DESIGNING PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

TRAINING LEVEL: Beginner

TRAINING TOPIC

How to design a participatory process? How to approach participatory process design, what needs to be taken care of, what to remember and what to avoid. Participation is not an end in itself. It is a tool that can help you build public trust in institutions, ensure that planning and decision-making meet the real needs of target users, and thus improve the effectiveness of planning and decision-making processes. The greatest benefit of participation for your institution is obtaining quality and meaningful data from the public and stakeholders.

TRAINING OBJECTIVES

In this document you will learn:
- What participatory process design is and how it works
- How to approach participatory process design
- What requirements participatory processes need to meet

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1. KEY TERMS DEFINITION

Participatory process
The process of involving the public and/or stakeholders in a project to ensure that the project outcomes meet the needs and realities of the target user group. Participatory process usually takes place as part of a particular project, e.g. revitalization of a public space, creation of a strategic document, etc. The timeline of the participatory process can be identical to the timeline of the project, if participation is implemented in several phases throughout the entire project, or the participatory process can be only a section within the project, if participation takes place only in one particular phase. Participatory process is composed of participatory methods and tools.

Participatory methods
A range of activities to involve the public and stakeholders in the participatory process, e.g. public discussions, round tables with key actors, sociological research, emotional maps, etc. Some methods bring more data about the researched issue, but have a low level of active public involvement (e.g. sociological surveys), other methods, on the contrary, provide a lot of space for active involvement of participants, but their data value is lower (e.g. public hearings). In order to select the right method(s), it is therefore crucial to first clarify the goal of the entire process and for what purpose the method is needed. Multiple methods can be combined to obtain the desired outcomes.

> Qualitative methods: methods used to obtain suggestions, inputs and ideas and to gain a deeper understanding of a particular issue.

> Quantitative methods: methods used to obtain numerical information and data.

Civic tech
Technology that connects citizens with government institutions. Civic technologies enable communication, informing, participation in decision-making processes, and two-way transfer of information between the institution and citizens.

E-participation
Participatory processes that involve the use of civic technologies. A process that allows citizens to connect with each other and with government representatives.

Stakeholders
Stakeholder, also a key actor/player, is a person or an entity who represents the interests of a larger user group or community, or who can influence the success of the participatory project in any way. It can be a company, institution or association whose

agenda is related to the given project, or an individual who influences public opinion ("opinion-maker").

2. IMPACT OF PARTICIPATORY PLANNING

Participation is not an end in itself. It is a tool that can help you build public trust in institutions, ensure that planning and decision-making meet the real needs of target users, and thus improve the effectiveness of planning and decision-making processes.

Participatory planning has two types of impact:

- Measurable

These are specific, measurable things and values, e.g. saved finances, saved time and manpower or necessary capacities for the project.

- Immeasurable

These are intangible changes and things whose value cannot be measured, e.g. citizens' trust in an institution, improved quality of life of inhabitants, or satisfaction with how a project or process has been conducted.

3. LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION

It is essential to determine the level of involvement of the target groups in decision making about the project early in the planning of the participation. There are multiple levels of participatory planning and it depends on you, the manager of the participatory process, to what extent the public or stakeholders will be involved. Participatory planning does not mean that the public decides everything, but at the same time it can be more elaborate than just informing about projects on the municipality's website. The appropriate level of participation depends on the type of project and your time and financial resources. Below are the four main levels of participation ranked from lowest to highest:

1. **Informing**

Target groups are only passive recipients of information. The manager of the participatory process decides on publishing information about the intended interventions and any further explanation of the given project or plan. At this level, however, the target groups cannot influence the project in any way.

2. Consultation

Target groups are approached at multiple stages of the participatory process to gather ideas, map needs, comment on the design and provide feedback. Urban planners take into consideration the obtained information to plan the intervention and make an effort to create a design that meets the needs of the target groups. However, the information gathered from citizens is not binding and it depends on the manager of the participatory process to what extent it will be incorporated.

3. (Co-)creation

Target groups actively participate in creating proposals, solutions or recommendations. This can take the form of, for example, the establishment of a working group for the project composed of employees of the institution, experts, and representatives of the public. Such collaboration enables stakeholders to learn from each other and to jointly seek project solutions.

4. (Co-)decision-making

Target groups are involved in voting on the project and thus have the power to decide on some aspects.

4. TYPOLOGY OF PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES

Below you will find examples of the most common types of participatory processes at the city and regional level.

A. Revitalization of public spaces, spatial planning and investment projects

Projects in spatial planning such as revitalization of public spaces and buildings fall into this category, e.g. concept development, spatial analysis, architectural or urban planning feasibility studies and competitions.

