of Information Act. These principles were based on the experiences and needs of civic organisations, standards applied in other democratic countries or documented in international agreements, as well as the experience of introducing such acts in neighbouring countries. The most important principle became the motto of the campaign: 'What is not secret is public'. The initiative gained the support of more than 120 NGOs representing over 100,000 members. The campaign was also supported by various media and dozens of journalists. A draft of the act underwent two rounds of public consultation and was made available on the Internet.

The first official responses from the Parliament and the government to the bill proposed by *Civic Initiative* were negative. In the meantime, the civic initiative began to forge its campaign in an effort to gain stronger support from citizens and to influence Members of Parliament. Thousands of citizens sent postcards to the Speaker of the Parliament to get him to support the draft bill. Media also supported the campaign. Campaign leaders were invited to attend parliamentary committee meetings and to negotiate on the draft, where they pressed for the general principles outlined in the draft to be accepted as the basic minimum for a good law. Legal experts from *Civic Initiative* continuously analysed the amendments proposed by members of the Parliament and prepared arguments for and against. Before the final reading in the Parliament legal experts prepared an overview of amendments specifying which could be accepted and which would jeopardise the quality of the act. On voting day, activists welcomed members of Parliament entering the building in T-shirts with the motto of campaign 'What is not secret is public!' and observed the voting procedure. In the end most Members of Parliament approved the bill as proposed by *Civic Initiative*. The Legislative Branch of the Office of the President announced several reservations to the bill, but after consultation with experts and the leaders of *Civic Initiative*, the President signed the bill into law.

The above-mentioned pieces of legislation help local and national initiatives to involve people in public planning processes and decision-making. The campaigns described demonstrated cooperation among NGOs and the ability of the sector to act coherently. Looking at the evolution of the sector, civil society gained in strength and capacity through these experiences, even though its social and political impact remains limited. It is encouraging to observe that there exists cooperation between government and civil society, which seek to establish mutually positive relations. This shows that the public sector is slowly becoming aware of the importance of the role of civil society. At the time of writing,

Prime Minister Iveta Radičová had in her advisory committee several people with NGO backgrounds, and the government had established a civil society development department, which should improve conditions for the development of civil society, promote active citizen and NGO participation in governance and coordinate the creation of a concept for the long-term development of civil society in the Slovak Republic. These developments give hope that civil society will be able to further evolve and strengthen its position within Slovak society over time.

Nevertheless, NGO capacity for participation remains limited, especially in relation to human and financial resources, even though the legislative framework and the attitude of the government are often facilitative. One very positive aspect of the environment for NGOs is the possibility for private individuals as well as legal entities to assign 2 per cent of their income tax to not-for-profit organisations. In 2002, approximately 4,000 NGOs were registered for this mechanism, and their number rose to 10,000 in 2011.

Civil society is active in promoting democracy, non-violence, gender equality, tolerance and environmental protection, but there appears to be a lack of activity in the field of transparency, among others. While transparency is observed within the sector itself, the importance of transparency as a principle has not been promoted in society more broadly, and civil society is not seen as successful in trying to hold the state or business sector accountable. Watchdog activities on the part of civil society have been able to make public cases of corruption at all levels of government, but they are rarely able to mobilise people to demand change.

In terms of civil society's impact, it has been modestly successful in its efforts to influence public policy, even though it is rather active in this field. By contrast, civil society has not had a major impact on the budgeting process, although this is generally regarded as being a rather open process. On the one hand, the impact of civil society on the decision-making process depends on the attitude of the government and the authorities towards NGOs, and on the other, on the capacity of civil society to respond. If the public sector is open to citizen participation and if citizens organise themselves well, participation can be very effective. This is especially the case when NGOs work closely with people, and to do so, they must provide services, like counselling, information and training regarding citizen participation in the decision-making process.

As described above, the last 15 years in Slovakia have seen major transformations in power relations. Adding to these has been a process of decentralisation, from national government to local governments and newly established regional bodies. Along with decision-making power, the responsibility for income and expenditure are now in the hands of regional and local authorities. Slovakia has three levels of direct elected government. On the national level representatives are elected directly to the National Council of the Slovak Republic, and

the President of the Republic is also directly elected. On the regional level, there are direct elections for municipal and regional representatives. At the local level, members of city councils and mayors are directly elected. Citizens are aware of these changes and their impact on their life. However participation, although generally higher than prior to political transformation, still remains weak.

Among the few long-term initiatives with a systematic approach to supporting local citizens participation in independent Slovakia are two programmes that have been funded by US institutions since the mid-1990s. ACDI/VOCA helped to establish *Vidiecká organizácia pre komunitné aktivity* (Rural Organisation for Community Activities) or *VOKA*, which has been deeply involved in rural development all over the country since its foundation.⁸ *VOKA* has implemented a wide range of rural development programmes, programmes to promote and support democracy, equal opportunities, freedom of expression, citizen participation in planning and decision-making, to develop voluntary participation in community activities and to defend citizens' interests at the local, regional and national levels.

From 1996, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) provided direct support for the implementation of its community organising project in Slovakia.⁹ 15 community organisers were hired and trained, and set up community groups mostly in urban areas all over the Slovakia. One of the results of this project was the establishment of *Centrum komunitného organizovania* (Centre for Community Organizing) or *CKO*.¹⁰ Both of these organisations are supporting local initiatives of people in their communities, helping them to solve local problems and to actively participate in planning and decision-making processes on the local level. While few international donors remain active in Slovakia and international funding for their work has become less available, their activities and those of the local groups they have supported are highly appreciated. *VOKA* is the national partner for the Centre for Community Work, a Czech non-profit organisation, that organises the international competition 'About people with people' to promote cooperation among citizens, NGOs and local governments, in cooperation with the Ministry of the Environment in the Czech Republic.

The efforts of others were directed towards the development of local community foundations in Slovakia, the first of which was established in Banská Bystrica in 1994, followed in 1996 by community foundations in Prešov, Trenčín and Pezinok. The Open Society Foundation (OSF) provided these initiatives with three-year matching grants aimed at building their sustainability. Even with the support of OSF, the involvement of local

⁸ ACDI/VOCA stands for Agricultural Cooperative Development International and Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance, a U.S.-based NGO supporting economic development and cooperative practices; detailed information is available on the [ACDI/VOCA](#) website. For comprehensive information about the Slovak Rural Organisation for Community Activities, see the [VOKA](#) website.

⁹ Information about the National Democratic Institute is available on the [NDI](#) website.

¹⁰ See the online presence of the [Centre for Community Organizing](#).

activists in the three cities was key to making the foundations' operations successful. Between 1996 and 2003, another eight community foundations were established. During that time, substantial financial support was provided by the Open Society Foundation and by the *Ekopolis* Foundation, which made grants with funds provided by the U.S.-based C.S. Mott Foundation.¹¹

In 1999-2000, Slovak community foundations launched local fundraising campaigns. Until 2004, it was possible to raise some funding from OSF and Ekopolis, and funds were also available from some foreign donors. These funding streams have since been wound down and today local fundraising is key to the Slovak community foundations' ability to function and run activities. In 2003, the Association of Slovak Community Foundations was established to strengthen their capacity, foster their development and to help create partnerships with donors and different institutions. The Association brings together organisations which play a unique role in their communities: community foundations accumulate in-depth knowledge of their communities' needs, in partnership with their donors they fund initiatives which strive to meet these needs, and they disseminate ideas of local solidarity, self-help and voluntary involvement.

On the governmental side, the responsibilities of local authorities and the legal provisions for citizen participation have expanded significantly in recent years. It is also generally expected that local government should work closely with citizens in order to effectively address local needs and issues, and citizens have several possibilities to participate in local decision-making processes. Municipalities have the right call referenda, and they must do so when they receive a petition from twenty per cent of the eligible voters of a given municipality. The results of such referenda are legally binding. More than half of the eligible voters in a municipality must participate in order for a referendum to be valid, and the decision is accepted if it obtains a simple majority. Further, citizens have the right to participate in public meetings organised by municipalities and in meetings of the municipal council. Any citizen may take part in the discussion and voice their opinion on the issues under discussion. Citizens also have the possibility to submit a petition, a complaint or a proposal to municipalities or any other state body.

Despite the fact that the legal framework for the participation of citizens in local planning and decision-making exists, real participation remains rare. According to one expert, "... effective participation cannot only be measured in terms of the ability to satisfy the citizen's need to speak out. Effective participation is not just letting someone say something or

¹¹ Detailed information about community foundations in Slovakia is available from the [Association of Slovak Community Foundations](#). For detail on the funding partners mentioned, refer to the websites of the [Open Society Foundation](#), the [Ekopolis Foundation](#), and the [C.S. Mott Foundation](#).

submit opinions or attend meetings. [...] To be effective, participation must initiate a reaction or response showing that the information was heard.”¹²

In the opinion of this author, citizen participation in Slovakia remains something of a one-sided process – in which citizens build their capacity to be a responsible partner in participation, only to then be ignored or put off by local authorities. While there exist examples of good practice through which citizens and local governments have cooperated successfully and effectively, these are not common, they do not take place at the initiative of local authorities and cooperation is often not sustained.

In sum, this brief overview already points to a mixed record of citizen participation and civil society involvement in democratic decision-making in Slovakia. On the bright side, civic engagement has scored some remarkable successes in challenging government, decentralisation has brought politics closer to ordinary citizens, and the legal framework guiding participation has gradually expanded and improved. Less encouraging are the continued reluctance of political decision-makers to respond to impulses and ideas coming from citizens, the continued vulnerability of many civic organisations, and generally low levels of citizen participation in public affairs. How, in these conditions, citizens and civil society engage on the local level shall be examined in more detail through the following case studies.

Case study I: A landfill that elicits a civic response in Pezinok

Pezinok is a city in South Western Slovakia, approximately 20km northeast of Bratislava. It has a population of 22,000 and is well known in Slovakia for its good wine and ceramics. Close to the city, a landfill has long been used to dispose of waste, including waste that is hazardous. For several years, the public authorities have been trying to build a ‘new’ landfill in Pezinok for years, against the will of the local citizens. Through joint steps of the civic initiative and local self-government, public involvement and legal assistance, the citizens of Pezinok have been trying to protect their environment against this new, and hazardous, landfill. The public authorities concerned deliberately and repeatedly violated legal regulations and the Constitution during the landfill permit procedures, and have contacts to both an interested corporation and to the ruling political party.

The Pezinok landfill story goes back to 1964, when the old waste storage site began operation. But, it only became a problem for the community in the mid-1990s.¹³ The landfill is located just a few hundred meters from a residential area, and its proximity was cause for serious concern about residents’ health (especially that of children) and the value of their

¹² Berner, M. M., Amos, J. M., and Morse, R. S., „[What constitutes effective citizen participation in local government](#)“, *Public Administration Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Spring 2011).

¹³ A detailed [chronology of events](#) is available from VIA IURIS.

properties. Health effects from exposure to hazardous waste can include cancer, birth defects, and genetic mutations, among others. Toxic chemicals from the soil can cause high concentrations of hazardous chemical gases in the homes. If harmful chemicals are present in the soil surrounding a water supply, they can seep into the water supply and cause harmful effects, even in small amounts. Soil can remain contaminated long after waste dumping has ceased. Harmful chemicals may be absorbed into the skin after contact with contaminated soil, and vegetables grown in such soil can absorb them. Further, proximity to the landfill has severely affected property values, and it affects the city's attractiveness to visitors.

In 1996, the landfill was privatised and has since been in the ownership of Ján Man Sr. and his company *Ekologická skládka* (Ecological landfill). In 1997, the Regional Construction Office (RCO) in Bratislava approved the use of the old landfill beyond 2000, although a later decision of the courts overturned that decision for being unlawful. In August 2006, Ján Man Jr. (the son of Jan Man Sr.) was appointed Head of the RCO. A few months later, in February 2007, the RCO excluded the city of Pezinok and other participants from the proceedings concerning the landfill and refused to inform them whether and how the RCO decided.

In January 2008, the RIE decided to allow *Ekologická skládka* to build a new landfill despite the ban issued by the Pezinok authorities. Since the early 1990s, a plan for a new landfill in Pezinok had been repeatedly rejected by the City Council because it had not been incorporated into the zoning plan. Only construction incorporated in a valid zoning plan can obtain a building permit.

The RIE's decision allowed construction on the landfill site to begin immediately. The citizens of Pezinok appealed, leading to a special session of the Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture, Environment and Nature Protection, and to a parliamentary enquiry. As a result, the Committee recommended that the Ministry of the Environment – the highest authority with power to decide about the issue – re-evaluate the location of the new landfill site.

Until the first public protest in February 2008 only a small number of activists and the municipal authorities had expressed their concerns. Before resorting to protests, they first attempted negotiation and took relevant legal measures to prevent the landfill from being built. In the end, the public protest was organised to inform the broader public about the problem and the impact of the landfill on the lives of local residents and to get support. The first protest and ensuing campaign were organised by an informal civic initiative called 'The landfill does not belong to the city'. Up to that point, the civic initiative was an informal group of active citizens from Pezinok, with a core group of about 15 members. The leader of the group at that time was Jaroslav Pavlovič, a former municipal clerk. The civic initiative cooperated closely with association VIA IURIS and several lawyers, primarily Zuzana Čaputová.

A series of activities were undertaken to bring the protest to public attention, including marches and petitions. In February 2008, the civic initiative gathered more than 6,000 petition signatures in just four days. In March 2008, they organised a march to the landfill and more than 2,000 citizens participated. In April of that year, they organised a concert against the landfill on the main square of Pezinok, and in May they organised a second march to the landfill. Illegal construction continued at the new landfill site, and the citizens of Pezinok demonstrated in front of the Office of the Government. The Prime Minister promised to intervene, and work was stopped on the site. In September 2008, another mass demonstration took place. More than 5,000 citizens, supported by famous Slovak artists and public figures, gathered in the main square of Pezinok. They signed an appeal to the Prime Minister who, later on, met with the initiative's representatives and promised a lawful resolution to the situation. In November 2008, the initiative organised a three-week long protest in front of the Ministry of the Environment. The final protest, including several hundred participants, was held in front of Office of Government. In parallel, the case was making its way through the courts. In 2009, the courts decided that a lack of law enforcement and corruption were present, and that the company had not acted appropriately. Despite the fact that the Supreme Court suspended the operation of the landfill until the final decision, the company began to use it and fill it with waste.

At the beginning, concerned citizens did not have a long-term strategy. They had their goal – preventing the new landfill from being built. The campaign attempted to use all possible legal tools to prevent the landfill from going ahead, and organised people to demonstrate that the locals did not want the landfill in their town. This strategy was reviewed and revised as the campaign developed, and the organisers discussed what kind of public events to run, how to involve the public, how to organise people in town, and how to get the support of the broader public all over Slovakia.

The locals also engaged in research to back up their claims and arguments against the landfill. They collected data on emissions, collected information on the permits issues, compiled basic information about the impact of the landfill on health and the environment, and about the company. Without particular attention being paid to training, the campaign resulted in the development of a group of skilled local leaders. The campaign managed to get the attention of all nationwide media of importance, describing the conflict as a 'David & Goliath' type struggle. The media were especially interested in the direct actions organised by the campaign, the status of the legal cases, court hearings and court decisions, the relationships between the company, the regional authorities and members of the National Parliament and government.

The civic initiative 'The landfill does not belong to the city' is an unregistered group of people; they have no paid staff or formal structure, and they cooperate with several NGOs

based on actual needs, including the association *VIA IURIS* and not-for-profit groups providing legal assistance to NGOs, with local authorities primarily on issues of environmental exploitation, and with international groups like Greenpeace, in whose campaigns they cooperate.

At the beginning, the local government was reluctant to get involved. However, when they saw the concern and anger of the local people, they became more supportive. Local politicians did not play a significant role in the campaign, and although some tried to gain visibility on the back of the protests, only the Mayor was invited to speak. From the beginning, the campaign followed a strictly non-partisan policy. It is also interesting to note that the core group of activists who began the initiative were not planning to organise a big campaign or to work long-term on citizen engagement. They did not have a lot of previous experience, but they were able to raise the interest of the public and its willingness to get involved and express its concerns.

The problems highlighted by the campaign were deeply felt by the local people in Pezinok and by local activists, which motivated them to participate. Even without a formal structure, the initiative had its informal rules about how to communicate and make decisions, and they held regular meetings to evaluate what happened, what was done, and to plan their next steps. Pezinok is a small town, so people knew each other before they began to cooperate on the campaign, which helped them to avoid many of the typical pitfalls involved in local organising. The initiative also tried to act transparently, involving participating citizens in planning and decision-making, and the campaign activities were broad enough so that everyone could find an appropriate avenue for expressing their interest and volunteerism.

The group was very careful, when prior to the 2010 general election, political parties began to take an interest in the landfill situation and some politicians expressed their interest in participating in campaign activities, including speaking at demonstrations. The owner of the company running the landfill and his son were members of the ruling party, so maintaining a non-partisan position was a very important decision for the campaign's legitimacy. The campaign made it clear that they would not allow politicians to speak at their public events.

The direct and visible outcome of campaign is that Pezinok remains a town without environmental threats and that the legal ban on the new landfill remains valid. More broadly, an important result is that a small group of local volunteers has been successful in running a campaign lasting several years, that citizens actively participated in the campaign and did not give up on it, and that they managed to maintain their ownership of the campaign, even with the participation of other nationwide environmental groups and the interest of local authorities and political actors to get involved. In addition, this small local group was able to build its capacity, to grow, to communicate their issue through local and nationwide media, and to involve local citizens as well as well-known celebrities. They were

able to organise large-scale events with broad public participation not only in Pezinok but also in the capital, Bratislava. With their openness and transparency, they gained support from the Slovak public. The case of the Pezinok landfill captured the interest not only of NGOs and activists, but also that of ordinary people. The campaign is a success story of local citizen participation in Slovakia. Along with legal instruments, the campaign used civic tools – dialogue, negotiation, common planning and decision-making, citizen engagement and mobilisation, direct actions, media, and others. A group of the most committed activists continues to regularly communicate with citizens through local media, and informs them about the most recent developments in the case, which has still not been resolved once and for all. Activists built a support-base on which they can call to organise new demonstrations or other actions.

The Pezinok landfill story is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, the campaign was organised by a small informal group of activists, which developed its skills and competences for their work through learning by doing, over the years of running the campaign hands on. They managed to keep the campaign moving forward, despite its long-term character. And they managed to build up their internal structure, developing effective relationships with citizens, the media, and the local authorities, despite having little previous experience. Secondly, the story demonstrates the problems of corruption and transparency that persist from the local to the national level. In this case, the public authorities knowingly and repeatedly violated the law and the constitution, and denied citizens their right to information and to participate in decisions concerning them directly. Further, the process through which permission was granted for the construction of the landfill was influenced by the company, which stood to profit from the endeavour. Therefore, the story of the landfill also demonstrates the struggles involved in promoting and protecting the rule of law and a democratic political culture in Slovakia. It demonstrates that democracy and citizens' rights are often threatened by the collusion of interests between political actors and corporations, and the extent to which money and power facilitate each other. But, it also demonstrates the power of a just cause, and of citizens taking action to defend themselves.

Case study II: Senior citizens reclaim a public park in Volkovce

This case study tells the story of the participation of senior citizens of the village of Volkovce. It is the story of active seniors trying to improve their community despite of lack of confidence from local authorities. These active seniors have shown that they are able to achieve what the elected representatives in many villages have failed to do. These seniors planned a project to rebuild and maintain their municipal park, raised several thousand Euros for the purpose, and implemented their project.

Volkovce is a village with about 1,000 inhabitants, approximately 130 km northeast of Bratislava. It is a typical village, and there are hundreds like it all over Slovakia. The lack of

jobs available locally has forced local young people to move to neighbouring towns and as a result, Volkovce's population is ageing. In addition, many active and educated local people have retired in the last 5 to 10 years. Volkovce has several small sport teams (football, table tennis, walking), an amateur theatre and a very active association of senior citizens.

The central area of the village is now a municipal park, but the oldest inhabitants remember when it was a local market to which people from the village and the immediate region came to trade their produce from family farms. The region was known for the raising of geese, so the market was also known as the 'goose market'. The communist regime made life for local farmers difficult and the markets disappeared. In the 1960's, the municipality built a new park on the market place, although it was never properly maintained and fell into disrepair over the years. It became a meeting place for young people and for their underage drinking. Local people avoided walking through the park, feeling insecure. The 'problem' of the park was regularly discussed in the meetings of the municipal council because local people complained, but the elected representatives repeatedly responded that they did not have the funds to make any improvements. Locals were pessimistic that anything would ever change, but the senior citizens simply did not want to give up on the park.

