HANDBOOK
FOR CIVIL SERVANTS
AND CSOs

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

WRITTEN BY Urmo Kübar and Hille Hinsberg

PRAXIS 2015

HANDBOOK
FOR CIVIL SERVANTS
AND CSOs

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

WRITTEN BY Urmo Kübar and Hille Hinsberg

PRAXIS 2015

The second, revised and amended version of this handbook was financed by the Government Office of Estonia, while the first edition, published in 2009, also received funding from the domain of the Minister for Regional Affairs operating under the Estonian Ministry of the Interior. Translation from Estonian to English was supported by Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Authors: Hille Hinsberg (PRAXIS Centre for Policy Studies), Urmo Kübar (Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations, NENO)

Translation for original version (Estonian): Praxis 2015

Riigikantselei

POLIITIKAUURINGUTE KESKUS
PRAXIS
CENTER FOR POLICY STUDIES

EMSL
Vabaühenduste liit

Contents

1. What is Public Participation?

During a training session we asked public officials to define "public participation" to a four-year-old. These are some of their answers:

„Public participation is when we decide together whether we want go to the movies or to the zoo tomorrow."

„Why don´t you tell me what you´d like me to prepare for lunch/dinner today!"

„When we´re watching TV together, and you want to change the channel, then it would be polite to ask for permission first."

„Please let me know the next time you want to build a playhut under the dining room table."

„If you don´t intend to clean up after yourself, then please do not come inside wearing dirty boots."

„Will you come and help us with the repairs? Please hand me that brush!"

„It´s not possible to do that with such small children. At that age we do what I say."

These definitions represent examples of different methods of public participation: information (letting others know before doing something), consultation (choosing between alternatives), empowerment (inquiring about the other party´s preferences), coordinated activities (helping somebody do something) or at least gaining support for subsequent action (asking for permission). In addition, there were also some other examples (do as I say!), that are also common in any interaction, although being treated that way does not make us feel particularly great

Public participation means that decisions are made together, with consideration to others, and applying the same principles to our actions. As can be seen from the examples above "the others" can mean only one or two people. In the following pages we focus mainly on situations where we need to engage tens, hundreds or even thousands of people, who are affected by the decisions being made, who might provide us with valuable input or whose support is instrumental for successful implementation.

Who is the target group of this handbook?

Public participation is possible and advisable in different situations, and there is a wide variety of methods to utilize. This handbook is mainly focused on public participation in decision-making processes, including organizational or sectoral strategies, development plans, action plans or budgets, legislative or governmental drafts, positions or proposals. Same principles can be successfully applied in public participation if your goal is to develop better public services, create new products or do something else.

Owing to the specific practical expertise of the authors, this handbook will mainly focus on participation in the public sector and civil society, but these recommendations are applicable in other areas as well. First and foremost, this handbook is aimed at government officials both at the state, and local levels, and NGO leaders – the people who are directly responsible for organizing public participation activities.

How to use this handbook?

This handbook is useful for planning as well as implementing public participation processes. The authors aim to answer and anticipate any questions that may arise in the process. Drawing on best practices and literature we will demonstrate why participation or some aspect thereof is necessary. Here you will find recommendations what to do to ensure successful participation. We bring you practical cases, with both successful endeavors and also learning curves, from Estonia. Each chapter begins with an overview of issues to be covered and we conclude each chapter with most important points to remember.

First and foremost we wish to foster enthusiasm among our readers towards public participation, and inspire them to practice this craft consistently. The only way to really learn public participation is to practice it! Therefore we hope that this handbook will remain on your desktop long after the first read or that you will at least keep it close by in order to look it over once and again.

About the authors

Hille Hinsberg is an expert at the PRAXIS Centre for Policy Studies in Estonia. Her main tasks include leading projects and doing research in the spheres of governance and civil society. She has been involved in projects dealing with open governance such as Open Government Partnership, public participation, data visualization, NGO impact assessment, and evaluation e-services both in Estonia and internationally.

Urmo Kübar has worked 6 years as Director of the Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations (NENO), dealing with issues pertaining to public participation and the internal democracy of NGOs. As an advocacy organization NENO is committed to the pursuit of activities that are aimed at improving NGO operational capacities, including fostering participatory culture. In addition, Kübar has also authored a NGO handbook "Good Advocacy. How to Mobilize Support and Influence Decision-Makers".

Both Hille Hinsberg and Urmo Kübar have studied public participation in theory, analyzing case studies from Estonia and beyond, but also have extensive personal experience with it through their daily work. They have both organized trainings, together and individually, for civil servants, politicians and NGOS, made presentations and given speeches, as well as given lecture courses on the topic, and also written articles. They are probably dealing with something related to participation as you are reading this handbook. In addition, many other people have contributed to this book by sharing their comments and experiences.

2. Public Participation – What Is It Good For?

Year by year public participation is gaining more and more public awareness both in Estonia, and all over the world. There is much enthusiasm but also disenchantment, because not all attempts have yielded positive results. Public participation is not a magic pill, that works wonders in every situation. In order to avoid disappointment, one´s expectations should be grounded in reality, knowing what to expect, and what not to expect.

As mentioned earlier, public participation means doing something together with others. Don Tapscott, and Anthony D. Williams, authors of "Wikinomics," have said that there are always more smart people outside the boundaries of your organization than there are inside. The more successful you are at fostering collaboration, the better you will do overall.

In order to understand why public participation has become such a focal issue not only in the public sector, but also in the business sector, and civil society, we must look at five fundamental shifts in thinking.

- **New perspective on legitimacy.** As a term "legitimacy" – a commonly shared understanding that someone´s actions are legal, acceptable, and justified – used to be related to public office. For example, the king´s authority was never questioned. Nowadays we see that a certain position may allow for certain decisions to be made, but does not guarantee, that these would be widely accepted or eagerly implemented. The legitimacy of elected bodies (eg. parliaments), but also of other organizations, must be earned by merit. This entails taking into consideration the positions of others, thorough planning, and discussions with the groups whose approval is necessary for earning legitimacy (often meaning the whole society).

- **New perspective on the consequences of actions.** It is becoming increasingly common to acknowledge that all our actions have societal, financial, and environmental consequences. If we do something that benefits other people, but spend unreasonably to achieve that goal, then we cannot consider it a success. The same applies to activities that save money at the expense of the environment or the larger community. It is difficult to anticipate the plethora of consequences, because it entails various competencies. The only way to achieve that is to engage people with expertise and experience from different areas.

- **New perspective on the nature of political decisions.** Policy making means coming to an agreement in order to find optimal solutions to pressing problems. Decision makers are increasingly faced with so-called wicked issues, i.e. complex, and conflicting questions comprising several intertwined problems, with no right answers, or such problems that seem to be immune to all remedies attempted. One must choose the most suitable alternative, best amongst the worst. This entails examining different facets of the problem, considering the consequences, and proposing unconventional solutions, if necessary. It is possible only if different perspectives are included in the decision-making process, meaning experts and other people representing various perspectives and areas in society. Public officials alone do not always possess the necessary power and/or knowledge to find solutions to all problems facing the society.

- **New perspective on truth, and expertise.** It is easy to think that simply finding the best experts is all that is necessary for making good decisions. But how to be sure, who this "best expert" could be? Nowadays the belief that expert opinion is objective truth, is being replaced with the notion that experts are guided by their own intrinsic values just like everybody else. In addition, they possess only a limited amount of information, and are prone to mistakes. The smaller the circle of decision-makers, the higher the probability that one person´s mistake will be reflected in the final result. It is also clear that we are all most distinguished experts when it comes to questions concerning one´s own quality of life, professional or recreational activities. Wider public participation complements, but does not supersede professional expertise. We still need "traditional" experts, but relying on experts alone is not nearly enough.

- **New perspective on democracy.** Representative democracy has been criticized for ages. We have also recognized long ago that despite its shortcomings we cannot do without it. However, the evolution of the party system has made it clearer than ever that the vote given on election day might be motivated by personal sympathy for the candidate, support for certain political promises, or simply the desire to vote for the least repugnant party. In any case, political parties cannot take it for granted that the electorate has given them an unconditional mandate for implementing all their policies, especially considering the changes they may undergo upon the formation of coalitions. Therefore it is necessary for representative democracy to introduce principles and methods of participatory democracy. This will ensure an on-going societal dialogue, as well as accountability of decision makers in between elections.

EXAMPLE

In the early spring of 2013 a crowd-sourcing process People's Assembly, or Rahvakogu was organized in Estonia. The main objective of the Rahvakogu was to apply methods of participatory democracy to alleviate problems that had arisen within political parties, as well as address the crisis of trust in the society. Although this initiative was born at a meeting that was convened by the President, the process was entrusted to civil society activists, and public participation experts. However, representatives from all parliamentary parties were involved in the planning process. Thus, there was no confrontation between the people and their elected representatives. Quite the contrary, collaboration was seen as the best means to collect public opinion in order to formulate recommendations for changes in principles regulating elections, party funding, and other political issues.

The need for public participation may stem from different situations. Before sending out invitations to the first meeting, one should first carefully consider why public participation is needed in the first place. The reasons may be one of the following:

- the need for expertise, and a comprehensive professional overview of problems/alternatives;
- the need to ensure maximum transparency for the decision-making process, as well as maximum dissemination of information about the impending changes;
- the need to balance different interests (eg. producers vs consumers, environmentalists vs industry that processes mineral resources, hunters vs land owners etc.)
- the need to ensure a better reception of a decision, and to foster implementation.