B. Participatory budgeting

The municipality allocates part of its budget and the public decides what the funds will be used for. Citizens can propose projects for implementation and then vote on the winner. There are different variants of participatory budgets that can be aimed at specific agendas or socio-demographic groups.

C. Strategy and vision creation

Involving the public and stakeholders in the creation of strategic documents to ensure that future development meets the needs of target groups.

D. Engaging the local community / demographic group

Projects that focus on the involvement of specific socio-demographic groups to solve problems and challenges specific to those groups, e.g. youth, single parents, senior citizens, etc.

E. Projects with a specific agenda

Projects addressing a specific agenda, e.g. climate change, water and drought, transport, healthcare, etc.

5. STEPS TO FOLLOW WHEN DESIGNING A PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

1. Have a clear project goal

Participation is not an end in itself and your goal cannot be just "to participate". Participatory planning serves as a tool to help you achieve your project goals faster and more efficiently. Therefore, when designing a participatory process, start by defining the goals of the entire project and use participation as a way to achieve them.

Only after the project goals have been established can a participatory process plan be drawn up, effectively managed and subsequently evaluated. A well-thought-out plan and a clear vision, together with an understanding of why you want to participate, are the keys to quality and sustainable processes.

2. Don't forget the stakeholders

Participatory planning aims to involve not only the general public, but also key actors and stakeholders in the participatory process. Stakeholders are persons or organizations who have an important role in the public space of a given area and/or can otherwise influence the course and success of the project. Stakeholders represent the interests of a larger group of people, not just themselves as individuals, e.g. civic associations and interest groups, schools and kindergartens, real estate developers or well-known personalities. They have a specific agenda and reason to engage in the

participatory process. The data and information they hold are of great value to the participatory process team.

Be clear from whom you need to get information and who is the target group (or target groups) for involvement, already when you start planning a project or designing a participatory process. For some projects, the target group may primarily be the general public, while others will be aimed only at institutional actors. However, oftentimes, you are going to need to involve both groups, the public and the stakeholders, in the participatory process.

[Learn more about how to map and engage stakeholders in this training](#).

3. Establish quality project management

Well-defined and clearly established rules of cooperation and project management are the key to the success of any project, including participatory processes. The first important step in process design is to carefully plan a course-of-action before proceeding with any further steps.

At the beginning, it is essential to define the following - individual project phases, timetable, budget, contractors and the team responsible for the delivery of the project. In your team, it is especially important to map human resources and knowledge, determine who is responsible for which phase of the project and ensure quality project management.

Additionally, the manager of the participatory process must define the objectives of the entire agenda and individual parts of the process and establish metrics/measurable criteria for evaluating whether the objectives have been achieved. Projects with bad metrics, incomplete project documentation and unspecific goals usually end in failure, disappointment and reluctance of participants to engage in participatory processes in the future. [Learn more about project management for participatory processes](#).

4. Develop a communication strategy

Communication is an essential part of any quality participatory process. Inefficient and incoherent communication strategy and poor project management are the two most common causes of failure of participatory processes. The basic rules of effective communication with the public and stakeholders are to inform them about participatory activities well in advance, in a way they can understand and using such channels that the information can reach them.

Along with effective external communication towards the public and target groups of the project, it is also necessary to focus on internal communication within the department or institution itself. Some participatory projects will require the collaboration of several departments or divisions within the institution. Well-functioning internal communication ensures that everyone involved has up-to-date information on current developments, which positively affects the quality of the entire project.

When designing a participatory process, pay attention to the development of a communication strategy - both external and internal. It is necessary to map out and plan with whom, in what way and how often to communicate during the process.

5. Tailor the process to suit the local environment and context

A common mistake in participation is the belief that participatory processes are a one-size-fits-all solution and a course-of-action that worked for one project can be replicated indefinitely. This is a fundamental mistake. Each project, area or target group has its own specifics that must be taken into account in designing the participatory process.

Effective participation is tailor-made, taking into account local challenges, issues and demographics of the target group. You can be inspired by best practices from elsewhere, but always consider whether some aspects need to be adapted to the local context.

6. Select the right digital tools to increase process efficiency

Nowadays, it is difficult to do without digital tools that can make the individual phases of the participatory process more efficient. The so-called civic tech or e-participation tools are used to deepen the contact between government institutions and the public and enable greater public involvement in planning and decision-making processes. Various tools and platforms are available for voting, collecting proposals, questionnaires and surveys, managing contacts or activities such as crowdfunding, or simply informing about new events in the project.