The local association of senior citizens is an individual membership organisation. Almost every senior citizen in the village is a member. It organises cultural events, sightseeing trips and lectures, and provides leisure time activities for senior citizens. It has a formal structure, with an elected leadership, membership and regular meetings. The association's budget is generated from membership fees and small financial contributions from the municipality. Sometimes they also receive funding from the national association of senior citizens. Traditionally, the association was not involved in public life or in local politics.

The senior citizens of Volkovce became tired of hearing that there was no way to rebuild and maintain the park from local politicians, so they decided to improve the park by themselves. They started to collect pictures of the old market place, on which the park was built, and information about it. They wanted to capture the interest of the younger local people and make the place attractive for them. The seniors asked children to draw pictures about how the park should look. They approached an architect to consult on what could be done and how, and how much it could cost. They started to look for money and approached several foundations and businesses for financial support.

The seniors found out that the *Ekopolis* foundation could fund their project, if the process of its planning is conducted in a participative manner. Since 2005, the *Ekopolis* foundation has been supporting local initiatives through its Public Spaces Programme, with two main aims.¹⁴ The first aim, and the more visible one, is to revitalise neglected public spaces and to transform them into vital meeting places. The second goal is to involve the people living in

¹⁴ Detailed information on the [Public Spaces Programme](#) is available on the *Ekopolis* foundation's website.

the neighbourhood and the immediate surroundings in the planning of the revitalisation of the respective public spaces. In other words, the local people (those most concerned) are not just supposed to be involved in the reconstruction of the public space, but first and foremost they should come up with the idea for how the space should be used and what it should look like. The programme methodology is subordinated to these two goals, and strong planning and communication components (e.g. public meetings, planning weekends, campaigns, presentation of proposals, etc.) have to be incorporated into the projects receiving support. Through the active participation of the citizens in the planning and revitalisation of public spaces, their interest in public affairs is increased and local leaders are helped to activate other citizens in the locality. This kind of opportunity was exactly what the seniors had been looking for.

The core group of active seniors took part in a training course on how to organise, prepare and run a planning meeting, they gained skills for communication with citizens, introducing their ideas about rebuilding the park, and collecting comments and suggestions. They learned how to involve other citizens, how to incorporate suggestions and comments. They also received training in how to prepare a project budget and write a project proposal.

The seniors organised a series of planning meetings. During the first meetings, participants focused on issues like access to the park for everyone (children and youth, mothers with kids, handicapped people, seniors, etc.). The challenge was to increase the safety of the park and deal with the juvenile drinking that had been taking place there. The architect developed three alternatives for how to rebuild the park, all of which had a common line of thinking – increase the safety of the park and its accessibility. These proposals included a variety of changes to the park, including new sidewalks, benches, trees, bushes and flowers beds. These alternatives were introduced to citizens for their consideration and comment. The final version of the plan foresaw a new park with three connected zones – space for small children, space for relaxation and a central green space. It also foresaw that the park would be separated from the road with a new hedge and that its accessibility would be improved through a new footbridge. In parallel to the planning process, the seniors and other citizens who got involved in the project, started to look for other sources of funding and other possible contributions in kind. They developed a strategy to engage businesses and ask for their support; for example, construction companies helped by providing trucks, excavators and other machines. When the city's elected officials saw the extent to which the level of participation in the village had improved, they became more helpful and supportive. The seniors showed others in the village, including the elected representatives, that they were able to achieve something that had been considered to be impossible by the local authorities.

The project organisers were thankful to the consultants from the *Ekopolis* foundation, which helped them through the provision of training, consultation and advice about how to

cooperate with different groups, how to include other citizens and how to make planning process interactive and interesting for the public. The *Ekopolis* foundation also provided funding to cover the involvement of specialists in the planning process, including an architect and experts in ecology. This external assistance and advice motivated the association of senior citizens to see the maintenance of the park in a broader perspective – instead of seeing the revitalisation of the park as a simple job of cleaning up, they understood the need to for deeper change. With the involvement of other citizens, the park has become a central location of community life, is now used by mothers and kids and local schoolteachers for science and environment classes with school children. As much as this external assistance was welcomed and appreciated, and the advice of the external experts has been considered, all decisions have been taken by the local people.

The organising group identified a few difficulties in the process. Many seniors were concerned about safety in the park. The impression that the park was not safe was the primary reason for which it was abandoned and people avoided walking through it. Discussing this with the architect and an environmental advisor, resolved this issue relatively quickly – by cutting and reducing the bushes and hedges, the park would become more transparent, and people would feel safer.

Some in the leadership of the association of seniors were sceptical about working with other groups and authorities and about cooperation, and tried to push the project through on their own. They argued that as members of the association everyone knew each other, so they would be better off relying on each other, and that working with others would only lead to problems of communication, planning and decision-making. They were also afraid that other groups would propose changes they would not like. Meetings and workshops with external consultants helped them to overcome this fear. Those meetings and workshops helped the association's leadership to understand why it is important to involve others in the process and convinced them to do so.

The strength of the project was the importance the seniors gave to the planning stage, and the priority given to addressing the real problems of accessibility and safety at the heart of citizen's concern over the park.

The seniors in Volkovce succeeded in rebuilding the park in the centre of their village. The trees were treated for disease, new bushes were planted, the grass was cut, all the garbage was removed, new benches were fitted, and a children's jungle gym was built. The Park is again the centre of community life. It has a small stage for cultural performances, the sidewalks are accessible for seniors as well as mothers with strollers. The World War II memorial has been moved to a more central place in the park.

The community appreciates the new park very much, according to the results of an

evaluation conducted. It is attractive for citizens and they like to go there to walk. Now that the park is in use, the young people who used to drink there illegally no longer felt 'comfortable' and have found another place to meet.

There are also some longer-term outcomes. A new energy is noticeable among citizens – they have gained in self-confidence and are more willing to participate. Now they know how to organise themselves, and how to plan and manage projects. The village, its participating citizens and senior leadership became model for other villages in region.

More often than not, an active citizen is considered to be a young person or adult up to age 40. Senior citizens are perceived as interested in their immediate families and as concerned with rising consumer prices. This case demonstrates the extent to which that perception is incorrect. The senior citizens of Volkovce are not stereotypical grannies sitting in their windows and watching what is going on in the street, or grandpas sipping homemade wine in their wine cellars. Today's senior citizens are often well educated and in good health. After retiring they have enough energy and interest to get involved in a variety of activities. They are a potentially powerful group that can change their communities for the better. Further, seniors are naturally more sensitive to the needs of other age groups. The experience of this case shows that seniors are able overcome barriers between generations and accept the needs of younger people. Interestingly, and as another outcome of this project, people who have not yet reached retirement age have begun to sign up to become members of the association of senior citizens, because they want to be members of most active group of citizens in the village.

Case study III: Citizens “downsizing” the *Úsvit* development in Banská Bystrica

The last decade in Slovakia has been characterised by a building boom in almost all larger towns and cities, with extensive demand for new construction and massive gains in the value of property. Developers look for unused plots of land close to city centres to build new office buildings, stores and large modern apartment complexes. This said the construction of new multi-storey buildings in densely populated areas has caused new problems including, for example, a significant increase in traffic. This case study is the story of a neighbourhood-based citizens' initiative in Banská Bystrica that has sought, since 2009, to prevent a large-scale development project from being constructed in the middle of their neighbourhood. The story shows how wealthy developers were able to influence the process of gaining permission to construct the development, and how the local municipality was unable to communicate effectively with locals and concerned citizens. It is also a story about how municipalities often act in favour of business interests, and undermine and weaken the initiative of citizens to advocate their own concerns.

The Fončorda neighbourhood of Banská Bystrica, just few minutes by foot from the city

centre, was built in 1950. Nowadays Fončorda has about 9,500 housing units, and approximately 20,000 inhabitants, and is one of the largest neighbourhoods in the city. The central part of the neighbourhood consists of blocks of flats with four to six storeys, while the more peripheral parts of the neighbourhood consist of the typical eight to ten storey high-rise buildings built in the 1970s and 1980s. Dispersed between the blocks of flats are also several streets with single-family houses. With its proximity to the city centre, its good public transport connections, sport, leisure and shopping facilities, Fončorda is also one of the most popular neighbourhoods to live in.

Banská Bystrica is the fifth biggest city in Slovakia, and it is located in the very centre of the country. It is the regional capital, a major transportation hub (several new highways have been or are being built around the city), and several new shopping complexes have sprung up recently. Banská Bystrica is a pleasant city with a growing economy. It is also well known as for its many NGOs and its vibrant civic sector. The first community foundation in Slovakia was established there in 1997. A city wide coalition of NGOs was established in 1997, but it has experienced difficulties in partnering with local authorities, who accuse local activists of misleading citizens and of being interested only in their own political or personal advantage.

In 2008, the owner of a small two-storey shopping centre by the name of *Úsvit* (dawn), located in the Fončorda neighbourhood, announced a plan to tear it down and build a new 22-storey multi-functional building. The new development would have a shopping area, offices for rent and apartments. The building was designed to become the new focal point of the city. Members of the community feared a huge increase in traffic, difficulties in finding parking spaces and the shadow that the new building would cast over their apartments. Some people did not want such a big building in their neighbourhood; some people did not want any new building in the neighbourhood. These issues were identified by local residents without previous experience of being active in public life.

A core group of concerned citizens soon realised that the municipality was not helpful and that it was going to be difficult to find out more about the construction. They also realised that one of their number, and a member with significant energy in a position of leadership, had close ties to the developer and that she was acting to weaken the opponents of the development project. They approached the Centre for Community Organising and asked for help.¹⁵

A local informal group of active citizens *Bystrica People in Action* acting with support from the Centre for Community Organising decided to fight against the proposed building. The group organised several public meetings to discuss the issue with local representatives and

¹⁵ The Centre for Community Organising is an NGO based in Banská Bystrica. It works with citizens through a methodology of community organising to assist them in solving issues confronting them and to build their capacity to engage over the long term in public and social processes that affect their lives; [detailed information](#) is available on the CCO website.

express the unwillingness of the community to accept this new building. It was decided to focus on legal mechanisms to ensure that residents would have the opportunity to participate in the process of issuing the necessary building permit, but they faced misconduct and a lack of information and cooperation from the authorities. The residents had to fight on several fronts at once. They got the local City Council to confirm that the neighbourhood is a 'central zone' where limits on the height of new construction apply. The residents sued the regional building authority for denying citizens the opportunity to comment during the permit-issuing process and won the case, with the result that the process had to start again from the beginning.

The leaders of the group were able to raise money in the community to pay for court fees and studies to prove that the new building would cause a larger shadow on their apartments than permitted. Besides public meetings in the neighbourhood, the group protested during City Council meetings, organised smaller public actions to raise the awareness of the broader community to the problem (for example, they stuck pictures of the sun in their windows to point out that the sunlight in the surrounding apartments would be negatively affected by the proposed project). They were able to attract the attention of the local media with such unusual actions. After a battle lasting several months, the leaders of the group were informed that the owner of the building had changed his mind and that the shopping centre would be rebuilt in its current shape rather than being torn down.

The group approached the Centre for Community Organising for support because they did not have any experience with campaigning or with participation in any sort of official decision-making process. The Centre appointed their community organiser to assist them to plan and lead all activities. The community organiser went door to door to talk with people about the issues, to inform them and ask them to join. The community organiser and the Centre organised training for the group on how to develop their internal workings, how to plan and lead different parts of the campaign, and other key skills.

In the early stages of the campaign, the Centre for Community Organising also covered some of the expenses related to the campaign (such as rent for a meeting room) but later the group was able to raise enough money to pay for such costs itself. On legal questions, the group had the support of the Association *VIA IURIS*, an NGO providing legal assistance to citizens.

From the very beginning, the group faced several challenges. One of the first almost split the group of leaders, as one part was willing to accept the building if it fulfilled all technical standards, whereas the other part opposed the building under all circumstances. They were also in disagreement about the height of building they would be willing to accept. The problem was that at the beginning, they did not focus enough on clarifying what the real issue at stake for the neighbourhood and the residents was. They were angry and wanted to

fight, but they were not fully clear about what they were fighting for. With the on-going assistance of a community organiser, the group managed to reach a consensus on the issue.

Another problem was of a more internal nature. One of the members of the group did not act in good faith with the cause. She presented herself as being willing and available to attend meetings and act on behalf of the group. She reported to the group that it was too late to do anything about the building, but eventually it emerged that she had close ties to the owner and local politicians, and that she was acting in her own and their interest.

The leaders of the group spent an enormous amount of time and energy on the campaign, although this was mainly because they failed to build a broader constituency. They paid extensive attention to necessary legal steps and to organising different kinds of actions but they underappreciated that building the internal coherence and dynamic of the group, and recruiting more supporters and members, were equally necessary.

In the circumstances, the group would not likely have survived for long without the support of the community organiser who constantly helped and motivated the members of the initiative group to stay focused on the issue, to develop a strategy for the campaign, and to fundraise for their cause. Eventually, the group's most active leaders joined the broader efforts of the Centre for Community Organising to build a citywide initiative that would address the problems affecting the majority of the inhabitants of Banská Bystrica.

The initiative group, but also citizens more broadly, experienced first hand the unwillingness of the local authorities to assist them; on the contrary, the municipality often acted in favour of the investor. This is unfortunately common in Slovakia, and it causes a lot of disillusionment among the general public when people find out that their elected representatives do not act in their interest. When citizens in Banská Bystrica found out about the plan for the new development, they believed that the local city council members would act in their interest and help them to get their voice heard. Sadly, this was not the case.

The attitude of the owner, the elected local representatives and the staff of the construction authorities staff raised suspicions that they were working together against the initiative group. Deep distrust of the authorities became widespread, as citizens realised that the promises of politicians, typically made before elections about protecting citizen and community interests, are often forgotten when influential investors enter the scene.

In Banská Bystrica, however, the organised pressure by citizens succeeded in breaking this vicious circle. Not least under the impression of their sustained scrutiny, resistance and pressure, the plans for an outsized development in the Fončorda neighbourhood were cancelled.

Contentious Politics and Local Citizen Action in Spain

Amparo Rodrigo Mateu

The world financial and economic crisis sparked a political crisis in Spain. In May 2011, politicians were the third main concern of Spanish citizens, after unemployment and the economy.¹ On 15 May 2011, against this backdrop of social and political discontent and of alienation of citizens from the political classes, the citizen movement *15-M* burst onto the political stage demanding democratic renewal from the political and economic powers that be.

Historically, citizen participation in Spain was used for redressing situations in which citizens were deprived of their fundamental rights rather than for cooperating with established power structures.² It was largely confrontational. For more than three decades of dictatorship, 'non-official' participation (i.e. that which was not sanctioned by the authorities) was forbidden.³ It was only in the 1960s that religious organisations started working as service providers, initially addressing the needs of disabled people. In the 1970s, participation reflected contemporary social transformations, as citizens began to demand political change.⁴ Neighbourhoods, workers, feminist and student movements are to be highlighted as most influential for this period.⁵ The strong socio-political orientation of their actions resulted in the first legal demonstration in 1976.

The first democratic local elections in Spain took place in 1979. However, the democratisation process did not really consider the potential of existing neighbourhood associations and proactive social movements. The new system proposed that politics be based on representation through political parties, instead of building democracy from the bottom up. Political representation was bureaucratic, and did not consider collaboration with community-based organisations as important. In the 1970s, local neighbourhood associations had good relationships with the media and professional groups. However, once

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¹ May 2011 poll by the [Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas](#) (Centre for Sociological Research).

² Posadas Suquía, P., [Participación ciudadana, sociedad y educación: La participación ciudadana en el municipio de Donostia - San Sebastián](#), PhD thesis (Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco, 2000).

³ Franco's dictatorship in Spain lasted from 1939 (the end of the civil war) to 1975.

⁴ Navajo, P., [Evolución del asociacionismo en España](#) (Iniciativa Social y Estado de Bienestar, 2004).

⁵ [XVI Jornadas de Participación Ciudadana: Retos de los procesos participativos en España desde 1975 hasta nuestros días. Una reflexión colectiva](#) {XVI Conference on Citizen Participation: Challenges of participatory processes in Spain from 1975 until today. A collective reflection}, Madrid, Spain, 12-14 April 2011.

the first democratic elections took place, the media began to focus more on the emergent political sphere, and on political parties. Activists themselves tried to make up for time lost to their personal lives during transition activism. And as citizens began to feel represented by the new democratic institutions, citizen organisations and movements began to lose their representative character. By the 1980s, a decade when the environmental movement and cultural associations gathered strength in Spain and elsewhere, previously widespread citizen activism found itself in crisis.⁶ While members of different grass-root associations admitted that the associative tissue was weakened by the appropriation of their initiatives by public institutions, citizens had also internalised the social rights discourse and started holding the state responsible for fulfilling their needs. Therefore, they became 'customers' of a 'protective authority'.⁷ In the new system, social demands would be channelled through political parties and some citizens exchanged activism in their neighbourhood for jobs in the new democratic government.⁸

Representative democracy was also established in companies through workers councils, and the 1980s was the heyday of the workers' and trade union movements in Spain. However, Spain's access to the then European Communities in 1986 entailed accepting, among others, its rules concerning the textile, iron and steel and marine industries, which were to be thoroughly modernised and made competitive. Hence, with the advent of the 1990s, Spain entered a period of extensive industrial restructuring and the workers' movement and trade unions were broken. Further, and also in 1986, an important national mass movement against Spain's membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was defeated by referendum. For many active citizens these events proved that in the new democratic Spain it was impossible to imagine or conduct politics without being engaged in political parties.

In the 1990s, anti-globalisation activism and the *0.7 Per Cent Platform* were the predominant 'nation-wide' movements, with enormous social impact.⁹ The word 'solidarity' became popular. New terminology for what had so far been referred to as citizen movements came into use, including the terms 'NGO' and 'volunteering'. Development NGOs, acting for a fairer world in which solidarity with vulnerable people, especially those in the global south, would be an important value, took the lead in civil society.¹⁰

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Colectivo IOE, *Participación ciudadana y voluntariado social*, documento mecanografiado (Madrid: 1989).

⁸ Urrutia, V., "[Transformación y persistencia de los movimientos sociales urbanos](#)", in: *Política y Sociedad* no. 10/1992, pp. 49-56.

⁹ 0.7 per cent of the gross national product (GNP) is the target contribution of developed countries to development assistance.

¹⁰ Alberich, T., "[Asociaciones y Movimientos Sociales en España: Cuatro Décadas de Cambios](#)", *Revista de Estudios de Juventud* no. 76 (March 2007), pp. 71-89.

Through the 2000s, volunteering in social initiatives became more and more popular, and was increasingly organised and conducted through large, powerful, hierarchically structured organisations.¹¹ These new organisations created employment, contributed to social mobility, delivered services (previously delivered by public administrations) and had an institutional presence. These, rather than social movements, came to determine civil society. Local neighbourhood associations, trade unions, self-help groups and environmental and solidarity movements, among others, were excluded from this process of civil society institutionalisation. This weakened the social bases of associative life in Spain and of collective participation.¹²

Contemporary citizen activism and associative life in Spain focus mainly on urban planning, housing and social integration issues. Examples of initiatives motivating citizens are urban agriculture, consumer groups, fair exchange networks, public space management networks and the defence of the rights of specific groups, such as immigrants, but their origins can be traced back to Spain's history of neighbourhood movements. These foster associative life and citizen awareness, increase the sense of community in line with citizens' problems and needs, foster and stimulate cultural, social and civil actions, develop a popular culture through participation and characteristic ways of expression, and are constant tools in the struggle to achieve better living and working conditions, enhancing citizen participation as a means for overcoming problems.¹³ In order to achieve these effects, it is important that neighbourhood associations bring together all social organisations in their area and share with them a common project for improving the quality of life.¹⁴

This evolution suggests that a generational approach should be applied to analysing participation patterns in a young democracy like Spain.¹⁵ Research on participation patterns across generations demonstrates considerable differences in relation to national elections, political meetings, work or collaboration with political parties, political party affiliation, petition signing, demonstrations, strikes, squatting, protests, associations, political and non-political organisations. Apparently, generations socialised in the 1960s and 1970s are more politically active than older and younger generations. The generation socialised in the 1960s shows more conventional participation patterns through electoral and partisan

¹¹ Rodríguez Cabrero, G., "Reflexiones en torno a la dimensión económica del sector no lucrativo en España", In: *Las entidades no lucrativas de carácter social y humanitario*, Colección Solidaridad (Madrid: Fundación ONCE, 1991).

¹² Rodríguez Cabrero, G., and Ortí Benlloch, A. "Institucionalización del sector asociativo en España: Estratificación motivacional e ideológica y diferenciación y complementariedad entre sector público y entidades sociales", in: *Las entidades voluntarias en España. Institucionalización, estructura económica y desarrollo asociativo* (Madrid: Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales, 1996).