Public participation in decision-making enables us to achieve better results, and avoid mistakes. In this context "better" might mean very different things, eg. a decision that is more informed, with better estimated consequences, more realistic, effective, comprehensible, and more widely supported, more succesfully implemented.

But what are the counter arguments against public participation? Skeptics claim that public participation interferes with decision-making, making the process too complicated, time-consuming, and expensive. Authoritarian decision-making which eschews participation, may at first seem to be easier, and more effective, but it may yield poor results.

Public participation, done well and at the right time, will save time, and money (and also everybody´s nerves) in the subsequent stages of ratification and implementation. It might, for example, reduce the need for revisions, the seemingly never-ending splitting of hairs, or settling differences between parties representing opposite interests.

Is more always better?

Just like in many other cases, it is quality not quantity that matters in public participation.

Public participation projects envisioned as large-scale collaboration, but executed poorly, may result in completely opposite situations: time and money gone to waste, tarnished reputations and damaged relationships, quarrels and increased mistrust. What is more, it may seriously damage subsequent public participation projects, because people grow more cynical, and adopt a skeptical outlook.

There are specific situations, where public participation is not a good idea.

- **When the decision has already been made or if there is only one solution.** If you attempt, in such circumstances, to imitate public participation, leading participants to believe, that they actually have a real chance to influence the decision to be made, then it would be considered deceit. In such situations it would be better to simply inform the public of the decision that has been made, explain the reasons behind the result, and be prepared to deal with justified indignation of those that were excluded from participation.

- **In case of lack of necessary skills or opportunities for organizing public participation.** It is always possible to educate ourselves or ask someone for help; there are other suitable methods in case you are lacking time or money. However, it would be misguided to make promises, and give participants false hope, that cannot be fulfilled.

- **If there is no respect for the participants, or any interest in their opinions.** Time is a valuable resource and each organizer must commit to using it with respect. Organizing public participation entails setting clear goals, careful planning, and implementation. It is imperative to give participants adequate information, and feedback.

EXAMPLE

"All managers are constantly bombarded with recommendations that it is important to include people in decision-making," writes journalist, and coach Raimo Ülavere in his article "The Big Misconception about Public Participation". "And so the managers try to figure it out on their won, and often they do not understand what the problem is, because people seem to have participated, people have had a chance to talk, everything has been done, but once you need to start working... everyone is suddenly whining, and clamoring."

Ülavere describes three behavioral models, that are mistaken for public participation:

1. People start organizing participation only after the managers have already decided on a detailed plan of action. In reality there is no participation. Ideas, and action plans devised by the management are simply being "sold" to the people.

2. People assume that others do not know how to take responsibility nor do they want it, and therefore they need to be told what to do, and checked upon afterwards. It is a good-old practice of giving orders masked as participatory management.

3. Participation is simulated, because "it is necessary to get people to commit". People are encouraged to offer their opinions, and discuss some relatively unimportant aspect of the plan. Usually the ideas remain on paper, or in the best case scenario some marginal changes are implemented.

In order to avoid disappointment, please bear in mind, that the following examples do not constute public participation.

- **Public participation is not a magic pill that will solve all problems.** It takes a lot more than one PR-stunt to improve a tarnished image, and a successful public participation campaign on one item in the policy agenda does not erase the shortcomings in other less successful topics. The result of public participation depends largely on the context where the process unfolds, and the creation of trust takes a long time. Similarly, public participation demands continuous work before it can bear fruit, and become a systematic practice.

- **Public participation is not a "piece of cake".** Usually it takes considerable effort to find all relevant parties, and get them to provide constructive input. In addition, stakeholders have different interests, and they use different methods for furthering their point of view. It is quite probable that first attempts at organizing public participation will mainly result in disappointment. It is important that the coordinator of the public participation is always ready to learn, and make changes where necessary.

- **Public participation does not mean that everyone should be involved in everything.** All decisions (or legislative drafts) are not equally important.

As a general rule, people do not want to be part of something that does not concern them. However, it is important to ensure that people, who are directly affected by the decision, or who may have important information, knowledge or experience are included in the discussion.

- **Public participation will not lead to universal happiness.** Public participation does not mean basing your agreements on the lowest common denominator. Rather it is characterized by a more open, and fair decision-making process that manages to find an acceptable equilibrium between different interests. The more thoroughly the decision has been discussed, the more understanding there is among those whose opinion fell into the minority. Knowing that when in some other situation their arguments would prevail, the others left in the minority would accept the decision as well.

- **Public participation is not a substitute for representative democracy, an opportunity to eschew responsibility or postpone inconvenient decisions.** The responsibility of decision-making remains with those who have been hired, appointed or elected for the post. As does the fact that in case of poor decisions they are responsible. Situations where the public is presented with a choice of "Yes or No" cannot be considered public participation.

EXAMPLE

Presenting people with a black-or-white choice (i.e. one can vote either for or against) is not good public participation. When Tallinn city government conducted a public survey regarding free public transport, the Yes-alternative included acceptance of all conditions that had already been decided by the city government, including who would be eligible for free transportation. Unfortunately the survey was not preceded by adequate information or discussion about the impacts of this decision. Questions regarding how the city plans to compensate for loss of profit from ticket sales, how the maintenance of roads and vehicles will be financed, how this presumed increase in the use of public transportation will affect traffic management etc, remained unanswered. Thus it is likely that people taking the survey did not have all the necessary information to make an informed decision.

To sum up

- **Public participation in decision-making is conducive to avoiding mistakes, and helps achieve better results,** i.e. acquiring more detailed information about the situation, acknowledging different preferences, and gaining the acceptance of those who can affect the success rate of implementation.

In the long run this will help save time, money, and precious brain cells of everyone involved.

- **Public participation is first and foremost about quality.** It should not be attempted just in order to "tick the box" or just as a formality.

- **Do not expect public participation to give immediate results in building partnerships.** Fostering prolific collaborative relations entails trust and experience, which can only be achieved in the course of working together over longer periods of time. Do not despair if your first attempts do not yield desired results, be prepared to learn from these experiences, and change your behavior accordingly.

3. Public participation and **being engaged**

Engaging the public, and getting engaged are two sides of the same coin. The person responsible for the decision creates an open process, and initiates collaboration. Each participant brings in their individual expertise, interests, arguments, and solutions. In addition, participation fosters ownership, and responsibility towards the final decision. In order to become a successful coordinator of public participation one must have an understanding of the participants´ needs, and various modes of participation that can be utilized in different stages of decision-making.

The life cycle of a decision, whether it is a strategic sectoral development plan, legislation, organizational action plan etc., can be divided into the following stages: identifying the problem, and specifying the objective; gathering information, and estimating impact/consequences; presenting alternative solutions; decision-making and implementation; analysis and evaluation. The last stage will also help in defining new problems, and formulate further objectives.

Public participation is possible and necessary in all stages mentioned above. The earlier you engage people, the better they understand what is going on, and are able to provide constructive input. If you delay participation to a later stage, then you will need to work harder to get others on the same page, and spend time on explaining how you arrived at your positions, and why you have made the choices you have made. The initiators have a head start, i.e. they have more information about why this particular issue is important, and they have had more time to analyze different alternatives. Thus, they must help other participants to get on track.

When and how to engage the general public?

1. Identifying the problem, and setting the objective. Action is driven by the understanding that the reason or consequences of some problem need to be dealt with. In addition, there must be a vision of what you want to achieve. Public participation will help you to get to know the situation from various perspectives, and map the scale of problem(s), gain a better understanding of the importance of the issue to affected social groups, as well as their preferences in terms of possible solutions to the problem. It is imperative to try and reach a common understanding regarding the objectives of subsequent action.

2. Collecting data and ideas, making estimates. After you have settled on a common objective, you will need to start gathering information, that is necessary for formulating alternative solutions, and estimating the consequences of alternative routes. Public participation is directly connected to impact assessment, pursuant to the regulatory rules for legislative drafting, and public participation best practices. Impact assessment is a process for collecting evidence on the advantages and disadvantages of policy alternatives, evaluating their potential consequences. The range of participation depends on the scale of the estimated impact.

For example, public participation enables us to determine who will be most affected by the impending changes. These people are the ones you need to engage to get the most relevant information regarding the perceived changes and consequences that the planned decisions might actually produce. Public participation will enable you to gather information regarding current solutions, and their results, specify the nature of your problem(s), and map out possible solutions.

3. Proposing alternatives. One or several alternative solutions, with impact assessments, are presented. These need to answer the question: how their implementation will help alleviate or eliminate the underlying problems, and what are the consequences of different alternatives. In this stage the nature of public participation activities lies mainly in consultations with partners and target groups who are given an opportunity to comment on the proposals, and make amendments, draw attention to possible weaknesses (eg. circumstances that were for some reason not included in the impact assessment), select, and explain their preferences.