It is essential to select civic tech tools carefully and with deliberation, as their use alone does not guarantee success. Without first clarifying what specific functions the tool should have, public sector representatives often select the wrong tool - either based on its aesthetics or persuasive techniques of the salesperson - and the tool cannot be used as needed. The form and structure of your participatory process determines what functions the civic tech tool should perform. Therefore, first define what those functions

are and only then choose the tool that best suits your needs. [More about civic tech and how to select the right one](#).

7. Think about data

The greatest benefit of participatory planning for your institution is obtaining quality and meaningful data from the public and/or stakeholders. The collected data help institutions make decisions that are in accordance with the needs of the target groups. They also provide information on long-term trends, preferences and concerns of participants, the mood of citizens and the most common problems encountered during a project or a process.

The data you are going to work with during the participatory process can be divided into the two following categories:

- ***Data on target groups obtained during the participatory process that can be used for other projects***

In participatory processes, various data about target groups (stakeholders, the general public, local communities or socio-demographic groups) are obtained either in form of reports from sociological surveys and polls, reports from workshops with the public summarizing the needs mentioned by the participants in relation to a certain agenda, or in form of ideas and comments for a particular project or agenda.

When planning the project, think about what specific data and information you need to obtain during participation. This will help you choose the right participatory methods and tools to use.

Moreover, the collected data are valuable not only for the project in question, but can also be useful for other projects that you and your organization are working on or will work on in the future. It may happen that your institution already has the data you need for your project, as they may have been collected by another department. Therefore, before you start the participatory process, inquire whether the data you need are already available at your institution.

When designing a participatory process, think about how to effectively use the collected data: how and in what format will you collect data, who will analyze them and how? Where to store them and who will have access to them?

- ***Data and project reports that enable effective project management, assessment and evaluation***

Throughout the duration of the project, it is important to record, save and share information on progress, important milestones, decisions and other developments, e.g. records from project team meetings, update reports from contractors, attendance sheets from workshops, etc. These documents enable you to monitor the progress of the project for its final evaluation and should be accessible to all team members. A final evaluation at the end of the project, or at least a simple continuous monitoring and evaluation throughout its duration, is essential to identify what went well in the participatory process and what parts did not work and could be done better. This will help you to avoid repeating mistakes in the future and know what changes to make for the next project cycle or another similar project that you and your organization will work on in the future.

It is important to decide on how to evaluate the project in the early stages of project planning, in order to know what data and reports are needed for the final evaluation and what information to record throughout the duration of the project.

8. **Think systematically and in context**

Implementing one participatory process can be fairly easy. However, if your organization implements several participatory processes at the same time, the whole agenda becomes increasingly complex and needs to be approached systematically and in context. If not, you risk the following: overloading the team, radically reducing the quality of participatory processes, overloading the public with too many participatory activities, etc. This results in poorly managed participation and consequently reduces the public's trust in the institution and their willingness to engage in future participatory activities.

What can be done to prevent these risks? It is essential to clarify how the participatory process in question fits into your agenda and long-term plan and figure out how it relates to other participatory processes within your institution. If you have several participatory processes going on at the same time or in close succession, it is advantageous to coordinate and consolidate them. It is important to spread the participatory processes throughout the entire year so that the same target groups are not addressed too often regarding similar agendas. In order to achieve this, effective internal communication within the institution is essential and individual departments or divisions must inform each other about participatory processes and collaborate.

9. Ask for advice

If you are unsure how to set project goals well, how to choose the right methods and tools for the participatory process, how to develop a communication strategy or if you do not have sufficient capacity to design a participatory process within your institution, do not hesitate to ask for expert advice. A good move is to ask experts to help you set up a framework for the process before you start designing the specifics.

6. MOST COMMON SHORTCOMINGS

A. Poorly defined project goals

Participatory processes need clearly defined goals and will never work well if an institution participates only because another institution does or because it is wanted by the political representation. Unclear goals lead to dysfunctional projects that result in wasted time and money, disappointed participants and project coordinators, and conflicts. One poorly managed participatory process can cause frustration and mistrust of participants, and make it harder to implement other participatory processes in the future.

B. Incoherent project management

If the participatory process is managed poorly, its quality will be significantly reduced. It is necessary to clearly establish who is part of the project team, what are the responsibilities and who is responsible for what, and what is the schedule and framework of the project. Otherwise, time and resources are wasted and people are unnecessarily overloaded. All these factors then lead to a lower quality of the participatory process.

C. Lack of knowledge about the market and tenders

Participatory planning is a rapidly developing discipline. The associated market, which offers the delivery of individual participatory activities, tools or the entire project is developing just as quickly and it is not always easy to understand what is on offer.