¹³ Trigueros, I., *Manual de prácticas de Trabajo Social Comunitario en el movimiento ciudadano* (Madrid: Ed. Siglo XXI, 1991).

¹⁴ Posadas Suquía 2000, op. cit.

¹⁵ Morales, L., "[¿Existe una crisis participativa? La evolución de la participación política y el asociacionismo en España](#)", *Revista Española de Ciencia Política* no.13 (October 2005), pp. 51-87.

mechanisms, whereas that of the 1970s uses a wider repertoire that includes protest actions as well as associations of civil society. Younger generations are equally active, and they have reinforced the trend towards political protest and novel forms of associative participation.

The legal framework has also had some impact on the evolution of citizen participation in Spain. The 1978 Constitution allows for direct and semi-direct participation in the new Spanish democracy: "Citizens have the right to participate in public affairs, directly or through representatives freely elected in periodic elections by universal suffrage".¹⁶ Limitations to direct forms of participation include that popular initiative shall not be allowed on matters pertaining to Organic Law, taxation or international affairs, and that the state shall have exclusive competence over the authorisation of popular consultations through the holding of referendums, with non-mandatory character.¹⁷ At the same time, the Constitution recognises political parties as key instruments for participation: "Political parties are the expression of political pluralism, they contribute to the formation and expression of the will of the people and are an essential instrument for political participation".¹⁸ Thus, in the Spanish representative democracy the political expression of citizens is 'managed' through political parties leaving little space for direct citizen participation.¹⁹

Citizen participation at the local level is regulated by the Law Regulating the Basis of the Local Government (1985), which states: "... history shows that local life thrives in the presence of wide autonomy and is strengthened by the real participation of neighbours".²⁰ Some observers argue, however, that this law in fact, restricts citizen participation. First, citizen participation cannot bring about decisions against the will of elected representatives. It is, therefore, limited, to tasks including assessment, informing or questioning. Second, citizen information is limited; while plenary sessions are public, those of the city council are not. Even if information is later published, citizens are not allowed to participate in the debates. Third, popular consultation, the main mechanism for direct participation, has rarely been put into practice for important issues of citizen interest. Last, reference to eventual funding for activities of associations is made, but no definition for those 'activities' is provided. This means that local authorities can decide which activities to fund.²¹

¹⁶ Spanish Constitution of 1978, article 23.1.; see also Posadas 2000.

¹⁷ An Organic Law, or *Ley Orgánica*, under the present Spanish Constitution of 1978 requires absolute majority of all parliamentarians in the Congress of Deputies.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, article 6.

¹⁹ Posadas Suquía 2000, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Ley 7/1985, de 2 de abril, Reguladora de las Bases del Régimen Local.

²¹ *Ibid.* chapter IV, articles 69, 70, 71 and 72.

Certainly, the availability and accessibility of information stimulates, favours and promotes participation. It is noteworthy that Spain still does not have a law on transparency and access to information which, judging by the example of other countries, would enable better citizen participation. *Access Info Europe* is an NGO that has, since 2006, advocated for the adoption of such a law in Spain. In July 2011, the Spanish government finally confirmed that a transparency law was going to be presented for approval, after this organisation and the *15-M* movement exerted public pressure. The law they intend to present, however, is based on a previously drafted law on access to public information that was extensively criticised as not meeting minimum standards set by the Council of Europe. The main problems with the draft are that key information, files, registers and public statistics are excluded, and that the proposed Commission for Transparency and Access to Information will not be independent, but dependant on the Office of the President.

Since the beginning of the democratisation process in Spain, strengthening local governments and citizen participation at the local level has been part of the political discourse: “The local level is a key space for developing political activity towards societal change and modernisation. [...] Political projects should be directed at the enhancement of individual and collective citizen participation in the public arena [...]”.²² At the local level, an important tool for the promotion of citizen participation and solidarity values have been, since the 1980s, the *Universidades Populares* (institutes of popular education), with institutional and budget support coming from local city councils. After the first democratic local elections in 1979, the need for effective tools for promoting cultural actions in villages and cities became clear. As a legacy of the dictatorship, society lacked the habits of democratic social and cultural participation. Opportunities for accessing culture were unequally distributed. Adult education was a widespread demand of the population. Following the long-standing adult education practice of other European countries, *Universidades Populares* were created in Spain with the aim of promoting free, critical and independent citizen participation at the local level through social and cultural development.²³ Courses and activities offered contributed to personal development and to the improvement of key competences and skills for life in a democracy: problem solving, decision-making, autonomy, creativity, responsibility, initiative taking, risk-taking, adaptability, planning, evaluation (including self-evaluation), communication and teamwork.²⁴

²² Ponencia de síntesis del XXX Congreso del PSOE: “El campo municipal, fundamental escenario institucional de intervención”, *Ayuntamientos democráticos*, 43-44 (1984), p. 8. (Presentation at the XXX PSOE Congress: The local level, a key institutional scenario for intervention).

²³ De la Riva, F., “Universidades Populares, un proyecto vivo”, *Ayuntamientos democráticos*, 43-44 (1984), pp. 10-12.

²⁴ 231 such institutes currently operate in Spain.

Since the early 1990s, the public discourse has also addressed the institutional requirements for improving citizen participation at the local level. Backed by extensive research,²⁵ recommendations have been made that include the creation of participation councils; management of specific local services by citizen organisations; training, assessment and support of civic associations; regular participation of citizen representatives in local information commissions; popular consultations and initiatives; regular informative general assemblies and public hearings; creation of independent and plural local media; participation in drafting proposals; and bridging divisions between political participation (considered the role of political parties) and social welfare (considered the role of associations).²⁶

Given the dynamics of social, cultural and political development in Spain, the main obstacles to citizen participation today are to be found in the weak social base for collective action, individualism, generational change, and a lack of understanding about how to include new 'neighbours', such as immigrants, marginalised or excluded groups. Adding to this are institutional deficits, de-politicisation and the limited public space available for citizen engagement.²⁷

At the same time, the discourse on citizen participation in the political and civic spheres demonstrates consensus on what it 'should' be like in the future: internalised, daily participation of citizens; responsive and open governments; creative and proactive civic organisations; habitable and lively spaces where citizens can meet; and social difference and diversity that are seen as opportunities.²⁸ In short, citizen participation should be characterised by the recognition of diversity and the cross-fertilisation of various influences.²⁹

Understanding the political and historical context of the last decades – not deterministically, but as an opportunity³⁰ – is key for appreciating contemporary citizen participation practices, and especially the current civic outburst in Spain. Recent events have raised the awareness of both political actors and society more broadly that citizen participation is relevant beyond elections. This is something of a juncture for civil society in Spain, which seems to be returning to its social and cultural roots – the neighbourhood and citizen movements of the pre-democracy and immediate transition periods of Spanish history. These origins and the lessons that can be learned from them provide a basis for citizen

²⁵ Villasante, T. R., *Las democracias participativas* (Madrid: Ediciones HOAC, 1995).

²⁶ Two long-standing examples of participatory democracy in Spain are the municipalities of Marinaleda and Santa Lucía de Tirajana.

²⁷ XVI Conference on Citizen Participation, op. cit.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Freire, P., *Pedagogia de l'autonomia* (Xàtiva: Edicions del CREC, 2003).

³⁰ Ibid.

participation from the local level up, today and in the future. The case studies included in this chapter are set in this context of change and opportunity, and offer examples of citizen participation in contemporary Spain inspired by the political history of its civil society.

Case study I: Cabanyal, a neighbourhood resists destruction

Cabanyal is the traditional sailors' quarter of Valencia, a city of approximately 810,000 inhabitants located on the Mediterranean coast. The main economic activities are services and commerce, with a predominance of small and medium-sized enterprises. Its cultural offer and historical heritage attract tourism, an important source of income for the city and its surrounding region, where agriculture is also practiced. Valencia is divided into 19 districts and these are divided into neighbourhoods. Some of these neighbourhoods were independent municipalities that joined the city in the 19th century, and that have preserved their original architecture and flair to this day. This is the case of Cabanyal.

Since 1998, a city project to extend a large thoroughfare to the coast has threatened Cabanyal with division into two parts, entailing the demolition of more than 1,600 homes constructed in the modernist architectural style, an important part of the neighbourhood's heritage and identity. Low rise houses and small streets would be replaced by much larger buildings and a big street. The social environment the area currently represents for residents and for pedestrians would be replaced by traffic. This case study looks at the way in which social pressure has been exerted on the legal system by the demands of the residents of Cabanyal for the preservation of their area's cultural, architectural and social heritage.

In 1988, Cabanyal was declared a protected historical area, and an asset of cultural interest in 1993, subjecting the district to the rules and regulations protecting cultural and historical heritage.³¹ However, in 1997, the local authorities planned to extend a large road to the coast. Three possible alternatives were presented to citizens to vote on in 1998, with the result that the road should run through Cabanyal. However, some of the citizens who would be affected by the project claimed that the vote had not been conducted properly, that full information had not been provided, that the final decision was taken in a non-transparent manner and that the vote had been manipulated.

Confronted with the prospect that their neighbourhood would be divided by the road extension project, members of the Cabanyal neighbourhood association started to get together. This happened in a natural way, without any call being made. As numbers grew and as they all wanted the same thing – to stop the demolition project – they decided to

³¹ Law 16/1985 of 25 June on Spanish Historical Heritage (Ley 16/1985, de 25 de junio, del Patrimonio Histórico Español).

form an association for the purpose. This led to the establishment of *Salvem el Cabanyal* (Save Cabanyal).³² This was a separate association to the neighbourhood association, since that had a wider variety of concerns. The documentation of the project demonstrates that the citizens involved in *Save Cabanyal* understood it as their right to participate in the urban development of their city, and indeed the association referred to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights when defining their purpose as defending their members' right to "participate in the cultural life of the community".³³

Despite pressure and the demands of the inhabitants of Cabanyal, the local authorities approved the final project in 2001. When, in 2004, amendments to the law on cultural and historical heritage were passed, and once the Valencia Regional High Court had rejected an appeal against the road lodged by the inhabitants of Cabanyal, work on the road began without delay.

In 2005, the joint public-private venture *Cabanyal 2010* was set up to handle the expropriation of properties lying in the path of the road, and to manage the resulting public property. The controversial process and procedures were followed closely and criticised by the inhabitants of Cabanyal, politicians opposed to the project and some media. The newspaper *El País* revealed, in 2008, some of the practices employed by *Cabanyal 2010*, including its purchasing of houses and renting them to fringe groups.³⁴ To make matters worse, local authorities issued demolition orders and refused building permits, resulting in a virtual end to investments in the neighbourhood.

At the same time, the efforts of *Save Cabanyal* continued. A court case brought before the Supreme Court resulted, in 2009, in a verdict that recognised the Cabanyal dispute as one of heritage protection, not of urban planning. This ruling shifted the final decision on this project to the Ministry of Culture, which was run at the time by Spain's socialist party, the PSOE. All the while, the local and regional authorities in Valencia, dominated by the conservative People's Party, continued to issue demolition orders. When eventually the Ministry of Culture ordered that that stop, the regional government further amended the law on cultural and historical heritage in order to facilitate demolitions and the work on the road.

Thus threatened, the inhabitants of Cabanyal began patrolling the streets of the neighbourhood and arranged a telephone chain for the case that the bulldozers came to demolish houses. Citizens responded with passive resistance, blocking the streets and forming human chains to protect the houses that were to be demolished. However, on 8

³² For more detail, see the [Save Cabanyal](#) website.

³³ Article 27.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948.

³⁴ Garrido, L., "[Una empresa municipal alquila infraviviendas en El Cabanyal](#)", *El País*, 15 July 2011.

April 2010 the police charged with batons, and the situation turned violent. Witnessed by TV cameras and broadcast nation-wide, police brutality only increased already widespread support of the general public for *Save Cabanyal*.

In June 2011, the Supreme Court rejected an appeal lodged by the local authorities for the demolitions to be allowed to continue and the bulldozers were ordered to stop their work. Local citizens felt that this decision might be the light at the end of their tunnel. Optimism remained cautious, however. At the time of writing, the final decision of the Constitutional Courts was still pending and national elections that took place in November 2011 brought the People's Party to power with an absolute majority. All local, regional and national governments relevant to the case of Cabanyal are now controlled by the same party, as is the Ministry of Culture. Citizens, therefore, fear that the destruction of Cabanyal may yet proceed.

Since its inception, the *Save Cabanyal* citizen association has been an open, participatory and horizontal structure. It is not membership based – people can join and leave the association as they see fit, or participate in any activity as they wish. Numbers are not much of a concern, even if the initiative has been popular from the beginning, attracting many people from the neighbourhood and beyond. Participation differs according to the kind of event taking place – more people attend general assemblies, held when verdicts have been passed by the courts, when demonstrations have to be organised and when the locals need to be informed about other issues, and can include up to 300 participants. Regular weekly meetings attract around 50 participants. It is the demonstrations that get the highest turnout, though: at a demonstration organised on 31 January 2010, 30,000 people rallied under the slogan “Cabanyal is ours and we want it full and alive.”

Regular assemblies are held on a weekly basis since 1998. There, criteria and proposals converge and decisions are agreed. Some participants attend to be informed; others to submit proposals and the older people come to feel supported by expert neighbours capable of dealing with legal aspects and exerting political pressure. These assemblies strengthen the sense of community and its group identity confronted with the dominant local political authorities that have an absolute majority in the decision-making process. Among those who attend are many professionals including artists, architects and lawyers. They, and especially the lawyers, are an important source of advice and expert support to the cause. Discussion points are identified from meeting to meeting, so that the themes for discussion are known in advance. The organisers also make sure to spread the information about the agenda of the weekly assemblies through the community using formal media and informal methods, so locals have a chance to comment in advance and to discuss among themselves. The day-to-day work is done by the neighbours in the district, joined by citizens

from surrounding neighbourhoods and also from more distant areas. The people involved have a variety of backgrounds and professions and are of all ages.

The association uses a variety of methods to spread news about the conflict: articles in the written press, interviews on radio and television, magazines, cultural supplements, participation in debates, conferences and academic events at public universities in Valencia, among others. The banners hung from balconies on a permanent basis demanding the complete restoration of the neighbourhood and regular demonstrations make the conflict more visible and enhance social pressure for its favourable resolution. Visibility is also ensured through the artistic project *Cabanyal Portes Obertes* (Cabanyal Open Door Days), an initiative of several artists living in the neighbourhood. Since 1998, neighbours hold annual art exhibitions in their homes. This way, visitors get to know more about the neighbourhood and its way of life, raising awareness of its socio-political situation and concerns. In its first year alone, more than 250 artists from all over Spain participated.

Citizen participation workshops under the name *Escoltem el Cabanyal* (Listen to Cabanyal) were organised by a group of professionals involved in the association – sociologists, architects, lawyers, economists, historians and urban developers. These entailed a sociological study, an awareness-raising process and the elaboration of an alternative regeneration and restoration project for the neighbourhood. Interviews held showed that locals would like to recover the traditional closeness among neighbours, which was characteristic of Cabanyal. Both supporters and opponents admit that a significant and valuable part of the neighbourhood would be destroyed. Further, the conclusion drawn was that the projected road would not solve the social problems of the neighbourhood, but would rather relocate or even worsen them, destroying the neighbourhood's social and physical fabric. Further integration with the city of Valencia should entail the rehabilitation rather than the destruction of the area.

In 2000, political parties, trade unions, neighbourhood associations, cultural entities, students and other organisations signed a manifesto supporting *Save Cabanyal*. Close relationships have been built with students, organisations and departments from surrounding universities in Valencia, including *Universitat de València* and *Universitat Politècnica de València*. There is increasing academic interest in researching the conflict and the issues it includes from the legal, architectural, heritage, sociological and tourism perspectives, and PhD research is currently being conducted on the neighbourhood's architecture and ceramics. The *Universitat de València* proposed the idea of rehabilitating some old buildings in Cabanyal for use by its students. Prospects for such plans have only become more solid after meetings between university representatives and different political parties at the City Council.

The association has also tried to learn from similar experiences in other places. Contact was established with neighbourhoods in Tokyo, Hamburg, Majorca and Buenos Aires that have experienced similar threats of urban destruction, and with citizens and professionals – architects, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, journalists or writers – at national and international levels. Institutionally, academies of history, architecture associations and museums have also shown their support.³⁵ Professional help and contributions by artists, musicians and writers are all appreciated because they help the association to address its cause in a multi-disciplinary manner.

While there have been many successes, there have also been problems. Cabanyal's inhabitants have witnessed its degradation, as well as its social and physical destruction, over time, and some have even been persuaded to leave their homes. Neighbours recount how the street is the centre of life, and that the conflict means they feel they are living daily under threat, a situation of grave social injustice. Asked what the main problem of the conflict is, the citizens point to the public institutions – in other words, the problematic attitude of the local city council and regional government controlled by the conservative People's Party. Space for dialogue with the local authorities was demanded, but has never been provided. Invitations to debate the situation in the media were also rejected by the local authorities. Every opportunity for dialogue has been avoided, and instead of being constructive the authorities have tried to discredit the citizen initiative. According to the local authorities, extending the road is simply non-negotiable. Affected citizens report feeling 'under siege' by the local authorities that use mobbing tactics to persuade residents to sell their houses. While awaiting demolition, houses are rented to groups at the margins of society; once buildings have been torn down, plots remain empty and derelict. This and the continued denial of licenses for rebuilding contribute to physical degradation in the area, where drug trafficking and crime have become a problem.

Confronted with this situation, local society has become divided. Some neighbours and shopkeepers are collecting signatures to support the demolition project as a solution to the physical and social degradation and to what they consider a risky environment to live in. Some of the neighbours, especially the older members of the community feel powerless and unjustly treated. A group of citizens also openly demonstrate their support for the local authority road project, using the slogan *Sí volem* (We want!). They also hang banners from their balconies, but they have not until now formed an association. *Save Cabanyal* tried, unsuccessfully, to enter into dialogue with them about common and different interests, for example the degradation of the neighbourhood. This divisiveness now threatens the social cohesion of a neighbourhood whose atmosphere once was more like that of a village. The media, while an ally in some matters, has also contributed to the conflict. Public regional

³⁵ Institutional supporters include the Spanish Royal Academy of History, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando, the Higher Council of Architects in Spain and the National Ceramics Museum Gonzalez Martí.

media and some newspapers are seen as the mouthpieces of the local and regional governments, and are accused of manipulating and hiding information. Other actors, such as the judiciary, are also suspected of being on the government's side.

Save Cabanyal has tried to understand its position in the community and in relation to other actors concerned with the conflict. It used the sociogram method to identify the needs and interests of different groups in the neighbourhood (both for and opposed to the road project) and other actors with a stake in the conflict.³⁶ The conclusion of the exercise was that *Save Cabanyal* had a well-defined policy towards the authorities concerned and towards the media, but its policy was not clear enough towards citizens or groups that were not directly involved, unconcerned or even opposed. It was suggested that *Save Cabanyal* should design a policy considering the interests of these groups in the conflict as a means of connecting with them and building up alliances. The task proposed to them was to prepare strategies for each of the groups with which their relationship was not satisfactory. Those participating in the exercise admitted that it was challenging, because it is difficult to develop approaches for whole groups and that in their experience working with individuals is much easier. However, first attempts have been made to address the concerns of others, including a call to neighbours and associations in August 2011 to develop a wider consensus as a basis for fighting crime, putting a stop to continued urban and social degradation and implementing a building rehabilitation plan.

After 13 years of demanding dialogue and asserting their right to participate in a decision-making process that affects them, the citizens of Cabanyal have developed a stronger sense of belonging and responsibility towards their community. Years of activism in this case show that the more one knows a place, the harder one tries to protect it. However, Cabanyal still has a long way to go before urgently needed regeneration is achieved. In moving ahead, the neighbourhood's civic potential will hopefully be tapped in a participatory process, in partnership with other groups and authorities, and through constructive dialogue of all sides for the sake of effective planning to benefit Cabanyal.

Case study II: Fighting a 'nuclear cemetery' in Zarra

Zarra is a village, which was selected as the location for a centralised storage facility for high-level radioactive waste (*Almacén Temporal Centralizado* or *ATC*); in other words, a nuclear cemetery. It is located in the Ayora Valley, a western administrative unit of the Valencia region. An area of vast valleys, mountains and rivers, the region boasts a rich variety of fauna and flora.

³⁶ The exercise was conducted by Miguel Martínez and Tomás R. Villasante, sociologists at Complutense University of Madrid, on 9 June 2010.

Ayora is the biggest municipality in the Ayora Valley with 5,469 inhabitants. The other six municipalities have between 500 and 1,000 inhabitants. Zarra, the candidate location for the ATC, has 520 inhabitants and is located 20km away from Cofrentes, where a nuclear power station has been working since 1984. It is the property of the leading private electricity utility in Spain, *Iberdrola*. The village has an aged population and offers few opportunities for young people. The main employers other than the nuclear power station are in agriculture and construction.