4. Making the decision. The alternative that is deemed most suitable for reaching the desired objective is chosen amongst the submitted proposals. It is possible to include the participants in the decision-making process (eg. in a working group, public meeting etc.), or the decision could be made by a representative body (eg. the parliament, government, management of an organization etc.). In the latter case, public and other interested parties are engaged via public notification by making the decision public, and explaining the reasons behind the choices that were made.

5. Implementation, analysis, and impact assessment. The chosen solution is implemented, monitored, and evaluated in terms of application, fulfilling objectives, what kinds of problems it alleviates, and what kind of problems it creates. This stage needs two types of public participation. First you need to collaborate with those partner organizations that contribute to implementation, either by assuming implementation duties themselves or by disseminating information and advice among the target group. In this stage the coordinators are tasked with ensuring that the partners are equipped with everything they need. Secondly, you need information from your partners regarding the consequences of the decision, i.e. whether and how it has been understood, has it helped improve the situation, what kinds of new needs have arisen etc. This information can be utilized as input for initiating the next decision-making cycle.

Types of public participation

Thus far we have provided a relatively general definition for public engagement, and participation – doing something together with others. However, in practice this process takes many different forms. An excellent overview regarding different types of public participation in decision-making is provided by a model prepared by the US organization International Association for Public Participation,:

INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT

INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Public Participation Goal:	**Public Participation Goal:**	**Public Participation Goal:**	**Public Participation Goal:**	**Public Participation Goal:**
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of preferred solution.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the Public:	**Promise to the Public:**	**Promise to the Public:**	**Promise to the Public:**	**Promise to the Public:**
We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and ackowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspiration are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influences the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what your decide.
Example Tools:	**Example Tools:**	**Example Tools:**	**Example Tools:**	**Example Tools:**
• fact sheets • web sites • open houses.	• public comment • focus groups • surves • public meetings.	• workshops • deligerate polling.	• citizen advisory committees • consensus-building • participatory decision-making	• citizen juries • ballots • delegated decisions.

In case of information, participants are relegated to a passive role as recipients of communication. In subsequent cases the influence of participants increases incrementally: they are able to impact the developing consensus, and the process of setting objectives, propose issues, and participate in final decision-making. Keep in mind that each subsequent public participation method entails deeper commitment from the participants, and also taking responsibility, something that many people might not even be interested in doing. They might prefer only to comment on the draft document or are content just being kept informed of important developments.

- **Information.** We recommend using this in situations where you need to make changes that are inevitable or unimportant. For example, legislative updates in order to conform with new technical requirements. Since there is not much need to contest technical standards, then there is no need for a wider discussion of draft legislation. However, information regarding these changes must be made easily accessible, and understandable to all stakeholders.

  If, for some reason, there is only one possible solution, then we recommend admitting to the situation, notify people of the impending changes, and explain their inevitability before making the final decision. These could be changes prescribed by EU directives, or local legislation, especially in situations where prompt response is needed, eg. during crisis situations. However, even in such cases you should critically assess whether or not it is just an excuse to avoid a more comprehensive public participation debate.

  Sometimes people justify non-participatory decision-making with "political will". It could be deemed justified in case of some major election promises, where the party in power may claim that they have received a mandate from the electorate. However, one cannot maintain that all promises listed in the winning party´s programme have been discussed with the public and found general support. In addition, the implementation process entails various details, that have an effect on the final result. Therefore it is necessary to organize a wider public participation even in such cases.

- **Consultations.** This is a widely used method for collecting feedback on draft proposals, that have been prepared by specialists or a designated working group. In such cases participants are rarely offered alternative solutions. In the course of consultations you are able to collect the opinions from a wider range of people, eg. in case of direct consultations from the people and/or organizations you have chosen yourself, whereas in case of open/public consultations the right to comment is extended to all interested parties. In the course of consultation the participants must evaluate whether the proposed solutions are in accordance with the objective, assess the potential impact, and consider alignment with the needs and expectations of the sector or target groups. Opinions and proposals may thus vary and conflict each other, sometimes radically so, and therefore it is not possible to take all input aboard. However, consultations furnish the decision-making process with additional information, and may considerably change the draft document. This must be taken into account, and desperate clinging to the initial versions of the document should be avoided.

- **Collaboration.** This entails open communication between the coordinator, and the participants throughout the whole public participation process, starting from the decision to start dealing with a specific issue. Alternative solutions are reviewed and discussed, and finally the most suitable amongst them is chosen. This is followed by preparing a draft document, which is amended with information received in the course of consultations, and the process concludes with preparing the final decision.

EXAMPLE

As an example of collaborative public participation we look again to the crowd-sourcing platform People's Assembly or Rahvakogu organized in Estonia in 2013. Different groups were involved in different stages throughout the whole process: first ideas came from wider public, then experts and politicians took part in seminars to weigh solutions, and finally, there was a cross-section of the whole society invited to make their choices on the final deliberation day. And thus the final result was achieved – specific legislative proposals that had been commonly discussed, and received the most support. It is important to note that the final choice was made by the participants themselves, not by the group that initiated and organized the public participation process.

- **Collaboration.** This entails sustained partnership in decision-making. Joint decision-making starts with deciding what and how should be decided. The official forms of partnership are for example advisory groups guiding the development of specific areas, or stakeholder committees. This kind of joint planning, and constant collaboration may also work as informal communication between partners. In addition to professional expertise, such advisory bodies between the public institutions and NGO sector are often initiated in order to facilitate on-going dialogue on specific topics, and to help reach consensus among stakeholders. Such collaborative arrangements play an important role. In addition, NGOs consider such opportunities to contribute to the policy-making process very attractive.

- **Empowerment.** The coordinators transfer the active role, and the necessary resources to their partners, who will decide what to do, and how to reach the outcome. They shall discuss various alternatives, choose amongst them, and will also be responsible for implementing the chosen solutions. Usually this process unfolds gradually during a longer period of time. The main advantage is the resulting effective division of labor in the society, i.e. the issue is tackled by the people, who are affected the most by it.

No method of public participation is better than the others. It is more akin to a toolbox, and the coordinator as master craftsman must be well acquainted with all of the tools at their disposal, and know exactly when and how to use each one.

EXAMPLE

Example: A grant-making organization can engage its beneficiaries in various ways. For example, notification to inform about an upcoming call for applications, its terms and conditions. Consultations are appropriate when feedback from prospective applicants or other stakeholders is needed, eg. commenting on a draft version of a new funding programme. It might be even better if the draft version is prepared in collaboration with stakeholders, taking their insight, experiences, and needs into consideration from the very beginning. We can talk about partnership if the decision to establish a new funding programme is reached via discussions about the current situation, and addresses unmet needs. Empowerment is also possible, when the decisions to grant funding are delegated to prospective recipients themselves, if there are grounds to believe that this would lead to better choices.

It is quite common to utilize different participation methods in different stages of decision-making. For example, a partnership may provide inspiration for the initial idea, subsequently potential stakeholders are notified, together a draft paper is prepared, and then an even wider circle is notified. Afterwards the draft proposal is presented for consultation with interested parties, and finally the results are communicated publicly.

The main principle is that the more strategic and high-impact the decision, the deeper participation should be designed. Decisions shaping the development of the country or an organization need to be discussed thoroughly and openly. However, it is not feasible to apply similar methodology to low-impact routine decisions, which would only lead to lost time and wasted resources for both the coordinator, and the participants.

Preliminary impact assessment will help you determine the gravity of the decision. It will indicate possible consequences that the impending changes will incur, whether they are economic, social or environmental. It will help identify the groups who will be affected the most. You will also gain a better understanding of the range of changes, and the interrelationships between different factors. In addition, you must also consider public interest. For example, building a regional strip of a highway may draw much attention if previously there have been problems with local road construction works.

Determining what type of participation would best suit the nature of the decision may prove difficult in practice, eg. something that may seem to be a technical detail to a civil servant, might prove to be a decisive question for others, and they may want to be involved in the decision-making. You develop a better understanding of non-governmental partners´ expectations through continuous collaboration and shared experiences. It is always reasonable to ask potential stakeholders already in the first phases of preparation whether they want to be involved and in what capacity. You don´t need to conduct a comprehensive survey, couple of phone calls or e-mails will do just fine. Those, who are not interested in active participation, are content with being kept regularly informed. However, the people, who are interested in contributing more, must be invited to participate.

To sum up

- **Public participation is an on-going process** that must begin as early as possible, i.e. already when the decision is being considered. Public participation can, and is recommended to be used in all stages of the decision-making cycle.

- **Decisions pertaining to the objective**, and stakeholders in public participation should draw upon conducting impact assessment, and defining public interest.

- **The range of consequences, and interests** that should be explored, taken into consideration, and balanced depends on the degree of complexity and impact of the decision. Public participation will help you do just that. Best results are achieved when the most suitable public participation method is paired with accountability for promises made to the public in the process of public participation.

Additional reading:

Crowdsourcing

In 2006 tech magazine Wired published Jeff Howe´s feature article "The Rise of Crowdsourcing"). He coined a term for an emerging phenomenon, whereby an organization delegates a task, traditionally reserved for a company´s employees or suppliers, to a large, and undefined group of people for public collaboration. Although the term originates from the business sector, it is still considered crowdsourcing if the crowd is engaged by a public organization or an NGO. In Estonia the most well-known example is the People's Assembly Rahvakogu organized in 2013 for the purposes of crowd-sourcing ideas and proposals to amend Estonia's electoral laws, political party law, and other issues related to the future of democracy in Estonia.

