

PARTICIPATORY METHODS

TRAINING LEVEL: Beginner

TRAINING TOPIC

There are many participatory methods for involving target groups in your projects. Each method is suitable for different types of participatory processes and projects. Some are best applied when revitalizing a square, others when preparing an urban development strategy. Some will bring specific suggestions from the public for your project, others representative data about the prevailing needs of users of the given location. In this training you will learn examples of participatory methods and basic principles for selecting the most suitable method based on what you need in your project.

TRAINING OBJECTIVES

In this document you will learn:

- Common participatory methods and for which types of projects to use them
- How to select the right method

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1. KEY TERMS DEFINITION

Participatory method

Participatory method is a way of involving an identified target group(s) (e.g. the general public, a specific demographic group or stakeholders) in a participatory process in order to achieve a goal that is needed to move the project forward, e.g. obtain data, co-create a proposal, involve the target group in decision-making processes, etc. Participatory methods are an essential tool in participatory processes.

Data

In participatory processes, we use the word data to refer to any information we obtain from target groups. In addition to socio-demographic data such as the age, gender, or education of the participants, this includes information such as: needs, suggestions, specific proposals, opinions and preferences, etc.

Engagement

Engagement means involvement of the target group in the process. With a high level of engagement, participants feel that they are a real part of the process and can have a greater role in it - e.g. they co-create a proposal for a solution to a certain problem, participate in decision-making processes, etc.

2. HOW TO SELECT THE BEST PARTICIPATORY METHOD FOR YOUR PROJECT

Every participatory process consists of participatory methods - usually a combination of multiple methods. Early in the planning phase of a participatory process, you need to determine what you want to achieve through participation at different stages of the entire process, e.g.:

- *I want to raise awareness of the existence of my project among the general public.*
- *I want to get information from a specific group of users of the space regarding their needs, what bothers them the most and what they value most in the given area.*
- *I need to know the preferences of the majority of the city's residents regarding the future direction of the city.*
- *I want local stakeholders to feel that they are sufficiently involved in the participatory process and thus perceive this project as their own.*

We distinguish two main groups of participatory methods:

1. Methods with high data value

These methods bring you valuable information (data) from the participants in the process. These are both quantitative or qualitative methods such as focus groups, representative surveys, etc.

2. Methods with high level of engagement of the target group

The primary aim of these methods is to enable the target group to feel involved in the participatory process, e.g. public meetings. However, their data value is lower, as it is not possible to ensure the necessary representativeness and the outputs may not correspond to the beliefs of the entire community, but only to a narrow group of active citizens who decided to come to the meeting.

Many methods can, to varying degrees, deliver both public engagement and representative data collection. When designing a participatory process, you can consider which methods to combine to achieve both goals. However, it is necessary to clarify what is more important for your process - high-quality representative data or the involvement of active citizens - and put emphasis on it.

Furthermore, we distinguish two types of data:

1. Quantitative data

We need numbers and percentages (e.g. 60% of the public prefer option x).

2. Qualitative data

We need ideas, suggestions and other information from the target group for a deeper understanding of the problem.

It is common to combine methods to gather both types of data: you can start with a qualitative pre-research (e.g. in-depth interviews) to identify the main topics, needs and problems, and continue with a quantitative survey to validate the findings from the qualitative part - quantitative research will allow you to quantify preferences, opinions, etc.

3. COMMON MISTAKES WHEN SELECTING A PARTICIPATORY METHOD

- **The method dictates the process**

It often happens that participatory process coordinators decide upfront to organize a public meeting without taking the time to define the objectives of participation. This is a common mistake that stems from unfamiliarity with the complexity of participatory processes. People know a couple of frequently used participatory methods (public meeting, opinion poll), and they keep repeating those whatever the goal of the participatory process is, instead of considering existing alternatives that would fit the given context better. A poorly chosen method leads to low-quality outputs (insufficient or biased data, low involvement of target groups, etc.), which then affects the quality of the entire project and can even diminish public trust in the institution.

Therefore, a fundamental rule for selecting a participatory method is: **first determine the goal of participation and then select the right method.**

- **Participation perceived as PR**

Participation is often perceived only as an opportunity to inform or present the institution's agenda, and its main goals - data collection and involvement of target groups in the process - are neglected. The impact of participation in such a case is minimal - the project in question is not planned and implemented with regard to the needs of the target users, and thus has a high risk of failure.

- **Lack of know-how about participation**

The above-mentioned mistakes usually result from a lack of know-how in the field of participatory planning - e.g. what results can participation bring, what participatory methods exist, and how to improve existing processes.

Lack of know-how within the institution can be solved by hiring a participatory planning expert. For selecting suppliers of high-quality, consult [training on public procurement](#).

4. EXAMPLES OF PARTICIPATORY METHODS

Below you will find a selection of common participatory methods and what type of projects they are suitable for.

Roundtable

- A form of facilitated discussion, where participants are seated at round tables and discuss a given topic in groups.
- Suitable for gaining input from participants and stakeholders on a given issue.

In-depth interview

- A qualitative research method, where you talk with one member of the target group about a specific issue or topic and ask in-depth questions about their experiences, opinions and suggestions.
- Suitable when you already have an idea of what is bothering the target group and you need to get more details (e.g. causes, connections, etc.).

Focus group

- A qualitative research method where selected members of the target group participate in a facilitated group discussion.
- Participants are randomly selected to ensure representativeness within the population.
- Suitable for getting ideas on a given topic.
- A method with high data value but low engagement.

Public meeting

- A meeting with a larger number of participants from the target group open to anyone who wants to join (depending on the needs of a specific project, participation may be subject to registration).
- Suitable for providing basic information to the public (information flow from the institution to the public) about a specific problem, project or process as well as for obtaining information from citizens (collection of suggestions, comments, feedback). It can also be used to collaborate on finding solutions.
- Public meetings have lower data value due to the self-selection of participants: only the citizens interested in participating will come to the meeting, and thus the representativeness of the data is not ensured.

Representative survey

- A sociological survey which, on a representative sample of the target population (e.g. residents of a specific city district), ascertains opinions, attitudes and preferences on a given topic or issue.

Opinion poll

- A quantitative questionnaire survey, which serves to determine preferences or validate hypotheses among a larger number of target group members. Unlike a representative survey, the representativeness of the sample of respondents is not ensured and the output data may not fully correspond to the general mindset of the target group.

Voting

- Suitable for setting priorities and understanding what is important to the target group.
- It is necessary to specify the weight of the vote in advance - are the results only informative for determining preferences or are they binding and have an impact on decision-making processes?
- There are different voting methods (e.g. different vote weights, upvotes, downvotes, etc.).

Emotional map

- Group work with a map, where participants draw on the map or otherwise visualize where they perceive problem areas, where they would like to see changes, etc.
- Suitable for collecting suggestions related to a specific area.

Urban walk

- A guided walk in the project area, usually led by an architect, during which the participants can mention their needs and suggestions. All inputs are recorded.