This case shows how citizens in small municipalities are able to organise themselves against decisions taken by the authorities that would affect their health and environment, by raising awareness and creating alliances with neighbouring municipalities and by leveraging pressure through supportive politicians.

In 2006, the Spanish government unveiled plans to build an ATC for storing spent nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste produced in Spanish nuclear power stations and a research centre. A public call for candidate municipalities was launched in December 2009.³⁷ In January 2010, at the end of a regular plenary session, the Mayor of Zarra brought forward a proposal for approval that the village apply to host the ATC. Although not on the agenda of that session, the proposal was presented as an urgent motion. Opposing political parties and citizens in attendance were caught by surprise. The decision was approved with the support of the ruling political party and its majority of representatives. Agreement had not been sought from neighbouring villages as close as Zarra to the selected location for the ATC and that may have been opposed. In fact, the neighbouring village of Ayora unanimously rejected the proposal the following day.

Local citizens, in turn, had just concluded battles to ensure that neither a macro-dumping site nor an incinerator would be built on the site where the ATC was now supposed to be placed. The Coordinating Committee Against the Dumping Site in Zarra (*Coordinadora contra el Vertedero de Zarra*) was created in 2001 and actively campaigned until the project was dropped because of citizen pressure, and because the location was not suitable for a dumping site.³⁸ In 2003, the citizens organised themselves again in a Coordinating Committee Against the Incinerator in Zarra (*Coordinadora contra la Incineradora de Zarra*) to stop an incinerator being built in the area. Opposing citizens, shopkeepers, politicians and members of the ecological movement joined these committees. They organised protests, demonstrations and information to citizens about the risks involved, creating sufficient pressure to ensure that these projects were stopped.

³⁷ Further information is provided by the [website](#) of the Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Commerce.

³⁸ The area was protected under the EU's [Natura 2000](#) programme.

Hence, citizens were already well organised when the call against the *ATC* went out and opposition spread quickly. Local ruling politicians in Zarra were accused of taking the decision without consulting citizens and of not seeking broad social agreement for the project. No information about the facility was provided, and the decision was considered to have been taken in a non-transparent and non-democratic way. The citizens organised themselves in the Citizen Platform Against the Nuclear Cemetery in Zarra (*Plataforma Ciudadana en contra del Cementerio Nuclear en Zarra*).³⁹ Around 80 per cent of those involved are from the biggest municipality, Ayora, which has more than 50 per cent of the population of the whole area. They found support in municipalities in the neighbouring region of *Castilla la Mancha*. However, few citizens from Zarra became involved.

The Platform meets weekly, and its work is conducted through assemblies, which are non-partisan and non-hierarchical. Between 20 and 30 citizens work and attend meetings regularly. Tasks are divided among them, such as organising demonstrations, arranging meetings, informing and involving media, and others. A larger number of people are involved in the different kinds of pressure actions organised by the Platform.

In September 2010, the Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Trade determined that, among 13 candidates, Zarra was the most interesting for the *ATC* project. Citizens started working against the clock. A popular assembly with around 700 citizens was held in Ayora, at which point the broader population began to react, and citizens took to the streets. This was followed by a hectic week of actions. Information on what an *ATC* is and what its implications were was provided to locals. The risks of nuclear energy and the presence of such an *ATC* are not to be underestimated. The planned facility is supposed to store nuclear waste produced in Spain, but sent to France for treatment until the mid-1990s. This waste would have to be returned to the *ATC* by rail or road, increasing the risk of radioactive leaks in other localities. Over time the incidence of Leukaemia and Cancer increases in areas where there is a high level of radioactivity. Future generations would be at risk. Further, citizens feared the experiments that would be conducted at the planned research centre, which would be located just a few kilometres from populated areas.

There were also extensive risks for the environment. The proposal was to build the *ATC* in an area of rivers and nature reserves, with unique forests and aquifers providing water to neighbouring villages. Two Special Protection Areas surround this location, and are well known for quality products like honey and wine.⁴⁰ Local activities of economic importance such as tourism would also be at risk. There is also frequent seismic activity in the area and

³⁹ See the [Facebook group](#) of the Platform.

⁴⁰ A [Special Protection Area](#) is a designation under the EU Council Directive 2009/147/EC on the conservation of wild birds.

in neighbouring regions.⁴¹ A first official report pointed out that the Ayora Valley is at high risk of flooding. In 1982, heavy floods caused casualties and blocked access to the nuclear power station and surrounding villages. Local experts tried to show that the official reports declaring Zarra as the best candidate for the construction of the ATC were not accurate and lacked detail regarding the risks entailed by seismic activity and floods. However, their petitions were not adequately considered.

The Platform also organised a series of demonstrations in 2010: in Valencia in May, in Madrid and Albacete in September, and in Almansa in November, with between 1,000 and 7,000 participants. Marches to meet regional politicians, camps in front of the regional government and a blockade of the motorway and access road to the nuclear power station were also organised. More than 100 arrest warrants were issued and 17 citizens including the Mayor of Ayora were arrested and accused of driving offences, civil disobedience and public disorder. Greenpeace got involved and asked citizens for their broad support using Internet channels, which stopped the police from arresting even more people. Greenpeace and the City Council of Ayora also provided lawyers to assist those already under arrest, and they were finally released without being convicted of any offence. The result of the arrests was more unity among citizens, popular rejection of the ATC and even bigger support for the Platform's cause. Greenpeace further arranged for a nuclear energy expert to speak to citizens, and to accompany the Platform and its representatives at large scale actions, such as that in Madrid, as well as to meetings with politicians.

Local associations, like a group citizens volunteering as forest rangers, as well as other environmental associations and anti-nuclear activists working at regional and national level also got involved: *Tanquem Cofrents* exerted pressure to closure the power station, *Ecologistes en Acció* conducted protests and awareness raising about the dangers entailed by nuclear power stations, *Marfull-Agró* advocated for good environmental practices and protection of natural habitats and *Xúquer Viu* campaigned for the protection of the river Xúquer ecosystem whose water is used for cooling the nuclear reactor at the power station in Cofrents.⁴² A Member of the European Parliament was persuaded to visit the site and to make the voice of local citizens heard at the European level.

From the very beginning, the association has insisted on dialogue with different political parties, and eventually succeeded in getting itself heard. The pressure exerted by citizens, but also the rejection of the project by several regional governments and the support received from individual politicians, all contributed to halting the process. Most local

⁴¹ In the first half of 2011 alone, 28 regular events were registered, with the strongest reaching a magnitude of 5.1 and the closest occurred 6 km away from the site, according to the National Geographic Institute (IGN).

⁴² For more detail on these organisations, refer to their Internet presence: [Tanquem Cofrents](#), [Ecologistes en Acció](#), [Marfull-Agró](#), and [Xúquer Viu](#).

politicians were in fact opposed to the project and have helped citizens to contact regional and national political actors to bring their complaints to the attention of the national level.

By the time of writing, no official decision had been issued rejecting Zarra as the location for the new *ATC*, and for the time being, Zarra remains the location at which it will be built if the project goes ahead. However, citizens continue to work actively to ensure an official statement excluding Zarra as a potential location for the *ATC* is issued.

Citizens of the region admit that the nuclear power station is a bone of contention. Some City Councils receive revenues from the power station, and some Mayors even work at it. In a region with few income-generating industries, dependant City Councils and workers at the plant fear any claims or demands related to nuclear power, such as the protests against the *ATC*, as they might lose benefits or jobs. It is to be noted that protest against the *ATC* is stronger in the neighbouring region of *Castilla la Mancha* than in Zarra, likely because its municipalities do not depend on the nuclear power station for income and employment.

Shortly after the local and regional elections in May 2011, Zarra's walls and façades were full of graffiti, mostly in support of the *ATC*, and banners demonstrating support for the project hung from public buildings, including City Hall. Some citizens claim, however, that any graffiti demonstrating protest against the *ATC* has been removed on the orders of the Mayor. Nevertheless, to any outsider it would seem that most citizens of Zarra itself are in support of the project. It is difficult to judge the level of support or opposition, as public opinion is not openly expressed – one might even say it is constrained and censored. When one gets closer to individual citizens it becomes clear that public opinion is divided.⁴³ Some do see the risks represented by the *ATC*, but others see it as a much-needed economic investment and job creator in an area hit by unemployment and depopulation.

The protests against the *ATC* have had the consequence that more citizens have taken a stand, and have decided whether they are for or against the project. The negative consequence is the on-going tension between the two sides in Zarra – supporters of the project go to one bar and those opposing it go to the other (there are only two). The longer the process takes, the more damage it will do to the social fabric of this small village.

The media have also played an important role in the escalation of the conflict. Some national media have been criticised for restricting information about the case. Further, media have been accused of being partisan when, for example, after the May 2011 elections, news about the supporters of the *ATC* were more visible than those about those

⁴³ As an illustration, see the reports "[Vecinos de Zarra divididos por ATC](#)" and "[Zarra dividido por la ATC](#)".

opposing it. Accusations emerged that elections in Zarra were manipulated.⁴⁴ Some citizens claim that the Mayor manipulated the electoral register to ensure his own re-election, after which the project of building the ATC was to be advanced. It is noteworthy that the Mayor concerned had already been taken to court for election tampering and corruption in relation to urban planning in 2007, but the trial is still pending. It is, therefore, no surprise that some citizens do not trust the judiciary.

An important aspect of the process is that work done to raise awareness about the ATC has also brought citizens from neighbouring municipalities together, giving them the impetus to be more active and increase their involvement in demanding dialogue, participation and more influence over the decision-making process. In less populated municipalities, it is easier for power-holders to impose decisions. Thus, support from Ayora, the largest of the municipalities in the region, is encouraging and strengthens citizen activism.

Actions to inform the citizens about the seismic and natural disaster risks confronting the region have helped to raise awareness about the risks involved in the production and storage of nuclear waste and its possible consequences for health, the environment, agriculture and the food chain. However, the Platform also found that it was difficult for some citizens to inform themselves. In a context of widespread unemployment and sometimes illiteracy, and where municipalities do not offer programmes for young people, so that they leave to find a better life, most often never returning, it is often difficult for people to take initiatives and ask for information, or even to interpret and make sense of the information freely available to them.

This case demonstrates the importance of seeking broad social consensus when taking decisions that could entail serious implications for the environment and public health, in the immediate but also in the long terms. When environmental issues are at stake, support from more experienced organisations is important. They can provide their expertise in advocacy, information and awareness raising, advice, innovation, creativity, capacity building for participation and publicity. This is a valuable contribution to increase citizen participation and also creates a network of associations supporting each other.

This case also shows the social dimension of power dynamics between citizens and power-holders in small places, such as villages. Citizens are often faced with the dilemma of what is better for their municipality and it is difficult for them to decide what they want. Unscrupulous power-holders often play with the fears of citizens caught facing such dilemmas and use it to their advantage. In cases where manipulation is present, support from neighbouring organisations and citizens becomes important, and the case also

⁴⁴ Irregularities were first detected by the National Statistics Institute (INE), according to an [El Pais report](#). Allegations were later rejected by the Electoral Registration Office due to insufficient evidence.

demonstrates the extent to which the idea of community can extend across local borders. This case also shows how fear holds people back and how it is a powerful tool for keeping citizens quiet and divided. Social injustices and inequalities, like unemployment, can drive people to despair, a situation in which decisions can be easily imposed from above. The best way of resisting is to know what is happening and why. In such cases, information can make the difference between manipulation and resistance.⁴⁵

Case study III: 15-M at the local level - *Toma La Plaza Morvedre*

Since May 15 2011, indignant Spanish citizens have been protesting the fear and resignation that has become widespread as a result of the financial crisis, attributed to bankers, capitalists, speculators and corrupt politicians. These citizens have joined forces against a situation of social injustice, demanding change and proposing alternatives. Several key concerns took Spanish citizens into the streets. At the national level, the main concern is unemployment; as of May 2011, Spain had the highest general and youth unemployment rates in the European Union.⁴⁶ Young people in Spain are likely to have worse living conditions than their parents. Average salaries are among the lowest in the 15 older EU countries and economic inequality is considerable. Meanwhile, prices are on the increase, salaries have been frozen or cut, it has become easier to lay off employees, the age of retirement has been increased, and extensive cuts have been made in public health and education.⁴⁷ These measures have been taken by what are perceived as privileged and corrupt politicians.⁴⁸

The nationwide 15-M movement was born in response to this situation, and named after a major demonstration held on May 15 2011 to demand 'real democracy'.⁴⁹ Some of the demonstrators decided to camp out on the *Plaza del Sol* in Madrid to make their point even clearer. The number of protesters grew as the news spread through different social networks. Daily assemblies were held to discuss the current situation in the country. Protests soon spread to other main cities of Spain including Valencia and Barcelona. More and more *indignados* (indignant people) took the streets, individual citizens voicing their dissatisfaction in the public sphere. Daily demonstrations and protest camps continued for well over a month, and were not suspended even on 21 May 2011, when electoral silence

⁴⁵ Klein, N., *The Shock Doctrine* (London: Penguin Press, 2007).

⁴⁶ Polls by the [Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas](#) (Centre for Sociological Research). According to Eurostat, the rates are 20.9 per cent and 44.4 per cent, respectively; both more than twice the EU average.

⁴⁷ In September 2011, only a few months after the 15-M outburst, significant cuts in public education were announced in several Spanish regions including Madrid, Galicia, Castilla la Mancha and Navarra.

⁴⁸ Escolar, I., "La generación estafada", in: Artal, R. M. Artal (ed.) *Reacciona* (Madrid: Aguilar, 2011), pp. 111-125.

⁴⁹ The 15 May 2011 demonstration was organised by [Democracia Real Ya](#) (Real Democracy Now).

was to be observed the day before the local and regional elections – a stark signal testifying to the considerable extent of indignation among many Spaniards.⁵⁰

As it consolidated, and gained visibility, the *15-M* movement began to decentralise into local and district assemblies, with actions at local, regional and national level running in parallel. *Take the Square Morvedre (Toma la Plaza Morvedre)*⁵¹ is the local *15-M* movement in Sagunt. Also known as Morvedre, Sagunt is a small city of 66,259 inhabitants in the Valencia region of Eastern Spain. Its history, beaches and location close to Valencia make it attractive for tourism. In parallel to agriculture, Sagunt industrialised extensively in the 20th century and became an important economic centre. However, during the industrial restructuring in the 1980s, Sagunt’s iron and steel industries were deeply affected and a large numbers of jobs were lost.

On 20 May 2011, *Take the Square Morvedre* held its first assembly in the streets of Sagunt. Around 700 participants attended this first local event. A manifesto was issued stating that the movement does not represent any political party or association, but is a gathering of individuals united in their demand for real participatory democracy and for political, social, economic, environmental and cultural change.

To begin with, the 10-point manifesto of demands that had been developed through assemblies in Madrid and Valencia was reiterated. The ten points included respect for justice, freedom, equality and pluralism; limits to the privileges enjoyed by those holding public office and a permanent ban on those who have been convicted of offences from taking up public office; reform of the electoral law, whereby proportional representation shall be guaranteed and the five-per cent electoral threshold shall be lowered; the right to hold a referendum in relation to decisions involving important socio-economic concerns; compulsory popular consultation on state, regional and local budgets; separation of powers, in order to guarantee total independence of the judiciary; treatment of services such as energy, communication networks, food supplies, the transport and banking system as public goods; the right to work including correct employment conditions, and the prohibition of laying off staff when companies are in profit; progressive tax regulations, including specific taxes on immense fortunes and on speculative financial transactions; and the calling of a Constitutional Assembly.

The main focus in Sagunt was placed on citizen needs and concerns at the local level. Themes presented and debated at general assemblies included unemployment, political

⁵⁰ “El 15-M sacude el sistema” (The 15-M shakes the system) was the headline of the newspaper *El País* on elections day, 22 May 2011.

⁵¹ For more detail, see [Toma la Plaza Morvedre](#).

decisions, evictions, corruption among politicians and the salaries at local authorities.⁵² Weekly open assemblies have since been held in the streets, including the participation of passers-by. In accordance with citizen needs, interests and competences, the following working commissions were set up: logistics (organisational issues), workers movement and action (picketing), creativity (banners and performances), communication and press (social networks and contact with local media), legal issues (legal advice to deliberations and proposals), public education (analysing local situation and decisions), agro-ecology (support to the local environmental association, food sovereignty and consumer groups) and districts, villages and universities (contact with other assemblies). These commissions are formed by individual citizens of different ages and backgrounds. They have open structures and work on elaborating the issues that arise at the assemblies, with a view to organising actions and taking concrete measures. The commissions also bring proposals to the general assembly. An open and weekly 'commission of commissions' brings representatives from each commission together on the basis of the principle of rotation.

Informing citizens and raising awareness have been a main aim for the *Take the Square Morvedre* movement. *Indignado* activists have delivered information sheets at street markets, the unemployment bureau, banks, public offices, factories and a variety of events. A three-day cultural camp was organised to make the movement more visible to citizens with information, activities, workshops, debates, speeches and video-forums, and to raise awareness of the nationwide demonstration against the *Pact for the Euro* planned for 19 June 2011.⁵³ Members of different commissions gave speeches about a more democratic electoral system and a fairer system of mortgages and taxation; they organised activities for children to introduce them to the work of the commissions, and recorded video testimonies about the motivations of *indignados*.⁵⁴ A workshop simulating an assembly was held for participants to learn more about compromise, active communication skills and networking. Finally, a documentary about the industrial and workers' movements of Sagunt's past was shown, and a local unionist who was active in the 1980s gave a speech.

Visibility and awareness were also raised with creative performances in public spaces. A group of blindfolded *indignados*, dressed in black were guided like lambs by a banker until a citizen, claiming freedom and revolution, made them remove their blindfolds. People, then,

⁵² Mortgages: between 2007 and 2011 almost 300,000 mortgage foreclosures were started in Spain, with Andalusia, Catalonia, Valencia and Madrid being the most affected regions. Corruption: the regional president in Valencia resigned on 21 July 2011 and faces charges for involvement in illegal financing of his political party (PP) in return for public contracts for major corporations. Salaries: *Take the Square Morvedre* demands that public service salaries should not exceed 3.5 times the guaranteed minimum income.

⁵³ The [Pact for the Euro](#) is criticised for failing to take measures on issues like tax havens, rating agencies, responsibilities for the financial crisis and trials, and creating employment. Above all, its failure to include citizens' opinion on issues affecting their lives, like cuts in public health and social security benefits, has provoked harsh criticism.

⁵⁴ See the video '[Lo que nos indigna](#)' (Our indignation).

woke up and started dreaming of a better future. This was shown using signs that read Dignity, Compromise, Freedom, Solidarity, Tolerance and Revolution. A local holiday, during which bonfires are lit by the sea, was also a good occasion for creating visibility. The *indignados* lit their bonfire at the crowded beach in Sagunt. Symbolically, injustices were burnt, and passers-by and citizens joined in.

Cooperation has been established with other organisations, like that of mortgage victims (*Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca, PAH*). Some local *indignados* were evicted from their homes and raised this issue during the first assemblies. Links have since included the attendance of *PAH* meetings and joint participation in protests. Some of these were directed against banks that are seen as evicting citizens from their homes when these fail to service their mortgages. Protests were also aimed at the government, which is seen by many to permit such evictions, while rescuing private banks with public funds. It is this logic of “profits are privatised, losses are socialised” that has so angered *indignados* and ordinary citizens alike.⁵⁵

Other forms of cooperation included the local environmental organisation *Acció Ecologista-Agró*, with whom a joint action on clean and renewable energies was organised. In the Valencia region, the nuclear power station at Cofrentes is of particular concern, and a joint demand to close this facility was handed over to the management of the Iberdrola electricity company.

As to media, traditional local media are informed about all actions undertaken at local, regional and national level by *Take the Square Morvedre*. Local media are considered allies. They publish news and reports about activities carried out, and organise press and radio interviews with activists. This helps to raise awareness in the broader public and to spread information about concerns beyond assemblies. Social networks have assumed great importance, as they allow for information flows in various directions and without major physical and temporal obstacles, are built from the bottom up and controlled by users. Blogs and Facebook are extensively used, and active citizens and those involved in the commissions regularly share and upload information.⁵⁶ Training in the optimal use of computer tools and Internet communication is also provided to interested activists and citizens.

The lack of adequate educational infrastructure is another major concern of citizens in Sagunt. A ‘minimum programme’ has been drafted by the Education Commission and approved by the general assembly, which demands free, public, secular, pluralistic, decent,

⁵⁵ Galeano, E., *Patas arriba. La escuela del mundo al revés* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1998).