Authors analyzing the phenomenon of crowdsourcing stress the importance of substantial input as characteristic of this type of collaboration. However, if the public is allowed only to pick their preference amongst a list of alternatives, then that does not constitute crowdsourcing.

A good example is the web-based encyclopedia Wikipedia. If traditionally reference books are compiled by a select group of scientists, and scholars, then in case of Wikipedia anyone can write or edit an entry. By the time this handbook is published, Wikipedia, launched in 2001, will have 30 million entries in almost 300 languages, approximately 365 million readers across the globe, and more than 30 million registered contributors, less than 1% of them contribute monthly.

If we compare Wikipedia´s largest, English section with the renown Encyclopædia Britannica (which has also moved to the Internet, and has utilized crowdsourcing to some extent), then the first one boasts a greater number of entries, and collaborators, as well as faster updates, as might be expected. In 2005 magazine "Nature" compared the two, and concluded that their level of trustworthiness is basically the same, i.e. there are some mistakes in both, but Wikipedia is able to correct their mistakes at a faster rate.

But why do people contribute, and how to foster that kind of behavior? As expected the research has concluded that there is no one determining motivator. It turns out that people are intrigued by the opportunity to step into the limelight, they feel useful, are able to establish, and nurture new contacts, challenge themselves in new tasks, acquire new skills and knowledge, take part in something important, and exciting, have a good time, in some cases also make some money etc.

Thus we can list some conditions that must be met in order to have success in crowdsourcing. At the core is the problem that needs solving or some kind of idea that needs further development – it must be important and exiting for a relatively large group of people possessing different expertise and skills. The nature of the contributions must be relatively simple, smooth, and offer swift feedback. In addition, there must be some kind of mechanism, and rules pertaining to how hundreds or thousands of individual fragments converge into a common "product".

4. Public Participation – Mandatory or Advisory?

Occasionally discussion arises around the idea, whether public participation should be made mandatory for public sector organizations in Estonia, and should a special law be passed to regulate this question. We believe that successful public participation entails more than just observing legal obligations as ascribed by law. In practice we recommend adhering to the Code of Good Practice for Public Participation, i.e. guidelines, informed by practical experience, and meant for all public sector organizations.

Public participation is directly related to the transparent and successful drafting of quality legislation, strategy papers, and other similar decisions. Therefore, several legal acts regulating practical governmental activities have included the participation of partners as an indispensable part of the policy-making process. Some legal acts describe the need for public participation in very general terms, whereas in others it is more detailed than merely mentioning participation just a stage in the decision-making process.

Studies analyzing cases of public participation have concluded that the success of participation process depends on the coordinator´s readiness to go beyond what is required by law, or job description. In practice it might mean very simple things, eg. phone calls to partners, expressing interest in whether they have received the materials you have sent, whether is everything clear, will they have time to respond on time, etc.

Good collaborative relations entail an open-minded approach and good will from both the coordinators and the participants. Collaboration is not based on giving and following orders, but on open and transparent interaction. In addition, all public organizations can use public participation irrespective of their field of activity.

Public participation of stakeholders is usually arranged in the form of consultations, i.e. all who do not belong to the official approval group will have a chance to review the draft document, and submit their opinions. Thus, NGOs have an opportunity to evaluate how the draft affects the area in which they are operating, and they can submit their feedback. Afterwards the office will publish all feedback in a special online environment, and they can use the same platform for submitting the draft for public consultation in the online public engagement platform. Public consultations can be arranged as many times as are deemed necessary during the course of working on the draft. For example, already in the beginning when you need to get an overview of opinions regarding preliminary plans, and possible solutions, or in later stages, when feedback is needed on the draft paper.

Constant monitoring of drafts and extracting relevant information form official documents can be a rather overwhelming task for most NGOs. Therefore we recommend that the officials should take initiative in disseminating relevant information, and send their partners invitations with specific questions that need the partner´s expert opinion.

One can find information about planned decisions for example in the government´s action plan, which is used by the ministries for drawing up their annual work plans, which can be found on the respective ministries´ web pages.

Code of good practice for public participation, and other guidelines

Good public participation entails more than just observing legal obligations ascribed by law. No legal act provides a standard on how public engagement, and participation should be organized. Therefore we recommend abiding by advisory guidelines, drafted from experience.

Several countries, and organizations, including the European Commission, and OECD, have drafted advisory public participation principles, and published guidelines for conducting public discussions, and consultations. In 2001 the European Commission urged its member states to draft their own codes of good practice for public participation, and issued a white paper on the subject.

According to these guidelines the achievement of a democratic public participation culture is achieved not so much by legislative regulation, but via the instrument of the code of good practice as a social contract between members of the society. The Council of Europe is currently drafting a similar code of good practice.

In the environmental sphere the main guidelines document for public participation is the UN Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, better known as the Århus convention. This guarantees stakeholders the right to participate in decision-making concerning environmental matters.

In Estonia the agreement on the code of good practice for public participation was reached already in 2005. The document was drafted by public officials, and NGO representatives. The code of good practice, approved by the government in 2011, provides obligatory guidelines for all government agencies, and is a very useful tool for all public sector and local municipaliites. The code stipulates a minimum standard for conducting participation processes.

By following the code of good conduct one can be certain that public participation is organized in a way that takes into account the needs, and opportunities of different stakeholders, and is in accordance with jointly formulated principles.

The code of good conduct foresees linking the need and scope of public participation with preliminary impact assessment, taking into account the needs of partners, continuous communication with the public and stakeholders throughout the whole process starting as early as possible, as well as providing feedback about on-going developments. The code provides guidelines mainly for conducting public consultations, whereupon the institution presents stakeholders with a draft legislation for review, and gives feedback on how their contributions were incorporated. In addition, local governments, parliamentary committees, NGOs, political parties, and other organizations that need to engage others in their decision-making processes, can all use these guidelines, as the course of public participation, and the main underlying principles are universally applicable.

Additional reading:

Estonian Code of Good Practice for Public Participation

1. Public Engagement

1.1. Government authorities engage interest groups and the public in the decision-making process to ensure the best possible quality and legitimacy of the decisions.

1.2. For the purposes of the Good Public Engagement Code of Practice, "public engagement" means informing and consulting with interest groups and the public in the decision-making process. "Informing" means providing interest groups and the public with balanced and objective information that enables the aim of and alternative options for the decision to be understood. "Public consultation" means asking for feedback from interest groups and the public in all stages of policy-making, including in raising problems, designating goals, analysing alternative solutions and preparing a draft.

1.3. Public Engagement is applied in developing policy initiatives of a considerable impact on interest groups or society as a whole. The main principle is that the bigger the expected impact, the bigger the opportunity to participate should be. The need for and the extent of public engagement is decided during impact assessment and public engagement is carried out when preparing a draft decision of an estimated significant impact or interest.

1.4. Public engagement is applied when preparing a legal act to be adopted or a decision to be made at the level of the Parliament, the Government of the Republic and the ministers. The Good Public Engagement Code of Practice also applies to forming Government positions on European Union issues.

2. Interest groups and the public engaged

2.1. A government authority assesses the impact of a draft decision on interest groups and society as a whole according to the Impact Assessment Guidelines and decides on the need for and extent and timing of the public engagement. Impacts are identified according to the Impact Assessment Guidelines approved by the Government of the Republic.

2.2. A government authority identifies the interest groups whom the intended decision will affect. The interest group may be a set of natural persons, a legal person or a non-formal association whom the drafted decision could affect, who participate in the implementation of the decision or who have clearly expressed interest in the field. During public engagement it is important to ensure a balanced representation of interests.

2.3. The circle of interest groups is extended during public engagement, as appropriate. Participation does not presume a legally defined status or a legal relation with the authority preparing the decision. Engagement of the public may involve differences in the manner and timing of engaging interest groups, based on the expediency.

3. Designing public engagement and notifying of participation possibilities

3.1. Ministries must determine interest groups to be engaged, stages of proceeding and initial deadlines of a draft Act and the name and contact information of the official responsible for drawing up the draft not later than by the time the Intention to develop the draft or the Proposal to prepare a strategy document is sent for official consultation among ministries. The aforesaid information is presented next to the Intention to develop a draft Act or a Proposal to prepare a strategy document. Ministries make available on its website contact information of the unit or official providing information about engagement issues.

4. Cooperation with interest groups and the public in different stages of preparing decision and explaining purpose of engagement

4.1. When developing drafts, a government authority consults with interest groups and the public in the earliest possible stage of proceeding and during the whole process. A public consultation must in any event be carried out in two stages of proceedings: when applying for a Mandate for developing a draft and when the draft has already been developed.

4.2. A government authority submits an Intention to develop a draft Act, a Proposal to prepare a strategy document or another issue of an estimated significant impact as well as the draft itself, before making a decision, through the Information System of Draft Acts or, where appropriate, also by addressing interest groups directly to collect proposals and express an opinion.

4.3. In European Union issues a government authority submits an initiative of the European Commission to interest groups along with a draft position of the Government of Estonia along with explanatory note. The authority keeps interest groups informed about the progress of debates in European Union institutions and, should the positions of Estonia change, also notifies interest groups of the changes.