Moreover, a frequent problem is a lack of knowledge within the institution on how to organize tenders for suppliers of participatory planning services. Participation is not a service where price should be the decisive criteria for which supplier wins the contract. The success of participatory planning is largely influenced by the participants'

confidence in the process - if people are disappointed by their first experience, it will affect their willingness to participate in the future. As such, if you intend to conduct a participatory process, focus on its quality and select qualified suppliers. This can be ensured by correctly writing the competitive criteria of the tender, which would include references or a proposal of the course-of-action by which the supplier would implement the contract.

D. Not thinking about data in advance

This occurs when the participatory process team or its manager are not clear about what data they need to collect during the process and in what form. Furthermore, when data are already collected from citizens, it is often not thought through how to store them and how to subsequently analyze them, to whom to give access to them or what exactly the obtained information can be used for. In fact, data have value not only for the project during which it is collected. Data from one participatory process can also be used for other projects or as a basis for planning future projects and processes. Each participation is a small probe into the mood of the citizens in your district.

7. STAGES EVERY PARTICIPATORY PROCESS SHOULD GO THROUGH

Each participatory process is slightly different and cannot be exactly replicated. However, whether it is the creation of a strategic document, the preparation of an urban study or a participatory budget, you can usually follow the general stages detailed below, which form the basic building blocks of a participatory process design.

1. <u>Process planning and set up</u>

The initial planning stage of each process, which focuses on planning of the entire process, agreeing on the course-of-action and preparing all necessary materials.

The following activities are included:
- Agreement on the intention / goal of the process
- Setting the rules
- Setting up project management
- Defining target groups
- Stakeholder mapping
- Developing a detailed plan
- Identification and provision of the necessary tools

2. **Deliberation and data collection**

The first stage of participation, which allows to obtain input information from the target groups of the participatory process, e.g. through gathering ideas, needs or suggestions. Its form and length depend on the specifics and goals of the project and the type of participatory process. Participatory processes that focus primarily on obtaining information may use short meetings with the public and/or questionnaire surveys to collect information. Other processes that, in addition to the data collection, also emphasize the participants' deliberation or aim for participants to co-create quality proposals and recommendations, will need longer participatory meetings with a clearly defined framework.

A variety of participatory methods can be used at this stage, depending on the specific goals of the given process and the type of information you need to obtain. Here are some examples:
● Opinion poll, sociological survey
● Workshop with stakeholders and the public
● Focus group
● Emotional map
● Urban walk

It is important to record all information and data obtained at this stage so that you can use it for further work.

3. **Data analysis and processing**

At this stage, experts process the input data obtained during the previous stage. For a strategic plan or urban study, this means to base the preparation of the given documents on the input data obtained through participation. In the case of participatory budgeting, this will be the analysis of proposals and their approval.

4. **Feedback stage: Voting / commenting on proposals**

The fourth stage in total and the second stage that involves participation, where the target groups have the opportunity to give feedback or even decide (depending on the type of process) on the outcome of the previous stage. For a strategic plan or urban study, this means that the public will comment and provide feedback on the proposed document. In the case of participatory budgeting, it will take the form of a public vote on the proposed projects.

5. Incorporating feedback and preparing implementation

At this stage, the outcomes of participation in the previous stage are incorporated and the project is being prepared for implementation. For a strategic plan or urban study, this means incorporating the feedback and finalizing the document for final authorization and implementation. In the case of participatory budgeting, this will take the form of preparing the winning projects for implementation.

6. Finalizing the participatory process and beginning of project implementation

The sixth stage occurs when the participatory process itself is finalized and the implementation of the project, which was prepared through the participatory process, begins, e.g. the implementation of a strategic plan or the implementation of winning participatory budget projects.

For more complex participatory processes, it is advisable to set up a participatory process for the implementation of the project itself to ensure that it corresponds to the needs and expectations of the target groups.

7. Process evaluation

Every participatory process should be evaluated after its completion, or at least undergo a simple monitoring and assessment. This stage is important to understand what went well in the participatory process and what parts did not work and could be done better. This will help you to avoid repeating mistakes in the future and know what changes to make for the next project cycle or another similar project that you and your organization will work on in the future.

Even though the evaluation itself will be done at the end of the participatory process, you need to collect evaluation materials during its entire course. Therefore, already at the initial stage, clarify how you are going to evaluate the process and what information you will need to collect throughout its duration. The evaluation can be outsourced to a third-party evaluator. If you do not need a robust evaluation procedure and are mainly interested in what worked, what did not and how to adjust the process in the future, an internal monitoring plan prepared by your team may be sufficient. [Learn more about evaluation in this training](#).

Additional stages that run parallel throughout the entire participatory process:

8. **<u>Communication</u>**

9. **<u>Project management</u>**