⁵⁶ See the *Take the Square Morvedre* [blogspot](#) and [Facebook page](#). In addition, *indignados* have developed N-1 that is similar to Facebook but based on free software, which is seen as more commensurate with the 15-M ideology and used by assemblies at local and national level.

compulsory, cooperative and high-quality education for all. Two public actions were organised at education centres in June 2011 where pamphlets demanding quality education were distributed and where protest against poor-quality school buildings was voiced.

As part of a wider movement, *Take the Square Morvedre* also participates in activities beyond the confines of Sagunt. Its representatives attend weekly assemblies for neighbourhoods and localities in Valencia, participated in a major demonstration on 19 June 2011 that called for a general strike, and joined the march on Madrid that was organised by groups from across Spain. Their claims were participatory democracy, political transparency and the separation of powers, and marchers held assemblies and collected proposals in all the municipalities they passed on their way.⁵⁷ Under mottos like “Spain is different, but not indifferent”, *Take the Square Morvedre* activists marched for a week before arriving in Madrid where a major demonstration was staged on 24 July 2011.⁵⁸ This was followed by a 2-day social forum, where *indignados* from different Spanish assemblies met to strengthen their network, to agree on common strategies and to debate on issues of the economy, environment, culture, health and education. The main focus of these debates was the organisation of a worldwide protest on 15 October 2011.

An urgent constitutional reform proposed during the summer of 2011, and aimed at limiting public debt, intensified *15-M* protests.⁵⁹ The protestors demanded that no public debate should be held about decisions that would put at risk the social rights of millions of citizens, that would make way for the future privatisation of public services or that would threaten the integrity of the welfare state. Protests and demonstrations were held in all the main Spanish cities. At the end of September 2011, a three-day conference on ‘Alternatives to Capitalism’ was organised in Sagunt. Debates were held with experienced activists in social movements fighting for citizens’ and workers’ rights. Moreover, between mid-September 2011 and November 2011 when they were held, the national elections were debated at weekly assemblies in Sagunt.

For a citizens’ movement, the most important is that individuals continue to join and that they contribute with their abilities and expertise. The *15-M* discourse is being developed on the basis of consensus among all its participants. Legal advice and work, written and audio-visual information, conflict management are some examples of support provided by professionally qualified *indignados*. Opinions and speeches given by well-known professionals, including actors, writers, musicians, university professors, journalists and economists supporting the protest, add credibility and give encouragement to this grass-

⁵⁷ See more at marchapopularindignada.wordpress.com.

⁵⁸ The headline of the national newspaper *Público* on 25 July 2011 read: “El 15-M no se para. Multitudinaria cita en la Puerta del Sol” (15-M does not stop. Mass date at Puerta del Sol).

⁵⁹ The proposal was presented on 23 August 2011 and approved on 2 September 2011 by the two main political parties (the ruling socialist PSOE and the main opposition party, the conservative PP).

roots movement. Somewhat more controversial, in turn, is the involvement of political parties, trade unions or any 'organised groups'.

The most important support for the grass-roots work, however, is the exchange with colleagues involved in the work beyond the local level, including through participation in camps, assemblies and national events. This helps the movement to establish a network exerting pressure from the local level up. Contact and exchange of experiences with other localities at regional and national levels enriches this movement and brings support back to the local level.

Movement-wide the main barriers are the continued opportunism of the political elite that is only interested in citizens during elections and a general lack of transparency in political life. These are, after all, the reasons that prompted the emergence of the movement in the first place. Mistrust is most widespread among young people, who are fearful for their futures. They are looking for ways of organising themselves that are far from political parties and trade unions. The degree of militancy is not least expressed in the slogans used during street protests, including 'Bankers to prison. Politicians unemployed', 'Less privileges for politicians', 'Earning 600€ is violence', 'Stop corruption', 'Respect labour rights' and 'Economic democracy'.

A further obstacle are the traditional media, which command much influence, and that seem to determine the nature of the image of the movement and the extent, to which it is known, among the broader public. The partisan image of the media is not helped by the fact that they are largely controlled by government and private business. Justifiably, then, people are concerned that facts are being distorted and that the citizen's movement is being discredited.⁶⁰ Problematic reporting was, for example, obvious when images of confrontations with the police during protests in Greece and shown on the TV news were attributed to Spanish *indignados*.⁶¹

Admittedly, there was also some violence during protests in Spain. However, a movement as large as *15-M* will always find it difficult to control, or exclude, the more radically minded. While debates at the assemblies of the movement aim at consensus building, some groups may not respect all decisions. In such cases, the assembly makes such disagreement by some groups public via communiqué and emphasises that the (violent) actions of dissenters do not represent *15-M* as a movement, but the individuals and groups concerned only.

⁶⁰ "Se nos mean encima y la prensa dice que llueve" (They piss on us and the press tells us that it's raining) was one of the slogans used by *indignados* during street actions.

⁶¹ This was the case with the TV programme "*El Círculo*" aired on Telemadrid (public regional television in Madrid) on 16 June 2011; for more detail, see the [Publico article](#) on the issue.

At the local level in Sagunt, a main obstacle was access to public information. *Indignados* from the legal commission requested information about public contracts for big projects during the previous year. They were first persuaded to retract their request and, then, informed that if they wanted to proceed they would have to go through an extremely complicated bureaucratic process that would render access to the information requested all but impossible. Further, the partisanship of the police and the judiciary were a problem. After supporting the *PAH* during a protest action at a bank in their locality, eight *indignados* were sued by the Government Delegation in Valencia for, allegedly, disturbing the peace, causing confusion among workers and customers. Appeals were presented against what has been evaluated as a false accusation, and an attack on the freedoms of expression, assembly and demonstration, all of which are fundamental rights.

Participation in the *15-M* movement and its assemblies has led to citizens being better informed about political and economic issues. When they are better informed, citizens are also more responsible and demand more transparency. One concrete result of the pressure exerted by *15-M* has been that the government has begun the process of instituting a law on transparency. Social awareness, cohesion and identification have become stronger, as individual citizens think issues that concern them over in more depth and watch government action more carefully. The success of the 19 June 2011 demonstration proves this and has been key for the sustainability of the movement.⁶²

Some political parties started to take the demands of *15-M* more seriously in the run-up to the national elections in November 2011. There has been some movement on questions such as the level of politicians' pay and open voting lists. Some politicians have even demonstrated eagerness to listen to *15-M*: "There is a citizen concern that cannot be ignored: there are people very worried about the way democracy is working that have gone out onto the streets [...]. This has to be listened to. [...] I try to chat in Twitter with people in the *15-M* movement".⁶³

At the local level, the working methods of *Take the Square Morvedre* have been improved over time through open reflection, evaluation and debate about proposals. Paulo Freire once said that one constantly needs to reflect critically over one's practice and to consider oneself as a social, historical, thinking, communicative transformer and creator.⁶⁴ Self-evaluations shared at the general assembly point to concerns about a lack of coordination between commissions, mostly in times of high activity. Further, new people would be more

⁶² Headlines of national newspapers on 20 June 2011 – *El País*: "Los indignados se reafirman con una movilización masiva y en paz por toda España" (*Indignados* stand by the mass peaceful protest Spain-wide); *Público*: "Indignación masiva y pacífica" (Massive and peaceful indignation).

⁶³ Such were the comments of one socialist candidate running for the November 2011 national elections; see "Claves de campaña", *El País*, 24 July 2011. p. 16.

⁶⁴ Freire, 2003.

than welcome in the different commissions. Considering that the political and economic situation, and by extension citizens' lives, have not improved significantly, and given the extent of support for *15-M*, many active citizens wonder why there are not many more *indignados* in the streets. Nevertheless, participation in the June 2011 demonstration was generally considered a success for *Take the Square Morvedre*.

Representative democracy in Spain is undergoing a transformation. Citizens are more aware of the need for the revitalisation of democracy. They look for alternative ways of participating that go beyond the usual act of voting. Getting organised, citizens have become more aware, and authorities should view citizen participation as an opportunity to renew democratic institutions. *Indignados* keep on working at the very grassroots for change not only at the local level, but also nationally. They hope to develop a more participatory way of implementing politics for the sake of democracy.

At the local level, especially, much remains to be done. Existing associations – neighbourhood groups, student and parents' initiatives, sports clubs and artistic circles – should be more involved. An invitation to these groups to cooperate would make the assemblies more powerful, as they would have access to more accurate information about the local situation and open up new constituencies. New forms of participation are as important as the coordination of existing and valuable efforts. As a learning experience based on dialogue, cooperation and exchange, the *15-M* movement facilitates what Freire has described as a process of assuming responsibility, which in turn brings about reflection and autonomy.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Strengthening Local Democracy through Devolution of Power in the United Kingdom

Alison Gilchrist

Citizen participation in the United Kingdom is a complex but rich field. Not only is there a long tradition of pluralist democracy based on a thriving civil society, but the country has recently been experiencing extensive devolution of powers to its constituent parts (referred to as jurisdictions) – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – although to differing extents and across a spectrum of policy areas. Each of the United Kingdom’s jurisdictions has developed a slightly different model for community engagement.

Over centuries, civil society in the United Kingdom has come to include a wide variety of voluntary organisations, societies, pressure groups and community-based campaigning and self-help bodies. These have been set up for a variety of reasons – to encourage self-help, to promote or protect particular interests, to develop specialist services and to facilitate collaboration between different agencies. Their work might focus on sport, religion, political or environmental campaigning, civic amenities or representing the needs of particular sections of the community (for example, older people or disabled children). Most civil society organisations are small and run by their members, but there are also well-established voluntary bodies, operating through professional, paid staff, working at national and international levels.

Today it is estimated that there are over 900,000 civil society organisations in the United Kingdom, of which around 170,000 operate in the voluntary and community sectors. Their total income in 2007-2008 was estimated at 37 billion Euros. However, the current economic downturn has had a big impact on funding for many such organisations, especially those delivering public services and therefore, accustomed to receiving financial support from local authorities.¹ While the previous considerations exemplify the diversity of

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organisations making up civil society, also commonly referred to as the third sector, this chapter focuses on community-led initiatives that provide the general public with ways of taking up local issues, running services and influencing decision-makers.

It is increasingly recognised in the United Kingdom that the term 'community' is not only about locality, or the places where people live. Communities can refer to all kinds of networks linking people who have something in common and who are able to connect in ways that are mutually beneficial.² Collective strategies for getting things done and making changes are an important aspect of community life. Community has also gained significance in relation to how the general public is involved in decisions about spatial and economic planning, the management of regeneration schemes, service delivery and the allocation of local budgets.³

Public or community participation has featured in policy-making in the United Kingdom for several decades now.⁴ Since the late 1960s, reports on improving education, planning, health and welfare have recommended that those affected by policy decisions should have the means and the opportunity to make suggestions on priorities and how things could be done differently, or at least to respond to proposals put forward by the authorities. Initially, this entailed little more than providing information (often highly technical) and waiting for interested parties to react. Gradually during the 1970s, this method of consultation was adapted to become more proactive. Members of the public were approached to provide input and were asked to identify the issues that concerned them, through surveys or open meetings. Officials and experts would listen to these views and draw up plans in the light of what they heard, to be ratified by appropriate politicians and subsequently implemented by managers and teams of practitioners.

During the 1980s and 1990s, voluntary and community organisations became more and more responsible for the delivery of services on behalf of a range of public authorities. This included tenants taking over housing management, national voluntary bodies providing advocacy and support services for the most vulnerable members of society, local associations running schemes for children and young people and so on across the spectrum of community needs and aspirations. Government funds were awarded to such organisations on the basis of service agreements that specified what was to be delivered

¹ The National Council for Voluntary Service produces a regular report on the voluntary sector. See the [United Kingdom Civil Society Almanac 2010](#).

² Gilchrist, A., *The well-connected community: a networking approach to community development* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2009).

³ Somerville, P., *Understanding community: policy, politics and practice* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2011); Craig, G., Mayo, M., Popple, K., Shaw, M. and Taylor, M. (eds.) *The Community Development reader: history, themes and issues* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2011).

⁴ Taylor, M., *Public policy in the community, 2nd edition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

and how certain targets were to be met. For some this 'contract culture', as it became known, created security, but an uncomfortable sense of dependency. Others managed to maintain their independence and simultaneously carry on campaigning for changes in legislation and government spending priorities. Embedded within this approach was a new way of thinking about the people who used or benefited from publicly funded services. This ideology was enshrined in the various 'consumer charters' launched by the Conservative government in the early 1990s, designed to empower parents, patients, passengers and pupils (among others) to have more of a say in how services in fields such as education, health and transport were organised. These charters focused on individual rights rather than community needs, and often did little more than establish quality standards, with accompanying channels for individual complaint and compensation.

The New Labour government, elected in 1997 on a centre left social democratic programme, set out to shift power and responsibility decisively towards the people, recognising that many of the United Kingdom's long-term and most complex problems could only be addressed through 'joined-up' thinking, cross-sectoral approaches and the active involvement of communities themselves. A host of new programmes were designed, each based on principles of partnership and participation, and implemented with renewed determination to put communities and users 'in the driving seat'. Government seemed firmly committed to this communitarian model of shared rights and responsibilities. The aim was to integrate collective community engagement and individual citizen empowerment, seeing these as complementary approaches that would increase levels of public involvement and address concerns about growing disenchantment of the general public, especially younger people, with traditional politics. This 'democratic deficit', as it was termed, was revealed most noticeably in a decline in voting, with less than two thirds of the electorate voting in recent national elections, and even fewer for their representatives on local councils. This compares with four out of five people voting sixty years ago.⁵

Public bodies were charged with engaging with their constituents and users, setting up mechanisms, procedures and structures to enable community representatives to contribute to decision-making in various policy areas. At the same time, funding for capacity building, citizen education, local leadership and social enterprise was pumped into communities. All kinds of schemes were piloted, then implemented widely, monitored and evaluated; many operated at neighbourhood level while others sought to bring together strategic partners to agree so-called community plans that covered much larger areas, such as cities and counties. Engagement initiatives have included the transfer of assets to community ownership, participatory budgeting, citizens' juries, scrutiny panels, youth advisory groups and similar arrangements for marginalised groups.

⁵ Jochum, V., Brodie, E., Bhati, N. and Wilding, K., *Participation: trends, facts and figures* (London: National Council of Voluntary Organisations, 2011).

So keen was the government to promote community empowerment and civic participation that national indicators were designed specifically to measure changes in perceived levels of influence and voluntary activity among the public at large. Alongside these, a vast number of toolkits and frameworks were produced to implement and evaluate community engagement and empowerment strategies, sometimes by national government, more often by local authorities and partnership bodies.

The general election in May 2010 brought in a change of government, with a right wing coalition made up of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats taking power. This heralded a radical shift of thinking in relation to community participation, with the introduction of the 'Big Society' concept, championed by Prime Minister David Cameron to complement the government's ideological commitment to reducing the role of the state. The intention of 'Big Society' is to harness the efforts and expertise of communities to get involved in running affairs in their areas and come up with innovative ways of solving age-old problems. The government website describes 'Big Society' as "... helping people to come together to improve their own lives. It is about putting more power in people's hands – a massive transfer of power from Whitehall to local communities".⁶

'Big Society' has been widely criticised, not least because it has coincided with severe austerity measures and spending cuts in public services. It reflects, though, a deeply held ideological position whose ambition is to drastically reduce the role of the state in people's lives, to devolve power to the lowest feasible level and to unleash the energies and local knowledge of communities for the benefit of society as a whole. This experiment in subsidiarity and social enterprise has so far been slow to take off, failing to capture the popular imagination and attracting weary cynicism from many people working in the voluntary and community sector facing redundancy and unprecedented cuts in funding. Nevertheless, the government is likely to persist with this version of community participation, at least in England.

For several years now, the United Kingdom and its governments have acknowledged that its different constituent parts or jurisdictions have divergent policies and priorities. To some extent, the four jurisdictions also have differing political and democratic traditions of participation, governance and voluntary activism. Recent and current institutional and legal frameworks reflect these differences, but address common social issues, such as general disaffection with formal political structures, social exclusion and economic decline.

The situations of civil society in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are different from that of England. Following referendums in Scotland and Wales, and as part of the peace process

⁶ See the [Big Society – overview](#) that is provided on the website of the Cabinet Office.

in Northern Ireland, these jurisdictions have been given more freedom and responsibility to decide their own policies in many areas of governance. As the devolution of powers gathered pace in the 1990s, different models of community participation appeared across the United Kingdom and its different jurisdictions. However, all shared a growing concern that those affected by political and policy decisions should, as far as possible, be involved in influencing and implementing them. In Wales an ambitious regeneration and anti-poverty programme, known as 'Communities First' identified localities experiencing the highest levels of deprivation and put in place partnership boards with representatives from local communities, as well as the various statutory and private bodies responsible for delivering the agreed strategies. Its guidance stated that the programme sought to "... enable and empower people (...) to decide what is needed for their area's regeneration and help them realise their ambition".⁷ In Scotland, a more systematic approach covering all services and all policy areas was adopted with standards and training developed for community engagement for the whole country. A definition of community empowerment is currently being used which describes it as "... a process where people work together to make change happen in their communities by having more power and influence over what matters to them".⁸ A toolkit and checklist have been designed for local authorities and health bodies to use for planning and evaluating how to encourage the best possible forms of community engagement, including reaching the most disadvantaged sections of society.⁹ Northern Ireland has followed a similar trajectory, seeking to involve people from all communities in developing 'civic leadership' and 'responsible citizenship' in order to tackle disadvantage and to build sustainable and cohesive societies.¹⁰

Case study I: Community empowerment in England

This case study examines how a voluntary sector organisation was able to work with the Borough Council and other public bodies to improve communication, consultation and collaboration between the local strategic partnership and local communities. The aim of the initiative was to increase the influence of citizens over decisions relating to planning, services and spending priorities. The work described here was led and funded by Dosti, which is the community empowerment network for Dudley Borough Council in the West Midlands, located nine miles to the west of Birmingham, England's second largest city.¹¹ Dudley Borough consists of a number of small towns, each with its own distinctive character and sense of community. Together they have a population of just over 300,000 people, with about 8 per cent from ethnic minority communities and relatively high levels of

⁷ Welsh Assembly Government (2007) Guidance for Communities First programme, p.14. Cardiff

⁸ The Scottish Government (2009) Community: Scottish community empowerment action plan, p.8. Edinburgh

⁹ The Scottish Government provides this and other information on [Community Engagement and Empowerment](#) through a dedicated website.

¹⁰ See [First Steps towards Sustainability. A Sustainable Development Strategy for Northern Ireland](#).

¹¹ For detailed information, see the [Dosti and Dudley Council for Voluntary Service](#) website.

unemployment due to the decline of the steel, mining and manufacturing industries that flourished in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council (DMBC) is responsible for a range of services and has had a long-standing commitment to community engagement through various partnership forums and consultation exercises, including the overarching Dudley Community Partnership, which is responsible for local strategic planning. Following the election of the New Labour government in 1997, public authorities were required to further develop and embed their strategies for community engagement and empowerment. Many local authorities established Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) involving officials from key Council departments, health services, the police and what were sometimes known as 'social partners' – voluntary sector organisations, trade unions, communities and faith-led bodies. The structures and experiences differed from area to area, with some more successful than others in genuinely involving members of the public in identifying local priorities and developing action plans to achieve a shared vision of how life could be improved for residents and other stakeholders.

Dosti, a network of networks, embracing around 800 local voluntary organisations, community and faith groups, responded to this pressure by setting up a Community Engagement Working Group involving DMBC staff, other public agencies and practitioners from civil society. Key partners were Dudley Council, Dudley Primary Care Trust, West Midlands Police and Dosti. This multi-agency group believed that the Dudley Community Partnership was starting from a fairly high level of experience and commitment, but acknowledged that there was room for improvement. Members of the group had been meeting on a regular basis since April 2007 to consider how community engagement could be enhanced in Dudley, especially through the provision of training and support. This included thinking about the purpose, drivers and benefits of community engagement and reviewing how other authorities were carrying out their engagement strategies. In particular, the group was mindful of how engagement was experienced by communities themselves and was determined to make the process more empowering for all involved.

The group compared the DMBC approach with strategies from other areas and concluded that they could be more empowering if they adopted some of the values and methods associated with community development. This would create more effective ways of reaching and including communities who might not otherwise have got involved or felt themselves to be influential. It was acknowledged that the term 'community' is difficult to define and often masks differences and complex dynamics between people living in the same area. The group therefore recognised that engagement strategies need to take into account the many ways in which people express their shared interests and identities. It also stated that community engagement is not just a government agenda – it can be instigated

by communities themselves and that local people may want to engage with statutory authorities for a variety of reasons, including a desire to find out what is going on, to improve services, and to contribute to local strategic planning, such as setting goals and spending priorities.