4.4. If a draft is accompanied by an impact analysis report, this is also submitted along with the draft for public consultation.

4.5. A government authority provides interest groups with information about opening a public consultation. Interest groups and the public is explained why the draft decision is needed, what is the purpose of public engagement, what is the scope for their feedback and further course of proceeding of the draft, including:

- the interest groups addressed;
- issues about which positions of interest groups are seeked;
- manners and deadline of providing feedback for interest groups are specified;
- further course of engagement and further proceeding of the draft is described.

4.6. Parties engaged are granted an adequate period for providing their feedback. A public consultation lasts for four weeks. In justified cases the period of consultation may be shortened. The period of consultation is extended in the case of voluminous drafts or in other justified cases.

5. Information channels for public consultation

Consultation channels must be selected taking into account the possibilities of the public and interest groups to access the documents sent for consultation. If consultation presumes participation of the wider public, information is published in the Information System of Draft Acts and, through that, in the Participation Web and, as appropriate, through other channels.

6. Feedback and notifying of consultation results

6.1. Interest groups must be provided with adequate feedback within a reasonable period of time, generally within 30 days of the end of consultation. If consultation lasts for more than three months or takes place in several stages, a government authority compiles, as appropriate, an interim summary about the feedback obtained during consultation and consideration thereof, changes, as appropriate, the consultation schedule and notifies all the engaged interest groups thereof.

6.2. Decision-makers must be notified of the results of consultation with interest groups. A government authority prepares a summary about the consultation results. The summary sets out interest groups who were invited to participate in the consultation, presents the proposals and comments made, explains consideration of the proposals or comments and provides a justification if they were not adopted by the government authority preparing the decision.

6.3. The summary is annexed to the decision being deliberated and is forwarded to all interest groups along with the feedback specified in clause 6.1. If the analysis of feedback requires, as an exception, more time than 30 days, interest groups are forwarded information about a new deadline. The summary is published in the Information System of Draft Acts next to the draft being processed and also made available after the end of the proceeding.

7. Assessment

7.1. At the end of public consultation of important drafts a government authority analyses the conduct of engagement, including attainment of the goal, relevance of the used methods, participation of interest groups in consultation, efficiency of providing feedback and satisfaction of interest groups with the engagement. For the purpose the government authority also asks for an assessment about the conduct from interest groups engaged.

7.2. Results of the assessment are considered in planning and organising the next public engagements.

5. Planning Public Participation

When preparing public participation one must first formulate a specific goal, and a time-frame, and subsequently identify target groups, activities, and necessary resources. Naturally it is not possible to foresee everything, but good preparation will help you avoid most of the problems associated with public participation.

Public participation planning could be compared to going on a hike: knowing where and why you want to go, packing all the necessities, inviting companions, determining the best time to go, and finding a suitable pace. The more experienced the coordinator, the faster and more natural the planning process becomes.

Planning public participation is important also from the point of view of the participants, ensuring that they understand what, why, and when is expected of them, whether participation has any relevance to them, and how they should plan their own activities. The minimum programme requires the formulation of a clear objective for the public participation, determining a schedule, and notifying stakeholders of these factors.

What is more, the planning process itself can be carried out in a participatory manner. We recommend contacting your partners already in this stage to give them an overview of the task ahead of you, and what is expected of them. In addition, you will be able to gain insight about their expectations, needs, possibilities, and suggestions. It is also important to engage your fellow colleagues at work in order to ensure that people in your own organization understand, and support public participation, and its objectives on common grounds.

Setting objectives

Setting clear and realistic objectives will foster harmonization of stakeholder expectations, and staying the course throughout the whole process. It helps avoid disappointment, and enables you to evaluate the success of public participation. Therefore the main objective should be commonly understood by all stakeholders.

It is actually not that rare that stakeholders enter the public participation process with very differing presumptions. If a public official expects the stakeholders to give their opinion about the presented solutions, then the stakeholders are interested in changing some of the prevailing conditions, e.g. alleviation of regulations. If such expectations are not mutually acknowledged, then they will be hard to meet, and the process is prone to tension. Therefore you should take time to come to a joint agreement about the objective, and understand each others´ expectations, which will lay the groundwork for effective collaboration.

Several other choices stem from the objective: who needs to be included, what types of activities to plan, what kinds of methods to use, how much time, and resources will it take etc.

It is important to distinguish between the objective of the planned changes, tasks of the coordinator, and the objective of the public participation process. The objective of the legislative amendment under preparation might for example be the improvement of employment opportunities for disabled people. The official has the objective to produce draft legislation. However neither of those is an objective of public participation: the proposal could be drafted without any public participation whatsoever, and as we have seen previously, sometimes there are situations, where public participation is not even advised.

Public participation is undertaken in order to better fulfill the task, and achieve the best results. This could be done with the following objectives in mind:

- collect information about the current situation, problems, needs, and expectations;
- notify interested parties about your plans, and gain their support;
- ask feedback regarding previous actions or plans;
- identify stakeholder preferences with regard to alternative solutions;
- decide upon the best option together with the stakeholders, or delegate the decision-making to them;
- ensure better reception, and implementation of the decision etc.

EXAMPLES

The Ministry of Social Affairs needed to specify the quality standards for paramedic services. The ministry´s objective for the public participation was to list such requirements together with the stakeholders, so that they would be based on practical and actual experiences of people involved.

National defence requirements necessitated the curtailment of the rights of wind-park developers to ensure the visibility of radar images. The objective of the Ministry of Defence in engaging wind energy producers in a public participation process, was to achieve a compromise that would be acceptable for the interest group, before initiating legislative action. This entailed conducting impact assessment together with the stakeholders.

All these objectives are clearly measurable at the end of the public participation process (see Chapter 11). In addition, there may also be some objectives that are harder to measure, but that does not mean that they less important. These may be strengthening cooperation, increasing civic activism, exchanging experiences etc. Reaching these objectives takes time, and the progress is rather difficult to evaluate.

EXAMPLE

The Ministry of Agriculture organized a training programme for coastal fishermen. The objective was to use these trainings as a means to increase their participation in the sustainable development planning activities in fishing areas. The Ministry credits public participation, and training sessions with improving their cooperation with the fishermen, which in turn has provided a better overview of the situation in fishing areas. According to the ministry official, public participation entailed open communication by all partners, conducting relevant analyses, active exchange of information, flexibility, feedback and input, a pleasant and supportive atmosphere, and some good humor.

A list of possible objectives of public participation generates a feeling that all those are achievable and desirable. They can be combined to some extent, eg. during one meeting collect feedback about the current situation, but also ideas for improvement. Subsequently analyze the strengths and weaknesses of various ideas, and finally choose the most popular ones.

Here you must take into consideration the capacity of your stakeholders. Planning tasks requiring intensive mental work and expecting to be done in one sitting may mean that your group will not be able to contribute fully in discussions. Participants may need to share all newly presented information with their colleagues and target groups, and hear them out as well. Thirdly, different objectives may require different methods, and participants. Therefore it is advisable to divide your work into stages, and set individual objectives for each stage.

EXAMPLE

The crowd-sourcing process People's Assembly organized in Estonia in early 2013 comprised three stages. First, everyone had the opportunity to submit their proposals via mail or the Internet with regard to five pre-determined issues related to the elections, political parties and public participation. The objective was to collect as many ideas as possible for the next stages of the process. In the second stage the submitted ideas were divided into sub-themes, and expert groups conducted preliminary impact assessment analysis. The objective of this stage was to identify the pros and cons of alternatiive solutions, and see what kinds of consequences their implementation would incur. In the third stage several seminars were held, where the authors of the proposals weighed the pros and cons together with the experts, and collectively chose the topics that were deemed most relevant and effective for remedying the selected problems. This was followed by >>

>> deliberation day, where more than 300 participants (a representative sample based on gender, age, and place of residence) chose their favorites from the proposed alternatives after reviewing and discussing the pros and cons of presented alternatives. As a result we found out the level of support in society for different ideas proposed. The process showed the value of participation in case people have access to comprehensive and balanced information about the consequences of different alternatives. Later the input generated at Assembly meetings was sent to the Parliament for discussion and decisions.

Preparing an action plan for public participation

Preparing an action plan for public participation does not take much effort, but will have a considerable effect on the end result. Sometimes public participation does not yield any results, because the participants do not have enough time to make relevant contributions. If the schedule for the process is published as early as possible, then it might alleviate this problem. We recommend the following course of action:

- **Prepare your action plan in stages, starting with the end date.** Usually it is known when a result must be reached, and this should be your staring point in allocation time for each previous stage (depending on necessity, eg. surveys, meetings, events, written consultations etc.).
- **Allow for time buffers, because things have a tendency to take longer than expected.** You should definitely plan for some time for yourself for reviewing all submitted proposals, making overviews, discussing the changes with your colleagues, and giving feedback to partners.
- **If you expect your partners to adhere to the proposed schedule then your own actions should set an example.** For example, if you have promised to send the materials on a specific date, and fail to do so, your partner may already have other things on their schedule, and they might not have time to deal with your documents.

How much time should be allocated for public participation depends on the complexity of the issue, and the specific tasks delegated to the partner. If the employees of your partner organization are engaged as experts, and you are interested in their individual professional opinion, then they will probably need less time. However, if you are interested in the position of the organization as such, then they need to discuss the matter within their management or with members, that may take a month or even longer. Longer deadlines should be granted especially in the beginning of the public participation process, because later, when people have already familiarized themselves with the nature of the problem, and have reviewed the materials, they do not need that much time anymore.

In case of public consultation where personal opinion is expected from a wide circle of people, you should reserve extra time in order to allow for information about the opportunity to reach people.

But what to do if you just have little time? You should take public participation into account already when making work plans. However experienced we might be in planning and time management, ad hoc tasks land on our tables every now and then, and might also need public participation. In that case you should first inquire about the possibility to extend deadlines, because rushing in the preparatory stages may mean that you need to start redoing your work later, which can prove to be rather time-consuming. If it is not possible to extend deadlines, then you should incorporate less activities in your public participation plan, i.e. only the essential necessities, that you will have time to conduct and finish properly. And if you have no time at all, then you should seriously consider foregoing public participation altogether, and simply notify the stakeholders on impending changes. However, be prepared for protesting reactions by various groups who will be affected by the decisions.

Planning your resources

It is quite difficult to calculate the total cost of public participation to a public organization, because this process is associated with several areas, eg. strategic planning, legislation, communication etc. It is usually a part of a larger task, eg. drafting a development plan. Public participation activities, and the budget are just a part of the resources foreseen for fulfilling that task.

In order to draft a budget for a specific public participation project, you need to map out the necessary activities, and associated costs. Public participation budgets are not simply about calculating the cost of coffee breaks, you must estimate the time spent on preparatory work, and organizing things, plus consider the cost of various methods.

You must decide which activities can be carried out by yourself in-house, and which need to be outsourced, for example workshop facilitators or discussion moderators. However, there have also been cases where the whole public participation process is outsourced. This is best suited in situations where there is a lack of human resources or skills. In addition, people may be more open to such coordinators as compared to public officials. Nevertheless, even in case of outsourcing the responsible persons from the ministry should take part in meetings and events (instead of only reading memos) in order to get a better insight into expectations, and opinions of the participants.

You can also calculate the costs of specific public participation methods, i.e. studies, surveys, print materials, web platforms etc. For events you need to factor in rental costs (organizing events outside the ministry may ensure more active participation, and better input), catering, transport, and also accommodation in case of longer events.

An important question to consider, is how to compensate the participants for their efforts. They should be reimbursed in case they are expected to make a considerable contribution (eg. prepare documents). In case of long-term partners the best way to do that is provide operating subsidies, whereas for one-time partners there should be a specific fee, that is based on time spent or linked to a specific result. No compensation is needed for open consultations where the participants share their opinions. Events such as citizens´ forums are an exception, because they entail that people must take off work in order to participate.

In addition to costs it is also possible to calculate income.[1] Usually it manifests as a positive impact of implementing a decision reached in the process of public participation (eg. drop in unemployment, increased tax receipts etc.), and it is rather difficult to very pinpoint a specific public participation contribution. Depending on the public participation process the income may comprise volunteer work, decrease in the number of complaints due to improved cooperation etc.

What else to consider in planning?

In addition to setting objectives, devising a plan, and drafting a budget you should also address the following questions.

- **Division of labor, and responsible persons:** Who in your organization will be responsible for the overall organization of public participation process, and who will be responsible for specific tasks and activities? Who is the person that the participants can contact if the should have any questions?

- **Participants:** Whose participation is necessary? What are our expectations for them?

  First you need to identify the potential participants, and then decide whom to engage, and how:
  - whom to consult with (in writing, in person)
  - who will be more actively engaged (working groups, discussion, expert group)
  - service providers (eg. preliminary study, working group leaders etc.)

1 See also Making the case for public engagement. How to demonstrate the value of consumer input" http://www.involve.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Making-the-Case-for-Public-Engagement.pdf

This type of preparation, and different engagement or various target groups will lay the foundation for a more effective engagement, and meaningful participation. This issue is discussed in detail in chapters 5 (“Whom to Engage?”), and 6 (“Public Participation in NGOs”).

- **Context:** What has happened before, or what is happening concurrently with our public participation process, that might affect its success rate? If the effect is negative, then what can be done to minimize the risks?

- **Methods:** What kinds of public participation methods are most suitable for achieving our objectives? This issue is discussed in detail in chapters 8 (“Methods of Public Participation”), and 10 (“Online Public Participation”).

- **Communication:** What kinds of messages, and what channels should we use to reach potential participants? How to communicate with them on a regular basis? See chapter 10 (“How to Communicate, and Disseminate Information”)

- **Decision-making.** Who makes the decision? When and how? How do we inform our participants thereof? See chapter 11 (“How to Reach a Decision”).

- **Assessment:** How do we evaluate our results after we have finished? See chapter 12 (“Evaluating the Process and Results of Public Participation”).

Why might well-planned public participation fail?

Sometimes, despite good intentions, the participation process is not considered a success, (eg. feedback is late or there is not enough of it, its not relevant/up to date, too ambiguous to use etc.). Here is a list of possible reasons hindering effective contribution from the perspective of participants.

- **Vague objectives:** What exactly is expected of the participants? Officials often turn to consultations, i.e. a preliminary draft legislation is sent to stakeholders for comment, but this might be too general a task. In order to attract interest the accompanying cover letter should specify why you are interested in consulting with this specific organization or person. In addition, you should formulate specific questions you wish to get answered. You should also specify whether you prefer expert opinion or an aggregate from members/target groups.

- **Materials sent to stakeholders** (i.e. draft documents and explanatory memorandums) are too complex: These documents are usually too long and complicated, and perceived by stakeholders as too "official" or "legalese". This could be remedied by a concise summary explaining the importance of the issue, what are the objectives, and possible consequences. Bear in mind that NGOs are usually better at practical matters than theory, i.e. they are in a better position to explain the current situation and their ideas, than comment on draft legislation prepared by somebody else. Therefore we recommend using stakeholder input in the initial stages (eg. surveys about problems and needs, arrange meetings to discuss alternative solutions), because afterwards they will be better equipped to comment on the draft you have prepared.

- **Timing.** You should provide an adequate amount of time, especially if you want an NGO to survey their members or target groups, which is difficult to do in less than a month. Contrary to ministries NGOs do not have designated persons who can start working on draft legislation as soon as it arrives in their mailbox. If you are on a tight schedule, then it would be helpful if you sent them preliminary notice a couple of weeks in advance (but make sure you stick to what you promise). Remember that NGOs are also on holidays during summer, and at the turn of the year!

  Participation capacity may be hindered by organizational funding. If an NGO receives only project-based funding then that will be their focus, and they might not have the time or the money to comment on draft legislation. Public officials can discuss their organization´s policy toward NGO funding, i.e. have you made an effort to increase their capacity to deal with draft legislation? For example you could offer operating subsidies to your essential partner organizations, or in case of project-based funding you can allocate a percentage of the funding for advocacy or capacity building activities. However, bear in mind that funding cannot come with prescriptions for the content of proposals/comments.

- **Negative past experiences.** These tend to kill any enthusiasm, especially if the NGO has not received feedback on its previous comments. You cannot undo the past, but try to make sure that your actions will not make life more difficult to subsequent coordinators. If you are collaborating with partners then please take the time to give feedback regarding their contributions.

To sum up

- **The more thorough the impact assessment,** the better you know what kinds of stakeholders to engage, and how much time the public participation process might take.

- **It is better to spend more time on planning,** because it will help both the coordinator and the participants to understand the course of the public participation, and their own role in the process.

- **The objective of public participation will determine all other choices,** eg. stakeholders, methods etc. Take time to formulate a clear objective, and be ready to explain the reasons behind it.

- **In order to organize successful public participation** you need thorough preparation in order to provide participants with adequate background information, and formulate detailed expectations regarding their contributions.

- **You should invest time in drafting a time-table,** and share it with the stakeholders even if you know that it will probably change in the course of the work process.

- **Allocate an adequate amount of time for partners** to submit proposals, and yourself to give feedback on them. If you are on a tight schedule, or there are other hindrances for proper participation, then at least disseminate information, but be ready for justified protests on behalf of stakeholders who may feel that they had been left out.

- **Public participation does not mean dragging the stakeholders through the bureaucratic process!** Non-governmental actors are not obligated to analyze draft legislation, and submit their positions and proposals. Their reasons for participation are motivated by other factors (eg. representing their membership, solving problems in their field of interest etc.).

6. Whom to engage?

The success rate of public participation depends largely on whether you are able to find and engage the right people, and organizations, who should, and actually want to contribute. In this chapter we give an overview of how to identify suitable partners for public participation.

Public participation does not mean that all people should have an opinion on all issues, and make it heard. However, it is important to engage people who shall be affected by the decision, who have relevant expertise, experience or information, and whose support or opposition will determine the success of decision-making, and implementation. In case of some issues this can mean public engagement of just a couple of individuals, in other cases it might involve thousands of people, who may or may not be part of an advocacy organization. Thus, before commencing a new public participation project you should carefully consider who are the relevant participants in this specific case. Do not forget those groups that are not directly mentioned in the decision, but who will be nevertheless affected in some manner or another.