Despite the existence of a local compact between the Council and voluntary sector, and a community strategy that recognised the importance of strong communities, communities in Dudley said that they wanted to be more involved in influencing decisions and that they did not feel sufficiently empowered up to that point. A series of facilitated conversations for Council officials revealed that many of them felt worried, nervous and confused about engaging with communities and involving them in decision-making. They lacked both skills and confidence, and felt they needed further training and support to take on these new roles.

One of the main problems was that there was only limited coordination between the different Council departments and other public services, such as health and police authorities. Members of the public and people working in the voluntary and community sector reported that they were confused about processes associated with community engagement and planning. They thought meetings were poorly organised and largely conducted in jargon. People felt they were not properly informed, that consultation was tokenistic and often took place too late to really influence decisions. One person described her image of the Local Strategic Partnership Board as "... a name plaque on a door to an office with no windows. Inside they haven't got a clue what's going on in the outside world... or other partnerships on the structure".¹² Although this view could be challenged for subjectivity, the metaphor of the Board as a closed room in which discussions are based only on the experiences and insights already present demonstrates one of the possibly problematic ways in which members of the public perceive local decision-making and the way it takes place.

Others felt there was too much consultation and that in any case they were not really interested. Even those who were more actively engaged, for example through the Dudley Community Partnership, felt that the Council's ways of working did not properly take into account how community representatives experience these meetings. Although intentions were good, citizens and officials alike were frustrated by their attempts to be involved and there was clearly a problem in encouraging more people to participate in meaningful ways.

The first step taken to remedy the dissatisfaction felt by all stakeholders was the production of a discussion document, entitled 'In it together' and the organisation of a consultation process so that local people could contribute to shaping the strategy for community

¹² Personal communication in interview with Lorna Prescott, June 2011.

engagement through the identification of key issues. The stated aims of the Dudley Community Partnership were to improve coordination of engagement activity between partners and partnerships by becoming more open, supportive and accessible. The Partnership wanted to plan properly for community engagement with adequate time, including giving feedback on the outcomes of engagement to the public and partners alike. Its intentions were to continually engage a larger number and more diverse reach of people in its work.

The 'In it together' discussion and consultation document set out a vision of what an 'empowering approach to engagement' might look like. It was produced by the Community Engagement Working Group and widely circulated, including through relevant websites. It explained the background to the proposal, introduced some useful terms and models for participation and illustrated some of the benefits of effective and empowering community engagement practices. As well as asking for views on the format for engagement processes, the group sought information about outcomes – how did communities benefit, did they feel more empowered and have services improved? In particular, the group wanted to ensure that people involved in partnership would feel valued and listened to and that their input would really make a difference in terms of bringing about change and influencing decisions. Alongside these approaches to increasing participation, there were also area committees and wider partnership boards, which involved mainly elected councillors and officials.

The consultation stage consisted of a number of workshops, or facilitated conversations, with public sector officials, elected members (councillors), community members and people working for voluntary organisations. These created spaces where people could ask awkward questions and voice criticisms. Around 250 people were involved and some activities were aimed specifically at young people, facilitated by Dudley's team of Young Advisors. Eight contributions were received from officials of the Metropolitan Borough Council as well as some input from staff working for local partnerships delivering housing and health related services. Generally, the 'In it together' document was well received, but people also anticipated that putting some of its proposals into practice would be challenging and might require additional resources and further training.

In order to respond to the main findings of the consultation and implement the revised strategy, the Community Engagement Working Group changed its membership to become more operational, involving officials, voluntary sector staff and volunteers. The main purpose of the working group shifted to ensure that various engagement processes were properly coordinated between the different agencies and departments, and to provide means for sharing ideas about good practice and feedback from community perspectives.

The Working Group was able to host meetings and events, and to support networking through newsletters and joint training, for example in community development, community engagement practice and facilitation skills. Training was designed so that people attending would be encouraged to pass on their learning to others in their teams, and also to build relationships that crossed organisational and sectoral boundaries, for example between health and policing.

The community engagement approach was informed by some parallel work on piloting two frameworks for assessing relative power and influence. The 'Voice' and 'Echo' frameworks, in the 'Axis of Influence' series,¹³ were developed and successfully promoted in collaboration with a private consultancy and the Community Development Exchange, a national networking organisation. Both draw on initial fieldwork research into the experiences and expectations of a range of people involved in community engagement in Dudley, and the West Midlands more broadly, including community members, voluntary sector staff, Council officials, officials from other public agencies and elected members. The first framework, known as 'Voice', was designed to help voluntary organisations, community groups and networks to assess and to increase their capacity to influence decision-making in local partnerships. This framework plots existing capacity to influence against how influential members feel their group, organisation or network actually is. It further consists of a series of participatory exercises that members can use at their meetings or at a specially convened workshop to improve their influence. In addition, the framework incorporates five community empowerment dimensions, which place the emphasis on collective action based on the core values and principles of community development. These help groups to work in ways which offer an empowering experience for all concerned, by enabling communities to be confident, inclusive, organised, cooperative and influential. The second framework, known as 'Echo', uses a similar, but complementary approach with public sector agencies and partnerships to gauge their openness to being influenced and their potential to respond to the messages received from communities through engagement processes. Various exercises are used to identify and explore the opportunities, organisational cultures, attitudes, constraints and capacity available in the statutory sector, and more importantly, to devise ways for improving community participation and empowerment.

One of the main areas of difficulty for those implementing community engagement strategies was that different departments of central government had differing expectations as to what they required from their local delivery agents and issued different guidance about how to involve citizens. This resulted in some confusion when partners came to work together – they did not always have the same understanding of key terms or a clear sense of the rationale for working directly with communities. Instead those concerned tended to

¹³ These frameworks are detailed on the website of [Changes](#).

focus on the application of available engagement tools rather than on thinking through why and how the chosen approach would bring about benefits and improvements.

These difficulties were exacerbated by rapid changes in the policy context. The government brought out a raft of initiatives in quick succession, all of which needed to be implemented at the local level. Many employees of public bodies had little understanding for the fact that community engagement should be seen as a process of increasing empowerment and partnership working between the statutory sector and private or voluntary organisations. The need for long-term capacity-building support for community participation was underestimated or overlooked altogether and there was little appreciation of the complex dynamics and diversity of even quite local communities, let alone the whole population of Dudley Borough.

A crucial part of this work has been the delivery of training courses to help people think through their engagement strategies and to learn from others. Forty-seven people attended the workshops, which were practically oriented and organised in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, using interactive and creative methods for learning. Feedback from the participants indicated that they had learned about different types of engagement and how to make them empowering, refreshed their understanding of key principles and felt reinforced in their commitment to be empowering, not just involving.

A survey of officials and voluntary sector workers carried out in October 2010 showed that there have been definite improvements in confidence, competence and commitment amongst public sector staff in using community engagement methods. Those responsible for organising the training events report that many more people in Dudley are now familiar with the 'Voice' and 'Echo' frameworks discussed above. They can use them to develop their understanding of community empowerment and engagement, to help communities become more influential and their public body to become more open to being influenced. A community engagement network was set up to support people working on this agenda and has had good attendance at its meetings. These have been opportunities for people from different organisations to ask practical questions about how to work together better, to build trust and relationships, and generally to demystify how the different communities in Dudley can become more influential and included in decision-making.¹⁴

It is too soon to say whether or not decisions about planning and services have improved, but the senior development worker at Dosti reported that people seem more prepared to cooperate on solving local problems and more understanding of each other's perspectives. Consequently, everyone has developed greater respect for community-led action, especially

¹⁴ For further information, see <http://www.dudley.gov.uk/council-democracy/engagement/> and *Engaging Together*.

where they lead to savings in public spending. A memorandum of understanding has been produced that sets out how community engagement training will be jointly provided and open to people from the public and voluntary sectors. However, at the time of writing this is threatened by cuts in funding and the elimination of positions that have had most responsibility for working with communities. Those working on the ground in Dudley and the surrounding area hope that the training and networking of recent years will ensure that there is a sufficient 'critical mass' of skills, values and knowledge left to keep community empowerment alive and growing despite the potentially negative impact of current austerity measures.

A crucial aspect of the work described above has been the role of the voluntary sector network, Dosti, in bringing together partners from different statutory and community organisations. Their approach was to listen carefully to what people were saying about their experiences, their perceptions and their feelings around being involved in community engagement activities. It was important to identify their different starting points and to use dialogue and reflection to design a programme of training and support which would suit everyone, while acknowledging different needs and perspectives. The existence of Dosti, the community empowerment network for the Borough, helped enormously. It was able to support and coordinate the involvement of people from a variety of interest groups, such as neighbourhood forums, women's groups, tenants associations, disabled people, young people, older people and faith communities. Dosti's direct engagement with the process meant that community members could contribute on the issues that were important to them rather than having to engage with the whole bureaucratic system which often ignored their priorities and timescales.

The emphasis on empowerment and inclusion as underpinning principles of the process has enabled all concerned to move forward in partnership and for citizens to engage collectively through their groups and networks, reinforcing processes of community development as well as encouraging individual participation.

Case study II: Community land ownership in Scotland

This case study examines the experience of remote rural communities living in the highlands and islands of Scotland. It focuses on how 'community buy-outs' of land and assets have been achieved through mobilising community involvement in fundraising, negotiating sales, managing projects and organising a whole range of collective initiatives to improve life for residents and attract visitors.

The 'story' presented here is based on a recent report on community land ownership and rural development,¹⁵ drawing on information collected through visits and interviews in May 2011 during a tour of 17 community land ownership projects in different stages of implementation from well established to just beginning. This research has been supplemented by interviews carried out by the author with key players in the communities referred to. The following sections consider how community ownership and management of the land has resulted in strong and resilient communities, pursuing economic regeneration and sustainable living.

Rural Scotland has experienced outward migration for centuries, with populations in some areas falling to levels that made it difficult to maintain services and infrastructure, and preserve a sense of community life. Over the past few decades, public subsidies have enabled some communities to survive, but the general decline has not been halted. In 1999 devolution led to the creation of the Scottish Parliament which meant that reforms could be introduced that dramatically shifted the balance of power between private landowners and the people who lived on and farmed the land in rural Scotland.

Although the campaign for land reform had been on-going for many decades, it gained traction in the 1990s with specific legal initiatives by residents on the Knoydart and Assynt peninsulas, and on the island of Eigg, establishing community-led organisations with the specific aim of acquiring community control over local estates. The 2002 Land Reform (Scotland) Act created the right for communities to buy estates. This was often achieved through grants and loans from the Scottish Land Fund and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), a government backed agency. Nowadays, finance is available through the BIG Lottery's Growing Community Assets Fund, part of the Investing in Communities Programme. Grants of between £10,000 and £1 million enable communities to purchase a variety of assets, thereby providing leverage and revenue for their own further development.

The Local Government in Scotland Act of 2003 consolidated the existing commitment of local and public authorities to involve 'community bodies' in the planning and delivery of services. It also empowered Councils to act in ways that advanced well-being, including through grants and the transfer of property. However, embedding citizen participation in mainstream thinking and practices has proved difficult for some agencies, despite the guidance and training provided by the Standards for Community Engagement model, devised by the Scottish Community Development Centre,¹⁶ and there is still need for an even more concerted and strategic approach to persuade some institutions to improve how

¹⁵ Skerratt, S., *Community land ownership and community resilience*, Rural Policy Centre research report (Edinburgh: Scottish Agricultural College, 2011).

¹⁶ For more detail, see the website of the [Scottish Community Development Centre](#).

they work with communities. The forthcoming plan to enshrine community empowerment in Scottish law is intended to consolidate the trend for increased citizen participation as outlined initially in 2009 in the Community Empowerment Action Plan, developed jointly by the Scottish Government and the Consortium of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA).¹⁷

As noted by Skerratt and others, until recently Scotland had one of the most concentrated patterns of private land ownership in Europe. Neglect and incompetence on the part of many landlords, only interested in maintaining estates for leisure pursuits such as hunting and fishing, resulted in a legacy of paternalism such that communities lacked control over their own destinies. Consequently, there was only limited investment in economic development and infrastructure, such as roads and telecommunications.

People living on such country estates found it increasingly difficult to sustain adequate livelihoods and decent standards of living. Reduced economic opportunities led to younger people leaving to take up education and or find jobs. This resulted in social disintegration, the ageing of the population, reduced services and little prospect of attracting new families or industries – in other words, a downward spiral of decline. A recent report, *Rural Scotland in Focus*,¹⁸ highlighted the consequences of this for rural development. Something drastic needed to happen and it required communities themselves to take up the challenge of managing the land for common benefit.

The Community Land Act asserts that communities have first option to buy private estates when the individual landowner decides to sell, and in crofting¹⁹ areas croft holders are entitled to force a sale, even against a landlord's objections. In order to do this, communities need to organise themselves and set up legal bodies to hold the land collectively on behalf of their members. Local ballots of the residents generally indicate high levels of support for this kind of buy-out. To date, there are around 20 existing and proposed community land schemes, mainly in the north and west of Scotland and mostly on the islands. Together they represent about 500,000 acres of productive land, including forestry, fishing and farming.

Community land ownership is generally seen as an opportunity for communities to attract inward investment and to generate incomes that can be used to create jobs, and run local services. Using local assets to create revenue streams is, therefore, a priority and a range of projects have been developed, notably in relation to renewable energy schemes (wind and hydroelectric turbines) and housing (for sale or affordable rent). Tourism has also offered

¹⁷ See the online version of the [Scottish Community Empowerment Action Plan - Celebrating Success: Inspiring Change](#).

¹⁸ Sarah Skerratt, et al., *Rural Scotland in Focus* (Edinburgh: Scottish Agricultural College, 2010).

¹⁹ Crofting is an ancient practice of subsistence farming, usually involving single households located in sparsely populated areas and common in Scotland and Ireland.

ways of attracting income to the islands and several of the Trusts²⁰ have developed projects that will appeal to visitors, such as walking trails, heritage tours and activities, alongside holiday accommodation, catering and merchandising.

In order to reduce dependency on grants and achieve self-sustainability, it has been common for the charitable trusts to set up trading companies, which invest any profits back into community ventures via the parent organisation. For example, on the Isle of Gigha, the community pledged to pay back £1 million of the grants used to purchase the land within just two years. The community rose to this challenge (and the need to raise additional money for other projects) by forming a fundraising committee to organise a variety of sponsored events, quizzes and other social activities. A trading company was formed to manage the hotel and self-catering cottages located on the estate as income generating concerns. Further, the grand house where the laird (the clan chief and main landowner) lived was sold, raising a considerable sum towards the target figure.

The Hebridean island of Harris is home to one of the largest community-owned estates. It is managed by the North Harris Trust via a board of elected volunteers, assisted by a staff of seven paid officers. The board's aims are to increase employment, address local housing needs and enhance the natural and cultural heritage, especially the wonderful landscape of mountains, moors and coast, by protecting rare species and establishing a network of paths. The Trust plans to create business start up units, rentable homes, a wind farm and a hydro-turbine project to generate electricity for use on the island and to sell into the national grid. It is also working to build community capacity and a sense of belonging that will recruit and retain incomers to settle and become involved in local initiatives. The board's approach has been described as simultaneously 'prudent and ambitious',²¹ and the Board of Directors are fully committed to involving as many community members as possible and working in partnership with external agencies to deliver services that fit with local needs and circumstances.

In addition to managing the land and assets for social and economic development, many of the Trusts have a role in galvanising community action and influencing national policy, through the combined efforts of the Community Land Forum.²² One concern is to lobby for public finance to be invested so that local services and infrastructure can be brought up to the standards enjoyed across the rest of Scotland.

²⁰ Community Trusts are organisations managed by local residents that can own land and other assets on behalf of the whole community.

²¹ From Skerratt's blog [Sarah Goes West](#).

²² Community Land Forum is a Scotland-wide partnership that brings together the various Trusts that have bought and developed land for community benefit.

Although most of the locations involved in community land buy-outs already had a strong sense of community and extensive networks, the complications and challenges involved usually required advice, encouragement and technical expertise that was not readily available from within. The Community Land Unit of Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE)²³ provided invaluable help, especially in the early stages of negotiating purchase, devising income generating projects and running feasibility studies. Board members received training in governance, charitable law and business regulations, repeated from time to time as some Directors retired after their period of office and new community representatives were elected, and were supported through shadowing and mentoring arrangements. Community engagement was vital to sustain interest and involvement. Regular communication and consultation about Trusts' activities, plans and achievements were carried out using traditional public meetings, exhibitions and newsletters, but good use was also made of websites and virtual networks to maintain the profile of each Trust and provide information about progress and opportunities.

Informal networks linked community members to each other and also to outside sources of expertise. Community Land Scotland offered additional, more formal, opportunities for those involved in the different communities to exchange ideas and learn from one another. Members had the opportunity to attend conferences and share experiences through the rural community of practice, known as Fiery Spirits and hosted by the Carnegie UK Trust.²⁴

As indicated earlier, the majority of people involved in community land ownership schemes are volunteers, performing their duties as trustees or community representatives on top of full-time jobs and family commitments. Some of the Trusts have been able to sustain strong Boards of Directors, but in the smaller communities it has sometimes been difficult involve new people as there is a limited pool of residents to draw on. Developing and managing community owned assets requires long-term commitment and a certain capacity to keep going in the face of disappointments and resistance. It is by no means easy to sustain good representation and accountability, but clarity of roles and transparency in decision-making are important to combat tendencies towards apathy and suspicion within the wider community.

'Burnout' is a common problem when responsibilities fall on few shoulders. For many community members, their dedication has involved weekly meetings over many years, dealing with complex decisions and resolving occasional conflicts of interest. Frictions and dissent within small communities are inevitable, between individuals and between factions, who pursue incompatible goals or hold divergent values. Open and democratic debate is

²³ HIE covers a large region in the north west of Scotland and is the Government's agency responsible for sustainable economic and community development.

²⁴ For more detail, see [Carnegie UK Trust](#) and [Fiery Spirits](#).

therefore necessary to keep communities engaged with the issues and to encourage their participation. Sometimes this is more easily facilitated by outsiders or external board members, representing non-community stakeholders.

Although the Community Development Land Trusts generally had good relationships with statutory and private agencies, Skerratt (2011) observed that they complained of inconsistencies in approach between different public authorities, for example, in how payments were made for the outsourcing of services and the levels of control such partners wished to exert over how these were delivered. Skerratt's report recommends a more coherent approach, based on area rather than policy themes such as health or housing, since outcomes are often interdependent.

Nevertheless, and despite enormous challenges, Community Land Trusts in Scotland have created virtuous cycles of success. Ownership of the land has brought with it security of tenure allowing communities to plan for the long-term and supporting the growth of many private businesses and social enterprises. As a result, populations have increased by around 50 per cent in these areas, making local schools viable, sustaining a range of welfare services (such as care for older people) and reducing the dependency of commercial suppliers on subsidies from the state. Further, new businesses have been established, some ploughing their profits back into further community investments. Services are being maintained or even expanded. Local people have greater security in terms of jobs and housing, and there real interest in tackling climate change through renewable energy initiatives has been growing.

The impetus to buy the land has come to be "... *the* catalyst for collective action, stewardship, and creative, forward-looking development".²⁵ Furthermore, "... community land purchase is felt to be local people with local knowledge taking local decisions on local matters".²⁶ It releases energy and fosters an entrepreneurial spirit that has transformed the prospects for remote island communities. Skerratt concludes that the challenge of owning and managing assets for community benefit, even survival, has demonstrated the resilience of all concerned – individuals, groups, communities and the wider networks of government and private agencies.²⁷

The work described above should be viewed as part of a wider movement for community development and asset transfer which reflects the particular characteristics of Scotland's highlands and islands (rural isolation, extensive private ownership and a history of migration). The creation of Community Land Trusts is gaining popularity as a method of

²⁵ Skerratt 2011, p. 5.

²⁶ *ibid*, p. 9.

²⁷ *ibid*, p. 12.

regeneration in other parts of the United Kingdom, especially rural areas. They allow communities to take control of assets and to use their knowledge of local conditions to devise and manage initiatives that are capable of generating sustainable income and protecting the land for future generations.

Although there is a firm commitment to local democratic decision-making, new problems have emerged and will take time to resolve. In the past, communities were able to blame either the laird or the Council for unpopular decisions. Now they have to agree amongst themselves and to negotiate compromises where necessary. Occasionally they are faced with dilemmas in their decision-making – making decisions that are broadly welcomed by community members, but that do not make business sense in terms of long-term economic viability (for example, in relation to how profits are generated and invested in local initiatives, such as housing).