EXAMPLE

It is quite easy to see the importance of engaging young people if the issue at hand pertains to school life or youth work. Usually the officials dealing with these matters already have close contacts with youth organizations. However, young people as a target group may also be affected by draft documents that do not contain the word "young" in their titles, eg. public transportation (young people are among the major consumers, and also have special needs such as discounts, which means that they would be directly affected; they could also have preferences in terms of the schedules etc.). Therefore it is important to engage them in such cases as well. This entails an open minded approach and cooperation with partners in order to properly identify affected target groups, and make contact with them.

Usually, in the beginning it is quite impossible to compile a comprehensive list of everyone that might be affected, and therefore you must keep an open mind throughout the public participation process, and allow interested parties to make their voices heard in different stages of decision-making. However, it is important to make an effort to engage as many stakeholders as possible from the start. This will save you time from updating the people who join later, or address already decided issues after there is additional information from newcomers, and also avoid tensions that may arise when some participants feel left out.

In case of public sourcing of ideas or when public consultations are held, the participation process is open to all interested parties. In that way, information about upcoming discussions may reach those, whose interest to take part might not have been known beforehand. However, bear in mind that simply posting a question or the draft document to a public website does not make the participation process public, because people who might be interested do not know to look for it. Therefore these kinds of participation opportunities must be supported with a comprehensive communication plan. In addition, you should think carefully whose participation (i.e. which people and organizations) is essential, and contact them personally in addition to the public notification.

Expert, stakeholder, and public opinion

The input contributed by participants to the decision-making processes can be divided into three groups:

Input	**Source**	**Contribution to the decision-making process**
Expert opinion	Researchers, and experienced practitioners	Relevant professional knowledge and experiences both local and abroad
Stakeholder opinion	Advocacy organizations and networks	Experiences, expectations, and preferences of affected groups
Public opinion	Private individuals	Ideas, expectations, and preferences widely held in society

Neither of these three groups can substitute others, because they provide different types of information. If keeping track of expert and stakeholder opinion is essential prior to making any decisions, then engaging the wider public is important in cases that affect a large part of the society (eg. all taxpayers, the whole electorate, users of some public service etc.). Crowd-sourcing cases have also highlighted that in some instances innovative and effective solutions come from outside the immediate circle of partners and stakeholders, from people with backgrounds in other areas, who bring a different point of view, and unique expertise[2].

In addition, being informed about the public opinion, and their expecta-

2 For example online platform InnoCentive (www.innocentive.com) allows for companies to post their complex tasks that they have in development in the areas of technology, chemistry, mathematics, and other sciences. Everyone is free to participate, and best solutions are rewarded. The platform that has grown to about 300,000 users in 12 years has found working solutions in approximately 85% of cases. The winning solutions often come from people from other professional areas, whom the companies would not even know to contact in their traditional practices.

tions is necessary in case of controversial issues attracting wider public interest, because it may affect implementation to a great extent. People often possess strong opinions, and wish to be heard in questions that do not affect them directly. For example, numbers of people who have no intention of entering into a same-sex marriage want to partake in the public discussion over granting same sex couples the right to register their co-habitation.

This does not mean that one should not make decisions that are deemed unpopular by the majority, but knowing public opinion will help you plan for risk management related to implementation, raising awareness etc.

Bear in mind that the results of public consultations cannot be equated with public opinion. People who take part in consultations are on average more active, more interested in the issue, and are aware of the opportunity to submit their proposals. Hence they are not representative of opinions in the wider society. If you need to analyze public opinion, then it should be done using appropriate methods such as public surveys or nation-wide discussions.

How to find partners?

If there is no easily accessible and adequate national register of NGOs, then it is practically impossible to get a comprehensive overview of all organizations operating in a specific policy area. In such cases your current NGO partners, sectoral or regional umbrella organizations, and NGO experts and researchers could probably offer advice and help in finding contacts, and spreading information.

It would be beneficial to set up a mailing list that people and organizations interested in that specific issue could join. You should keep advertising the option to join, and update the contacts regularly. Most ministries keep a list of stakeholder representatives who are active on specific issues, and have shown interest in participating in certain discussions. For example they have attended events hosted by the ministry, communicated with officials, taken part in working groups and commissions. However, one should remember that finding, and maintaining partnerships is mainly the task of the officials. Always keep an eye out for new contacts, follow the media, attend professional events, incl. those organized by NGOs, and keep your partner list constantly updated.

The coordinator must also pay attention to minorities or marginalized groups, who may not be active themselves, or might not even have the capacity to stand for themselves and their interests, nor have an organization to represent their interests (eg. refugees, drug addicts, victims of domestic abuse or human trafficking etc.). Since ministries and/or local governments may also face difficulties reaching these marginalized groups, we recommend collaborating with NGOs or other service providers who work with these groups.

How to recognize a good partner?

In free societies it is not uncommon to have several organizations working in the same field, and whose pursuits may seem identical to random bystanders. The reasons may lie in historical circumstances or personal relations, but there is actually nothing strange about having differing points of view within one interest group. Each person and organization has the right to have a say in matters that are important to them, but it is also important to know who you are dealing with.

One can get a quite a good idea of a partner´s credibility by answering the following questions:

- Whom do they represent, and how do they do it?
- What is their competence/expertise based on?
- What have they managed to achieve thus far?
- What is their reputation among partners, and target groups?

The number of members, commonly the first figure people look at, may or may not be an important indicator (i.e. a large membership does not necessarily mean that the organization actually communicates with all of them, whereas a small number does not preclude the organization having a large and active network outside its immediate membership.). The competencies needed in participation do not have to derive from pooling somebody´s opinions, but on professional expertise, and practical experiences.

Where could you find this information, if you are dealing with a completely new partner? Firstly, they should be able to answer these questions themselves. If you can spare a few hours, then you can get a good idea yourself by studying their strategic plans, and annual reports, calling their financiers, partners, closest collaborators, and some representatives from the target group. However, bear in mind that talking to a couple of dissatisfied people does not automatically mean that the organization has a poor track record.

Naturally it is not feasible to conduct such thorough research in every instance, but do not hesitate to do that if you find yourself unable to decide who you are dealing with. You should definitely make the effort if the partnership entails financial obligations (eg. You are giving grants to improve the organizations´ capacity for public participation).

What to avoid when choosing partners

- **Seeking only expert opinion.** Although it is obvious that the positions of academically qualified people or public opinion leaders will contribute positively to the quality of the decision, it is simply not enough. In order to have the best possible data before making the decision, and to ensure a better reception in society, you need to collect different opinions, and take time to explain your objectives to the public.

- **Not looking beyond your traditional circle of partners.** It is very convenient, and safe to engage only those people and organizations that you are used to dealing with. However, they might not be the only experts on the specific issue at hand, or even interested in the topic. At the same time you might exclude those to whom this issue carries a lot of weight.

- **Engaging only umbrella organizations.** They are the easiest to find, and generally they are able to provide quality input. However, it is incorrect to presume that an umbrella organization represents all relevant opinions. Organizations that provide certain services, or people using those services might have more pertinent information to share. Of course it is not advisable to keep enlarging your working groups, but you should not hinder any organizations from keeping themselves informed with the latest developments, and voice their opinions, on the excuse that a similar organization is already participating.

- **Being attracted to fancy names.** The fact that an organization claims to represent someone, and has named itself accordingly, does not guarantee that they could be active participants, or even that they have the support of the target group the claim to represent. Everyone has the right to submit their proposals, but if the coordinator does not know the organizations they are working with, then it may leave out some prospective partners with relevant expertise.

- **Avoiding critics.** The exclusion of those people or organizations whose opinion we do not like, may initially speed up the process, but you may also lose some important information. In addition, you can be sure that your critics will find another way, and take their concerns to the media or straight to the politicians, which may mean that you may have to go back to square one, because emotions might get out of hand, making constructive collaboration impossible.

To sum up

- **We urge you to be more open-minded when choosing partners.** Do not limit yourself only to those you think of first, but take time to make sure that you engage all relevant stakeholders.

- **First, identify the stakeholders related to the issue,** and also those, who are related to implementation (eg. government (also local) agencies, and their unions/networks, NGOs and companies operating in that specific sphere of regulation, and their unions/networks, relevant educational, and research organizations, research centres, independent experts etc.). In addition, ask for their opinion regarding who else should definitely be engaged.

- **When evaluating a potential partner do not concentrate only on the name, and the size of their membership,** but find out what have they actually done, and achieved, how they represent their target groups and members, and what is their expertise based on. Try calling, reading materials, meeting people, and googling.

- **If you are not sure whom the organization specifically represents,** and what is their authority to speak on behalf of others, then just ask around!

- **Representation is not the only criteria for deciding.** Opinions of minorities or of groups that do not have formal representation, may prove to be more important in highlighting the impact of the decision.

- **An organization´s legal status is not important** from the standpoint of public participation.

- **Keep updating your contact list,** and the mailing addresses regularly.

7. Public Participation **in NGOs**

One of the main reasons for engaging NGOs in public participation is the desire to utilize in decision-making the expertise, practical experiences, and expectations of those affected by the impending changes. There are only a few issues that deal with NGOs as organizations (eg. amendments to the non-profit associations act). Most issues affect the social groups on whose behalf these organizations operate. In order to be a worthy representatives of their members, and target groups, it is important for organizations to engage them in the development of their own positions, and activities.