Further, as a result of the recent economic downturn, public funds are diminishing and communities can no longer rely on support or subsidies from government agencies. They will need to discover other means of building capacity amongst their members, perhaps through ‘buddying’²⁸ and peer mentoring schemes for those taking on governance roles. For those communities with small and relatively stable populations, finding sufficient numbers of willing and able active citizens is likely to prove a continued challenge. However, as Skerratt emphasises in her recent report, “Community land ownership is not a quick fix. It is a long-term plan, and is an investment in livelihoods that will shape Scotland’s communities and their sustainability for many decades to come”.²⁹ It requires a combination of internal fortitude and external expertise. The quality of community relationships and the links that people can use to access technical advice and assistance all need on-going investment through local interaction, networking between the various community land initiatives and the continuing availability of advice from outside agencies.

This ‘livelihoods’ approach recognises that, for many residents, flexible working within a mixed economy will generate income from a range of sources. A recent survey of community asset transfer projects across the United Kingdom identified a number of opportunities and challenges around extending this model of regeneration.³⁰ In particular, the report highlights the critical importance of community leadership and capacity to manage the competing pressures associated with the management of communally controlled assets. The authors proposed a threefold framework for categorising how communities operated: namely as stewards, community developers or entrepreneurs. The

²⁸ ‘Buddying’ is an arrangement whereby more experienced people are paired up with newer members to provide them with informal training and support.

²⁹ Skerratt 2011, p.12.

³⁰ Aiken, M., Cairns, B., Taylor, M. and Moran, R., *Community organisations controlling assets: a better understanding* (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2011).

stewards were seen as small groups of volunteers with responsibility for managing a building that could be hired out to local community groups and residents. This provided them with a small income used to cover the costs of maintenance and possibly a small caretaking staff. The community developers were medium-sized organisations, often community-run, but with the support of paid staff who had worked to acquire their assets and used them to deliver local services and community-led activities. Community entrepreneurs can be characterised as larger, more professional organisations responsible for a mix of assets used as part of a business model for social and commercial purposes. All these approaches are present in the Community Land Trust model, alongside an overriding shared commitment to community well-being and sustainability.

Case study III: Respect and reciprocity in a community-led partnership in Wales

This case study considers how a community-led partnership, delivering a wide range of services to local people, has succeeded in building a strong sense of ownership and pride among community members and has tackled significant problems in the area.

Caia Park, formerly known as Queens Park, is the largest housing estate in Wales. It is located on the outskirts of Wrexham, a former military town close to the border with England. It was developed in the 1950s. The population of Caia Park is approximately 11,000, living in around 5000 households, many of which experience hardship due to unemployment, ill health or low wage employment.

The estate has acquired a reputation for social problems and low-level criminality. In 2003 residents of Caia Park clashed with Iraqi Kurd refugees in a series of riots. Since then community relations have improved considerably and Caia Park is now home to a number of Polish migrant workers and their families. The area is designated as one of the target areas in the 'Communities First' regeneration programme³¹ and receives considerable attention from a range of government agencies concerned with employment, health and education, although recently funding has diminished.

An early sociological study of Caia Park, explored, and to some extent reinforced, the 'tough' image of the estate, highlighting in particular the delinquent activities of boys and young men engaged in what would now be called anti-social behaviour.³² The author of the study blames these high levels of offending on the failure of the estate's planner to provide facilities other than a small shopping precinct, neighbourhood community centres and

³¹ Communities First is a major government funded programme designed to tackle unemployment, poverty and social exclusion in the most deprived areas of Wales. It was intended to be 'community-led' but has been criticised for not involving residents sufficiently in decision-making.

³² Mayo, P., *The Making of a Criminal: A Comparative Study of Two Delinquency Areas* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1969).

schools – a form of social engineering which she argued created boredom and territorial hostilities.

Today, residents of Caia Park continue to experience relatively high levels of poverty and stress and health-related problems. A lack of jobs, alongside a culture of non-working in some households, has resulted in endemic unemployment and low self-esteem. Drugs and alcohol abuse are common in some parts of the neighbourhood, with many residents living with mental health issues and learning difficulties, for example in relation to basic numeracy and literacy. Limited access to training and education opportunities have meant that many people were unable to gain the qualifications needed to secure jobs. Many tenants struggle with debt, facing eviction for rent arrears and nuisance behaviour. There is a lack of decent and affordable care for children, young people and elders, which exacerbates difficulties with potential employment.

The many obvious problems affecting households on the estate led to local churches, councillors and community activists coming together to support people to improve the situation. A door-to-door survey revealed the extent of discontent and deprivation on the estate, and resulted in the setting up of the Caia Park Partnership in 1995 and it being incorporated as a legal body in 1998. The Caia Park Partnership is a membership organisation, run by and for the residents of the estate. It is managed by a Board of elected Trustees, the majority of which live locally. Its offices and facilities now occupy a complex of several buildings, located centrally near a school and large playing fields (formerly the town dump). It is a registered charity and social enterprise, running a variety of services, many funded through state agencies or on contract to local authorities. All of them have been developed in response to consultation with local people and involve residents as volunteers as well as 'customers'.

People come to the Partnership for any number of reasons. Unemployed people might drop-in to use the computers to find out about job opportunities and receive help with applications. They might also want advice about welfare benefits or to talk with the police at its regular surgery. Others attend free training sessions in information technology, woodwork and other craft activities, some achieving certificates, others simply learning for pleasure. Young people can 'hang out' in the youth department after school and anyone can eat at the cafe, which serves wholesome and affordable meals. There is a health promotion project, aimed at tackling inequalities and reducing the worryingly high incidence of obesity, diabetes and cancer. A local food co-op provides low cost fresh fruit and vegetables. The Sparkles Nursery offers flexible, affordable childcare enabling residents to study for qualifications and to take up job opportunities.

Not all the services are provided on site and some are available to people from the whole of Wrexham. There is outreach support for tenants offering help with budgeting and neighbouring issues, and a special service to help young parents keep their tenancies. Several youth clubs are run in different centres around the estate, supplemented by detached work to support the most hard to reach youngsters and some mentoring in local schools. The Partnership manages two community venues, a house where parent and toddler groups are run, and a day care project for older people which provides a lunch club, social activities and which delivers hot meals to people who are not able to visit the centre.

Many of the people using the services are encouraged to become volunteers, contributing their time, skills and enthusiasm and several have risen through the ranks to become members of the senior staff team or Trustees. Work placements, through government-sponsored schemes and intermediate labour market (ILM) programmes have created job opportunities for people who are finding it difficult to re-enter the labour market. Caia Park Partnership places immense importance on helping local people to find a niche in the organisation, to support their progression as they acquire skills and confidence. Everyone is valued and receives proper supervision, including a record of their participation and achievements. Although they are unpaid, volunteers are rewarded through a monthly social event and awards system, including recognition in the regular Newsletter, which goes to all Partnership members, other interested organisations and partner agencies.

Funding has always been a challenge for voluntary organisations and Caia Park Partnership is no exception. Since its early days, the organisation has aimed at self-sufficiency through a combination of social enterprises and agreements for the services it provides. For the year 2011-12, it aims to generate income amounting to approx. 860,000 Euros. Currently, it runs a number of moneymaking micro-businesses, some in partnership with private firms. For example, recycling bins are provided by a local company, Cohens, and any suitable textiles deposited are laundered and mended to be sold in a second-hand baby and children's clothes shop whose rent is paid by money collected at a local pub. There is a catering service supplying 'Best Buffets' for events across Wrexham, as well as 'meals on wheels' delivering lunches for older people, some of which are house-bound. The woodcraft workshop makes a range of quality products, which are sold through Caia Crafts to raise money for the organisation. Alongside these enterprises, the Partnership uses its premises and staff expertise to offer rooms for hire and operates a training and consultancy service specialising in courses relating to the workplace such as first aid, staff recruitment, effective supervision and health and safety.

Although Caia Park Partnership appears to be a collection of separate projects, in reality it functions using a 'whole organisation' approach and is able to offer local people multiple routes to becoming involved in any number of activities and roles. The atmosphere is warm,

friendly, relaxed and supportive. The staff place great value on building relationships with volunteers and visitors, responding to individual requests and offers, and work hard to ensure that community members using the services are respected as citizens rather than as people who need therapy or care. Informal and appropriate support is available to those who want it and everyone is enabled to contribute according to their abilities and interests.

Over the years the Partnership has developed a coherent set of policies, setting out standards and expectations that apply to all staff, volunteers and users. At every step, members of the local community have been involved, resulting in a strong sense of loyalty and ownership, expressed by one worker as “proud to be part of it”. Regular in-house training makes sure that people are equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and confidence for carrying out their roles. For example, a course on committee skills and other aspects of governance ensures that the organisation’s own trustees are able to manage the Partnership’s affairs effectively and in compliance with current legislation regarding charities and company regulations. In the recent past, a ‘community development worker’ position was funded to build the capacity of small community groups on the estate and to assist them in linking up with similar networks.

The economic downturn is threatening the financial sustainability of some of the Partnership’s work, but the organisation is confident that it will find ways to survive, especially since it has the backing of local people and is highly regarded as a service provider by public authorities in the area. It has succeeded because it is so well rooted in the community, although this can also create difficulties because staff and volunteers alike are residents with lives embedded in local networks. This has the advantage of maintaining robust and far-reaching channels for communication, which convey information about the Partnership’s activities and generate feedback about how these are viewed on the estate. But the same networks can also spread rumours, suspicion and resentment if a member or resident feels excluded or disagrees with what might be happening, for example in relation to a job application or a proposal to start up (or indeed close down) a particular project. The management team at Caia Park Partnership are well aware of the potential strains between neighbours and consequently have made sure that the organisation operates as transparently as possible, with all decisions made according to clear criteria and accompanied by proper record keeping. Equal opportunities procedures are followed so that there can be no favouritism or prejudice shown towards any particular section of society, or indeed to friends or relatives. While employing community members brings undoubted benefits to the organisation in terms of their local knowledge and commitment, it can also lead to ‘burn-out’ for the individual staff that can find it hard to distinguish between ‘life’ and ‘work’, let alone maintain a balance between the two. Through regular supervision, people are helped to keep the role boundaries of their job while recognising

the value that living locally adds to the quality of the Partnership's services and accountability to the wider community.

The Partnership was disappointed not to be chosen as a delivery vehicle for Communities First when it was set up in 2003. Instead another independent but potentially similar organisation was set up covering the same area. This had some damaging consequences, notably confusion among residents and agencies as to the roles of the two organisations, together with the appearance of duplication even though the Communities First body concentrates on capacity building while CPP delivers services and provides facilities. More worryingly, CPP has tended to withdraw from involvement in community engagement activities as these are funded and delivered by Communities First. Consequently, CPP is carrying out less community development work than it would like and this has limited the impact that could have been achieved for citizen empowerment locally.

All in all, Caia Park Partnership offers a fine example of how communities have worked together to establish an organisation that is locally owned and controlled and has had a major impact on the quality of life for many people living in the area. It provides accessible, affordable services that would not otherwise exist and has empowered residents to take advantage of the opportunities provided to improve their own lives, to overcome difficulties and to develop shared social capital that potentially benefits everyone involved. The operational plan produced by the Partnership identifies key outcomes around increased employment and volunteering rates, reductions in anti-social behaviour, evictions and social isolation. Health and nutrition have also improved and people attending Partnership activities report increased self-esteem and willingness to tackle problems in their lives.

A brief visit to Caia Park Partnership confirmed that it operates a wide range of activities in a welcoming atmosphere. The multi-functional nature of the Partnership means that there is something for everyone: some people drop-in with a specific query and find out about what else is on offer. Like Avril, they might start by going along to a training session and end up as the Treasurer on the Board of Trustees or Barbie, who began by helping out with youth activities, gained a qualification in community and youth work, and came back as the Lifelong Learning and Employment Coordinator. Others are happy to stay on the periphery, enjoying the sense of being part of something bigger for a while, acquiring skills and confidence perhaps before moving on to work or volunteer elsewhere.

As one volunteer described it, the organisation 'grows people'. It treats people with respect and in turn expects people to reciprocate through their voluntary involvement or professional dedication as willing workers. The many projects being run are integrated to create a coherent sense of purpose and shared pride. The Partnership is also well connected

with external agencies and so can act as a 'signpost' for community members who might be looking for specialist advice or support of a different kind.

Overall, it is clear that the Partnership has flourished because it is so well rooted in the local community, acting as a hub with multiple spokes. The Welsh Assembly Government commissioned a report to consider how regeneration programmes might be delivered in the future, and specifically to consider how 'Communities First' schemes should evolve.³³ A key finding of this report was that "... success has come where good community development has resulted in communities identifying their own priorities and acted on them".³⁴ Among several proposals about how local citizens can be further involved, the report recommends that every target area should develop "... a network of independent community organisations – community hub – which will provide the basis to tackle social injustice directly and support communities to engage effectively and as equally as possible with statutory agencies and others".³⁵ It seems that Caia Park is already well on the way to establishing that model as an exemplar of good practice.

Conclusions

The above case studies from 'real life' experiences and practice provide examples of a variety of interventions. They also illustrate some key lessons and challenges for developing effective, inclusive and sustainable engagement. As a recent book on community development and civil society points out,³⁶ processes of participation and association are 'fundamental building blocks of society' and are core community development principles. It is therefore not surprising to see how community development methods and values have been applied across the United Kingdom to build capacity within communities and public institutions. Over the years, empowerment has been recognised as a vital dimension of participatory democracy, but issues around equality have not yet been fully addressed or embedded in mainstream thinking. Consequently, poor understanding, pressure of time and lack of resources have meant that discrimination, poverty and social exclusion continue to affect people's willingness and ability to be involved in community activities and public decision-making. The positive action practices described in the above case studies show how these problems can be tackled, but community members, officials, managers and practitioners need more to help them deal with the resultant dilemmas and conflicts.

³³ From Adamson, D. *Communities First – a way forward: some proposals for consideration* (Centre for Regeneration Excellence Wales and Wales Council for Voluntary Action, 2011).

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 1

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 5

³⁶ Henderson, P. and Versceg, I., *Community development and civil society - making connections in the European context* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2011), pp.11 and 34.

Recent policy thinking in the United Kingdom has been based on important concepts of active citizenship, partnership working and collective empowerment. The idea of 'community' is central to this approach, while at the same time being full of contradictions and paradoxes.³⁷ The ideal of 'community' is often associated with a sense of belonging, generating well-being and solidarity, on the basis of mutual interests and overlapping connections. However, some communities need additional interventions in order to be effectively involved in decision-making and for all citizens to have an equal chance to participate. Infrastructure for organising and engagement is needed so that people are able to get involved in collective activities, such as neighbourhood forums, campaigning bodies or self-help groups, not just as individuals. Experienced community workers can make a real difference to encouraging the marginalised or less confident members of communities to join in, to sorting out the inevitable difficulties and disagreements. In situations where there are relatively few people willing and able to take on positions of leadership and responsibility for community initiatives, governance training is vital so that everyone understands the formal requirements for their involvement. Opportunities for informal, peer-to-peer, learning and networking are useful for spreading confidence, skills and 'know-how' across the community.

Community members are not the only ones who need to learn about participation and engagement. As indicated in the Dudley case study, people concerned with issues of community engagement have discovered how important it is to build capacity within the institutions of the state, whether local government, health authorities or the police. Positive attitudes, a responsive organisational culture and 'openness to be influenced' are all part of an enabling environment. Having a clear strategy for community engagement, which recognises that it is a long-term journey that moves from information sharing, through consultation to dialogue and partnership working. The legal context enshrines (but also constrains) what decision-makers can do and what communities have a right to expect. This may set out general freedoms of expression and assembly for citizens, but also country-specific opportunities relating, for example, to asset transfer, involvement in planning and service delivery.

Democracy is about far more than voting, but it is also necessary to recognise that there can be tensions between a desire to involve as many people as possible in decision-making, and ensuring that elected politicians and community representatives are able to fulfil their duties regarding accountability and evidence-based policy-making. This is most evident in striving to maintain a balance between processes (building social capital and collective efficacy), values (such as social justice and cooperation) and goals (real improvements and changes that benefit communities). Demonstrating impact is also a challenge and communities need feedback on their involvement and achievements. Although this is not

³⁷ Taylor 2011, p. 4.

always straightforward, there is evidence that investment in citizen participation yields cost-savings as well as improving the quality of life in many communities.³⁸

In the United Kingdom, there remains a fairly high degree of scepticism about the value and effectiveness of citizen empowerment initiatives. Partly this can be explained by patchy and sometimes poor practice on the part of public authorities. So-called ‘apathy’ is also blamed for the ‘democratic deficit’ that has been identified in the last few decades. In order for these barriers to be addressed, the power dynamics involved must be properly understood and confronted. This applies to the distribution of power within society, the application of power in partnerships and institutions, and the power relations between citizens and the state. From the point of view for communities, recent research by the author and colleagues, suggests that *meaningful empowerment* combines the following dimensions: “... internal group dynamics (enthusiasm, comfortable team spirit, mutual challenge and praise, appropriate leadership, welcoming and inclusive approach); organisational management (clear plans and membership involvement); contact and links with other bodies (mechanisms for dialogue, respectful relationships, representation in decision-making forums, clear information and signposting), and impact (influence mechanisms and opportunities that are effective at bringing about change that group members want)”.³⁹

Clearly, the case studies show some of the different ways in which these can be achieved but also indicate the crucial role that external agencies can play in helping or hindering processes of participation and community control.

³⁸ MacDonald, D. and Barnes, M., [Business case tool for community empowerment](#), London: IDEA, now Local Government Group, 2010).

³⁹ Gilchrist, A., Evison, I., Fitzhugh, H., Stevenson, N. and Taylor, M., *Community empowerment: Meaningful ways for communities to explore their own experiences: Findings from action research on quality assurance* (London: Community Development Foundation, 2011), p. 18.

Conclusions:

Ten Critical Insights for Local Citizen Participation in Europe

Joerg Forbrig

The country chapters and case studies that have been brought together by this study provide a fascinating glimpse at the reality of local citizen participation in Europe today. They do not pretend to be, nor are they indeed, encompassing and representative of all trends, practices and experiences that can be found at the local grass roots of European democracy. They do, however, mark a first step towards a much overdue stocktaking of developments and achievements at the – all-too-often overlooked – local level of democracy in Europe. The eight countries and nearly two dozen case studies presented here indicate how colourful a landscape of actors, practices and approaches, how diverse a range of situations, problems and solutions, but also how mixed a record of successes and failures, of strengths and weaknesses can be found as citizens engage in their immediate community, locality and region.

While varied and incomplete, the picture drawn by this first set of country and case studies does allow for one overarching observation: enormous democratic potential exists where citizens take direct and continuous action to influence the development of their communities. A civic reservoir of ideas, energy and commitment exists that can do much to improve local communities and social life but that is also important for democracy broadly. As Audun Offerdal points out in a perspective from, but by no means limited to, Norway, “the first basis for a democratic form of governance is that people can indeed govern – that they can shape the society they live in. It is not blind forces that govern. Neither gods nor demons, neither fate nor coincidences decide. People can shape, and reshape, societies... Secondly, and perhaps as self-evident but worth repeating: democracy is about a shared community of people. It is about *us* and *ours*, not about *me* and *mine*... Thirdly, and some people have trouble with this, the normative basis for a democratic system is that everyone is competent to participate in governing. No one is incompetent to have an opinion about how the community should be governed. There are no experts in democracy who can tell the others what the problems are and which solutions are right... Fourthly, in continuation of the last point, politics is an important conflict solver in democratic systems. Politics is democracy’s way of solving problems, or at least of living with them”.¹

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¹ See the [2006 Report on Local Democracy in Norway](#) (in Norwegian) and its [English-language summary](#).

These parameters are, as the chapters of this study have also pointed out, not equally and always appreciated. In some contexts more than in others, they are manifest and conducive to public participation, and as a result, citizens leave their positive mark on the development of their communities. Elsewhere, these key factors face obstacles that have so far limited the impact of citizen participation. These differences across countries and cases notwithstanding, it is possible to derive from the chapters of this study a number of key insights for local citizen participation in Europe today. Ten problem areas emerge that present challenges and opportunities for engaging citizens in local democracy, that resonate in many of the approaches and good practices described in the chapters of this study, and that call for improvements. Thus structured, the following problematizes common dilemmas for all those engaged in advancing citizen participation in Europe rather than presenting recipes for success. The latter, if they exist at all, can only be found by those familiar with and committed to a particular local community: citizens themselves.

Empowerment Perhaps the most obvious lesson from the cases brought together by this study is how empowerment in different forms is key to citizen participation. Numerous examples confirm that formal opportunity without support to make use of it is often as unhelpful as no opportunity at all. The case studies highlight the fact that citizens and local authorities alike often lack competence and confidence to make the most of existing channels for participation and consultation. More often than not, the legal and institutional environment formally supports citizen participation but the social climate, culture and traditions pose powerful obstacles. This points to specific fields where training and capacity building across all stakeholders in local democracy would be required, including governance, participatory mechanisms and facilitation, conflict transformation, approaches to decision-making and strategic planning.

This said the more ‘technical’ dimension of empowerment is a necessary but by no means a sufficient condition for effective citizen participation. Equally important is the more ‘emotional’ dimension, the sense of self-worth and esteem that comes through the realisation that one can change something in the community if one tries, that one’s efforts are appreciated and that support is available if needed. In addressing what social scientists call political efficacy, empowerment for local citizen participation is truly not only about training and learning. It is also about the facilitation of mutually enriching experiences for stakeholders that are not always aware of the extent to which they are interdependent, and that this interdependence is the lifeblood of the communities they live in and serve. It is often challenging for people in positions of authority and responsibility to accept this, whether they be senior civic activists, representatives of local authorities or business leaders. In turn, ordinary citizens often find it intimidating to engage with such leaders, even when they are convinced of the validity of their cause. As almost all cases in this study demonstrate, this kind of ‘power dynamic’ can be an important and stubborn obstacle to the

introduction of sustainable processes of citizen participation (and will be dealt with further below).

In the words of one of the contributors to this study and her colleagues, *meaningful empowerment* combines the following dimensions: "... internal group dynamics (enthusiasm, comfortable team spirit, mutual challenge and praise, appropriate leadership, welcoming and inclusive approach); organisational management (clear plans and membership involvement); contact and links with other bodies (mechanisms for dialogue, respectful relationships, representation in decision-making forums, clear information and signposting), and impact (influence mechanisms and opportunities that are effective at bringing about change that group members want)".² On all these accounts, much remains to be done to empower European citizens.

Motivation The reasons prompting citizen participation in local democracy vary widely, as the chapters of this study illustrate. Some of these are more conducive to civic engagement including, in particular, disaffection with the local or even national political situation, and by extension with the social and political status quo; concerns or problems that bridge the interests of several groups of local stakeholders; a mutual sense of responsibility for the community or a sense of belonging to it; a sense among community members that 'something has to change' resulting from manifest problems, difficulties and dissatisfaction; a sense of threat to the community, its integrity or some key aspect of its identity; and distrust or suspicion towards authorities that are seen to be acting in their own interests rather than those of the community.

Tentatively, one can conclude from the experiences reflected in this study that 'negative' motivations – dissatisfaction, distrust, sense of threat, etc – are somewhat more likely to prompt citizen action than 'positive' ones, such as a mutual sense of responsibility for the community and others. It is interesting to note that forms of engagement based in protest tend to be more common than those motivated by the intrinsic sense of importance given to community or participation per se. What drives citizen participation has, however, also an effect on its nature in that a 'negative' impulse seems to be correlated to more punctual, ad hoc engagement, while longer-term and sustainable participation seems to be rooted in more 'positive' motivations. This said, evolution from more adversarial to more co-operative orientations is possible, as several of the cases also illustrate. What starts as protest may well evolve into community development, and even has to if engagement is to be lasting and constructive.

² Gilchrist, A., Evison, I., Fitzhugh, H., Stevenson, N. and Taylor, M., *Community empowerment: Meaningful ways for communities to explore their own experiences: Findings from action research on quality assurance* (London: Community Development Foundation, 2011), p. 18.

Community A recurring theme throughout nearly all chapters and cases of this study is the central importance of communities. Although not always confined to fixed localities, communities can play an important role in tying citizens together and in providing them with a sense of belonging and concern for the society locally. This social tissue and identity is a key requisite for local citizen participation, no less than the much-observed importance of social capital and democratic culture for democracy broadly. As with these broader notions, however, vibrant communities are not a given but require development and nurturing, often over extended periods of time.

As observed by many contributors to this study, this often poses a dilemma for citizen participation at the local level. On the one hand, awareness of community as a social bond, as a sense of mutual responsibility among members of the community, and as a collective sense of belonging, identity and concern are all important social assets and can spur civic engagement and activity. On the other hand, modern-day societies have seen social relationships change. Populations have become more mobile and individualistic, community bonds have weakened especially in urban areas, and ‘senses of belonging’ no longer have the same territorial dimension of a particular locality or neighbourhood as they had in the past. In the words of one of the contributors, social anomy has become widespread. Reinvigorating a sense of community among citizens has become an important dimension of, even a pre-requisite for, citizen participation.

Consequently, many cases included in this study cite explicit efforts at ‘community development’ and ‘community organising’ that have to precede enhanced civic engagement. Clearly, these processes of revitalising, if not re-establishing, communities are intrinsically linked with questions of empowerment or building capacity and self-esteem. After all, many of the worst affected communities (if considering social problems and issues) are those with the highest levels of anomy and, correspondingly, with the lowest rates of social capital. Re-constituting communities is clearly a first step towards both material development and participatory democracy.

Infrastructure Citizen participation is impossible without legal and institutional infrastructure. The existence or lack of recognised and functioning channels for individual and/or collective consultation and participation, legal conditions and provisions regulating access to information, consultation and participation, the availability of professional support for community development processes in the form of social and community workers, relevant organisational networks and civic associations – these and other ingredients determine how the will of citizens to participate translate into action. The case studies also point to interesting variations in the existence and in the effectiveness of the infrastructure available for citizen participation across regions of Europe, historical legacies and ideological traditions, and newer and older democracies.

In Central and Eastern Europe, for example, where a sharp break with the communist past ushered in many legal and institutional provisions following international standards, the formal environment for civil society and citizen participation quickly became 'enabling' as new constitutions and laws were introduced soon after 1989. However, as some case studies point out, this has not automatically facilitated citizen participation, as new laws are often implemented only pro forma by local authorities. A similar problem can be observed in some older European democracies. Certain aspects of infrastructure have long existed but have become calcified or obsolete, while more modern provisions have never been introduced, such as freedom of information acts to mention just one example.

Thus, deficits in the legal and institutional infrastructure persist in many European countries. A key lesson from the examples provided by this study is that the existence of such frameworks is neither a guarantee of citizen participation, nor is civic engagement possible without such an infrastructure. Consequently, efforts to improve citizen participation in a given local context often have to consider both levels – the very existence of, but also the effectiveness of, laws and institutions designed to enable civil society and citizen participation.

Power dynamics No less than at national or supra-national levels of democracy, local communities see various forms of power dynamics at play. They are manifest among individuals and between groups of citizens in local communities, between citizens and local authorities, among different levels in public administration and its hierarchies, and between local actors of different kinds, such as business, NGOs or intellectual and cultural elites. Many factors determine who has and who does not have formal power or informal influence in the local context, and unfortunately, these dynamics and relationships are not always governed by the 'democratic rules of the game'. Thus, a democratically elected representative may be formally endowed with power but few are the guarantees that this power will always be exercised wisely or in legitimate ways.

Others actors, although not legitimately entitled to power, may in fact wield as much or more influence. They may have superior material resources, such as in the case of large corporations, a prominent status or reputation, such as in the case of churches or intellectuals, or mobilisational capital, such as in the case of NGOs. These constellations, and the dynamics evolving around them, can be hard to comprehend for ordinary citizens who often struggle to understand how local authorities work, let alone the broader power structures that exist in most local communities. In the absence of clarity and transparency in relationships, influences and eventually decision-making, participation does not often seem promising for many 'uninitiated' citizens.

Hence, as many of the case studies point out, the so-called 'level playing field' of local democracy is, in fact, not level at all. Opportunities are skewed in favour of some who are,

by way of mandate, resources or reputation, more equal than others. What is required then, besides the empowerment of citizens, is an awareness and understanding of the power dynamics that are at play in a given local context. Even more, special measures are needed to ensure that groups whose voices and concerns are not usually heard can have their say, such as marginalised and underprivileged social groups.

Citizen participation hinges on power dynamics in a number of respects. Much depends on the attitude of holders of public power, elected decision-makers and executive authorities. If they are open towards citizens or can be brought to openness, then civic participation is facilitated. No less, those occupying positions of influence in a given local community need to act responsibly, transparently and respectfully of the general public. Finally, equal access to and quality of information are essential for citizens who are willing to participate. As exemplified by several cases in this study, if these conditions are not met, then levelling the playing field in a local community is an uphill struggle.

Approach The experiences described in this study from various corners of Europe point to the conclusion that the question of ‘how’ to engage citizens is not secondary. In fact, it appears that the approach taken to enhancing citizen participation is often more important even than the existence and effectiveness of the infrastructure available for it. At the outset this might seem somewhat counter-intuitive – how can the approach taken be relevant before the legal, institutional and organisational infrastructure has been secured? Certainly, the latter is important, but as several cases included in this study indicate, much action is possible even without extensive and elaborate means, legal provisions and institutional channels, and in situations of adversity between state and civic actors.

Without doubt, a widespread desire for change and a clear statement of principle are important starting points, and this is where questions of approach assume key importance. If a primary aim is enhanced citizen engagement, then the approach taken has to be participatory, as otherwise any civic action will be weak on legitimacy and credibility. Hence, processes of community development and local citizen participation need to begin from the bottom-up, from local concerns and needs, and need to involve the people most concerned by the issues in an inclusive, visible and transparent manner. More often than not this requires creativity, openness to others and the willingness to interact with and meet people face-to-face. And while citizen participation processes including community organising, community development and advocacy are initially often about ‘action’ – trying to get something done – underlying their success is a conscious effort at collective reflection on common concerns.

Seen from this angle, questions of approach, or probably more precisely, matters of principle, assume critical importance. If including from the outset a strong participatory dimension, civic efforts at the local level can succeed even if infrastructure and environment

are less than enabling. In turn, if paternalistic in approach, even the best-resourced civic initiative will fail. Most importantly, only through such participatory and reflective processes will civic initiatives be able to last beyond actions, whether individually successful or not, assume a life of their own and become a self-sustainable element in the democratic functioning of local communities.

External support Several of the case studies point to the role that external support has played in the emergence, effectiveness and sustainability of efforts aimed at enhancing local citizen participation. Such outside inputs can take the form of moral support or endorsement from public figures, media attention and the willingness to objectively report on problematic issues, technical expertise and competence development, or funding. Some of these resources might be found within a given community – among the citizens wishing and willing to participate, through their personal and professional networks, and in public institutions, media, business and civil society on the local level. However, the local availability of these resources is often limited, and access to dedicated support systems elsewhere becomes important for the success of citizen participation efforts.

Such mechanisms and sources of support can, at times, be informal and incidental, when individuals or groups from outside a given community take an interest, offer advice and make their own expertise, standing, networks and resources available to local actors. External support may also be available in more structured ways, through dedicated programmes, networks, organisations and institutions at national and international levels. They include expert groups, research clusters, NGO resource centres, and associations of community organisers that often function within individual countries and Europe-wide, and they extend as far as institutionalised platforms of local and regional authorities, civil society forums and the specialised programmes of a number of European institutions. Beyond Europe, an important source of inspiration and support are numerous U.S.-based foundations and NGOs that often have a long history, and therefore strong experience, with questions of local democracy, community engagement and citizen participation.

A key element of external support, as is manifest in many cases included in this study, is funding for citizen participation efforts. Although the examples included here indicate that, in order for such efforts to become sustainable, local financial resources are indispensable, many also point to the extent to which international funding has been essential, especially for initially launching and consolidating participation programmes and projects. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Central and Eastern Europe where Western institutions and foundations have long rendered critical support to local civil society. It is ironic, if not tragic, that donors typically exit once a new democracy seems to have achieved some level of consolidation. This often leaves citizen participation efforts under strain as local and national funding sources are still weak or absent. This, however, poses a further question: if citizen participation is so essential to the health of local democracy and so promising for local

development, should it not primarily be local government and society that set aside the necessary resources it requires?

Legacies The range and diversity of countries represented by this study also points to the importance of different histories and traditions that characterise individual countries, regions and localities across Europe. Some more distant, others more recent, these legacies of the past continue to leave their mark on citizen participation. In a few cases, as with the old *dugnad* tradition in Norway or the long histories of charity in the United Kingdom and Spain, legacies can provide enabling impulses and facilitate present-day practices of local citizen participation. Where there are traditions of individual and collective engagement or older forms of representing social concerns and group interests, citizen participation can draw on important foundations, as both the state and society may share a consensus about the importance of social initiative and influence for democratic debate and decision-making.

However, more often than not history and traditions seem to inhibit participatory and democratic processes at the local level. Experiences of totalitarian and authoritarian rule, the ideological dogmatism of one-party systems left and right, mass mobilisation forced upon citizens, recent wars, a historical politicisation of civil society, or claims that social interests be represented exclusively through political parties, have left their traces on many European countries. They have often resulted in widespread non-participation and withdrawal into individual concerns, the discrediting of the idea and ideal of 'community', a poor and closed attitude on the part of power-holders, decision-makers, executive authorities and society more broadly towards initiatives of civil society, the exclusion of certain groups from the public sphere, and scepticism about the necessity and effectiveness of public consultation and participation. Not rarely, such political histories of state control over society have created legacies of protest and a high potential for conflict between governments and citizens that complicate the efforts of both sides to interact, develop a consensus, and partner.

These effects of past politics are compounded by social developments and characteristics. Some of the contexts represented by this study have faced severe social and economic ruptures, such as the relocation of populations or the breakdown of major industries, eroding the social fabric of communities. Others have remained significantly traditional in their outlook, with a reliance of individuals on personal and family relationships rather than civic and community ties for needed support. Yet others are strongly marked by dominant religious institutions that place more emphasis on charitable acts than on civic action and participation. Such social features compound difficult political pasts and can be powerful obstacles to building communities and citizen participation at the local level.

Cooperation A further key aspect revealed by the cases included in this study is the extent to which cooperation and partnership building is a factor of success for citizen participation

efforts. Cooperative relationships play out on many different levels. An important first step to advancing civic action and participation is to bring together citizens spanning different social groups, interests, and generations. This typically succeeds only if an overarching concern or cause can be found, or created, that is sufficiently compelling to many citizens, unites them despite other differences, and mobilises them to engage in joint action. In some cases, as reported from Slovakia and Spain, the driving motif can be protest against local government action deemed illegitimate by citizens. In other contexts, as illustrated by examples from Croatia and Romania, civic action can be prompted by material needs for better public services. A second factor of success has been partnership with other civic actors in different localities, nationally and internationally, that are concerned with similar issues or problems. This creates opportunities for mutual learning and exchanges of experience that can inform and improve approaches and courses of action taken by individual local initiatives, and make them more effective and give them a better chance of success.

Thirdly, cooperation and partnership with relevant local government and state authorities are highlighted as indispensable by most cases presented in this study. Arguably, this aspect was the most difficult to achieve and, more often than not, it seems to be one of the main results of many local participation projects rather than an initial reality. Overcoming the widespread unwillingness of local authorities and drawing them into cooperative schemes is, beyond the success or failure of individual civic actions, a key ingredient for longer-term and sustainable forms of local citizen participation. An important attempt to advance the openness and cooperativeness of public authorities when it comes to citizen involvement is the *Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in Decision-Making Processes*. This document, which was adopted by the conference of INGOs of the Council of Europe in 2009, spells out in detail what public authorities can and should do to encourage the participation of citizens. However, this important guideline is little known, and even less implemented, by local authorities.

All three areas of cooperation and partnership are necessary for building thriving local communities. Taken together, they contribute to the interdependence of all living in and concerned with a given locality, strengthen the status and effects of citizen participation, leverage competence and credibility in dealing with local affairs, and create the basis for lasting democratic practices at the level of local communities.

Democracy While it might seem obvious that democracy is the principal condition for citizen participation, the cases described in this study reveal a more differentiated picture. They illustrate the extent to which the penetration of democratic ideals in society, and the quality of its practices in reality, influence citizen participation at the local level, its sustainability and effectiveness in the long run. All European democracies suffer from weaknesses. Changes in government, at all levels, can improve or worsen the political and

social climate, while policy priorities often shift under the impact of economic cycles and the eruption of social tensions. Institutions may remain fledgling, as in some new democracies, but they can also ossify, as in some older ones. These and other dynamics that are inherent to democracies across Europe exert important effects on the space, recognition and potential of citizen participation at the local level no less than countrywide and even Europe-wide. They influence, among others, the political and social acceptance of the ideal of public participation, the openness of a given society to change, and the level of activity of the citizens. They equally shape the credibility of civil society as a conduit for the interests of citizens, and the acceptance among elected officials, decision makers and executive authorities of the necessity and desirability of public consultation and participation.

Given these fluctuations in the political life and social perception of democracy, civil society assumes a critical role. One of its key functions, as outlined in the introduction to this study, is to demonstrate and to promote democratic ideals, principles and values, and to serve as a constant reminder of democracy to both politics and society. This presents civic actors with something of an eternal dilemma, as they strive to effectively deliver on common aims within a reasonable timeframe but without compromising the ideals of democracy and participation. As attested to by the cases described, instances of corporatisation and co-optation of civil society, and of its instrumentalisation for service provision, have not been rare. If anything, it appears that such 'deviations' have become more pronounced in recent years, given continued and even increasing resource penury and the efforts of some states to consolidate control over the public sphere. These trends have contributed to widespread criticism of civil society, as well as democracy more broadly. The primary task for civil society, therefore, is to steer a balanced course between effectiveness and efficiency on the one hand, and democratic and participatory practices on the other. One area that particularly lends itself to recovering such a balance is citizen participation at the local level, as the cases included in this study also argue.

These observations, as much as the country and case studies comprising this study, highlight how much citizen participation and democracy in Europe remain a work in progress. Numerous efforts at citizen engagement, community development and civil society are underway in the immediate habitat of Europeans; some have been detailed in the chapters presented here, others will be added in a next stage of this learning project on local democracy in Europe. They represent a rich reservoir of ideas and solutions, civic creativity and participatory practices but they also constitute a catalogue of the many remaining problems and challenges to citizen participation at the very grass roots of European democracy. Tapping this collective knowledge will be key to further boosting citizen participation in local affairs and decision-making, and thus to adding an ever more important building block of contemporary democracy in Europe.

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The **Central and Eastern European Citizens Network (CEEEN)** started its operation in 2001 as a project of the Center for Community Organizing, Slovakia and was officially registered as an independent entity in January 2005. Its main aim is to strengthen democracy through encouraging citizen participation, and it works to promote citizens participation in the CEE region and provide opportunities for grassroots initiatives to learn and exchange experiences and ideas. The main activities of CEEEN include:

- **Citizen Participation Week** - annual week long program with simultaneous national and local events to heighten importance of active citizens
- **Citizen Participation University** - early summer activity for people working in this field which provides time for reflection by combining theory and experience
- **Action studies** – documenting actual experience on participation in Europe which helps analysis and reflection
- **Promotion of e-participation tools** – exploring additional ways in which citizens can more effectively be active
- **Exchange of experience and best practices** – sharing of things that are being learned about how better to ensure active participation
- **Joint activities and actual exchanges of grassroots initiatives** – learning firsthand how others have brought about change

In 2007, CEEEN became a member of the Council of Europe’s Conference of INGOs. The European Community Organizing Network joined CEEEN in 2008. CEEEN established a strategic relationship with the Combined European Bureau for Social Development .

Structure

- Membership - open to organizations and individuals in CEE who share our mission.
- A Representative Team - each member country has a representative.
- A Coordinating Team – elected by the Representative Team

Member countries

Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Republic of Belarus, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine

More information about CEEEN and its activities is available on www.ceecn.net.



The **Combined European Bureau for Social Development** (CEBSD), the European Community Development Network, is a non-governmental European umbrella organisation which brings together a variety of partners from a dozen countries both inside and outside of the European Union. It is registered as a foundation under Dutch law. CEBSD has nearly two decades of experience of working to develop civil society actions and democracy.

Mission

Although Europe is a 'wealthy democracy' where everybody should have guaranteed basic human rights, the reality shows that there are still people being excluded. That is why CEBSD works on inclusion, participation and democracy through the promotion of community development.

CEBSD should contribute to the optimal development of sustainable community development in Europe. In that way CEBSD:

- supports citizens, professionals and policy makers from different countries in Europe;
- endeavours to develop a Europe which functions on the basis of community and participative democracy;
- helps build European civil society through community development.

Aim and Activities

To achieve its mission, CEBSD aims to implement dynamics which could help transform the European reality. Within this framework, CEBSD carries out the following activities:

- Studies and research – national and international;
- Facilitation of agency development;
- Taking part in policy discussions on social development;
- Make studies of good practice widely accessible by disseminating the results
- Use all legal means possible to achieve the goals of Community Development

Structure

CEBSD consists of the following:

- a Board to which all CEBSD members belong; an Executive Committee;
- Friends of CEBSD;
- Task Forces;
- Ad Hoc Commissions.

More information about CEBSD is available on www.eucdn.net.