It is important for officials to know what kind of authorization the participant organizations have for representing their organization or target group. When claiming to be a representative of someone (eg. its members, university students, local villagers etc.) the NGO must be able to prove, what their claims are based on. It is important to distinguish between speaking on behalf of someone (eg. groups that do not have the capacity themselves) or with someone. In the latter case there are several alternatives, i.e. whether the presented position has been discussed with them; have they authorized the management or employee to form an opinion, and submit it on their behalf, or if the opinion is based on a previously discussed plan.

On the operational level it is of no importance whether we talk about engaging the public sector and NGOs or about NGOs and their members, network, and target group[3]. In addition, there are no major differences when it comes to the public participation of members, the network or the target group. In the latter case it might be slightly more difficult to reach out to them, and maintaining those contacts.

Everything that will subsequently be said about the engagement of members, and creating a capacity-building environment in NGOs, applies also to networks, and more widely to target groups. In addition, these recommendations are applicable also outside the sphere of policy-making, for engaging your members in the development of your organization (eg. drafting strategy papers, and action plans). There is no doubt that good engagement will strengthen any organization.

3 NGO membership means that a person or an organization has applied for membership, their application has been accepted by the organization, and together with other members they form the highest body or the NGO – the general meeting. The target group of an NGO are the people in whose interest the organization operates. For organizations working on behalf of their members, the membership and target group are the same. However, for organizations working in public interest the target group may be several times larger than its membership. A NGO network comprises individuals and organizations with whom they are in direct contact in addition to their members (eg. volunteers, donors, partners, and other interested parties).

We recommend discussing and writing down the principles of engagement in your organization. Do not concentrate on quantity (overly detailed codes of procedure may prove to be too rigid, and hard to follow in practice both for employees, and members alike), but aim for meeting your essential needs, and capacity to adhere to its tenets. In smaller NGOs it can be an oral agreement, but in case of high turnover of people you should opt for a written version. That way your partners and other interested parties will have an opportunity to read it as well.

EXAMPLE

The Estonian NGO network NENO, together with its members, and its network, has drafted a code of practice for public participation detailing the issues on which the organization shall express its opinion, how positions initiated within NENO are formulated, how to act when the organization needs to respond to issues discussed in the media or in society, how to contribute to legal drafting or in working groups, and how to react to proposals originating form members or the network. The document specifies the cases when organizations are engaged, and in which cases the decisions are made by the council or NENOs employees, who afterwards simply notify its members thereof. The first draft of the code was extremely detailed,and proved overwhelmingly difficult to observe. Therefore, a couple of years later, the document was amended in order to simplify NENOs engagement procedures and principles.

Establishing and strengthening your (membership)network

Detailed knowledge about someone or something is the essential prerequisite when wanting to represent their interests. Each organization must have a clear vision about what they do (and do not do), and why. And also what type of people they need in the management, on the team, as members, or in their wider network. The organization´s expectations with regard to those people, and vice versa must be clear to all parties involved, they must be coinciding and mutually acknowledged, otherwise it will result in disappointments and quarrels, that will rob you of precious time and energy.

Meaningful collaboration begins with the first contact. It is important to determine what kind of information and how the prospective (network) member will find out about you (eg. from other people, in the media, events organized by you, publicity campaigns, social networks, online etc). You can find new people either actively, by contacting them yourself, or passively by waiting for them to find you.

In case of networks, which offer a looser form of collaboration, the process of joining, and leaving is much simpler, and generally they are not even being kept count of. However, we recommend that before accepting new members you should try to communicate directly with those who wish to join your NGO. It will give you a good opportunity to talk about the operating principles of your organization, and the role of members, but also about their expectations, interests, and capacity (eg. where and how actively they would like to contribute, what can they do, what types of communication channels, and methods they prefer etc.). In case of larger organizations it would be more reasonable to establish local units, and delegate the task to them.

If mutual expectations do not coincide then you should think very carefully about adapting your expectations or activities, or perhaps it is better to simply part on friendly terms. The more effort you put in that first meeting, the better the subsequent collaboration will be.

In trying to ensure the quality of new members, you should not forget the existing ones. Firstly, their expectations, needs and capacities change over time, both as a result of natural evolution but also because of turnover in case of organizations. Therefore it is very important to keep an eye on those changes as well (eg. joint events, member visits, and surveys).

You should continuously strive to keep your members informed of the important developments in the organization, and within your filed of activity, and also regarding the results of your work. Ask them what they consider important, and how they prefer to be informed. Do not conceal negative information, because if it is discovered, it will be certain to undermine trust.

In case of larger organizations it is inevitable that communication is mainly conducted online. Most organizations have mailing lists, many send out regular newsletters, manage forums on their web pages, are active in social networks (eg. facebook, twitter), some publish printed magazines. Bear in mind that if there is too much information, especially if it is not formulated clearly and attractively, then people tend to delete these messages without reading, or set them aside, thereby basically losing an important communication channel. Consider creating different topical mailing lists (eg. discussion lists for heated debates, information list that features only the most important information etc.).

Thirdly, you should consciously work on the capacity-building of your members and other interested parties, in order to increase your organization´s capacity. You can do this with information materials, trainings, consultations etc. You must take into account the wishes and needs of the target group, but also the needs of the whole organization, which is probably best evaluated by the leaders. If you concentrate only on the wishes of your members, then the organization becomes a reactive by nature, which might decrease the motivation of leaders. In the opposite case the leaders may turn into “generals without an army“, because the network either has not been able or has not wanted to keep up with them.

ACTIVE and REACTIVE approach to engagement

Active engagement is the kind of tactics where the organization is the initiator without any outside prompting. For example, they identify issues that are important to NGOs, and prepare their positions, and take initiative. The alternative to the active mode is reactive public participation, i.e. reacting to engagement initiatives (eg. consultations, working groups, reacting to positions or statements made by others etc.) proposed by others (eg. public officials or umbrella organizations). In general, NGOs should utilize both active and reactive tactics, because public participation is possible and necessary in both cases.

The major practical advantage of active approach is the fact that in this case the organization is in control, of their time, and of other resources. In addition, this method ensures that the focus remains on the issues that are most important to the organization, and is not dependent on the topics or limitations set by others. One possible problem may be that if the implementation of such positions needs support from other organizations (eg. public officials), and if they do not coincide with the work plans, wishes or capacities of partners, then it may delay implementation. In order to avoid such situations we recommend notifying your network as well, and engage also those whose support is needed in later stages of the process, or prepare a realistic plan how to win that support.

EXAMPLE

Before parliamentary elections a dozen NGOs in Estonia, active in various spheres, sent political candidates a document outlining their proposals for necessary action. Preliminary work began approximately a year or 6 months before the start of the election campaign: management or core groups reviewed current positions of the NGOs, next came discussions with members, target groups, and outside experts which enabled them to gain new ideas, and feedback. As a result the first draft was born. Those draft documents were uploaded on the web, and the NGO federation had an e-vote regarding the proposals. The final version was approved either by the NGO general meeting, council or the board. Afterwards they arranged meetings with political parties, attended debates organized by candidates, and took part in broader awareness campaigns etc.

You can combine active and reactive tactics by learning about work plans of institutions (eg. ministries). Knowing what issues are going to be tackled and when, allows NGOs to prepare their positions in advance, so they will be ready when the ministry starts working on draft legislation. This way the consultations become less time-consuming, and it is enough to keep the participants updated about the developments, and ask for specific input from time to time. The more you foster active public participation, the smoother the subsequent process will become.

How to plan and organize active or reactive tactics, which methods to use, how to communicate with the network, how to reach a decision, communicate results, and evaluate the process – all of these topics are discussed in more detail in the following chapters of this handbook, and we hope you will be able to find some useful tips for your organization.

TO SUM UP

- **Come to an agreement within your organization** about how you want your decision-making process to be set up, and be ready to explain it to everyone who shows an interest in it. Engaging your members will improve the quality of decisions, and strengthen your organization.

- **Public officials, who are involved in public participation processes** engaging NGOs must know whom each organization represents and how they do that.

- **We recommend using both active and reactive engagement** within your own organization.

8. The Methods of Public Participation

In our work, organizing training sessions or consulting on the topic of public participation, we have noticed that methods are something people get a bit too excited about. Whether the reason is boredom with traditional methods to just get together and discuss something, or disappointment that public participation has not yielded desired results, people seem to believe that they need to find a new and clever public participation method, which will solve all problems. This chapter provides and overview of some less customary methods, accompanied with recommendations how to select the most suitable method for your objective.

A well-chosen method will considerably improve achievement of public participation objectives, i.e. strengthen relationships, provide new information or ideas, specify preferences etc. However, the chosen method affects the final outcome much less than, for example, the context where the public participation takes place, trust between partners, thorough planning or seamless and open communication. Thus you should set your focus beyond the chosen method, and consider public participation as an integrated whole.

The most commonly used public participation methods are information events or print materials, written consultations, and various discussion meetings (meetings with partners, working groups, forums etc.). These are all relevant methods, but we will not discuss them here. However, this handbook will provide helpful tips for implementing these methods, and you can also look up other sources on conducting meetings and other events. In addition, these methods can be combined with the methods described below.

How to choose a suitable method?

A discussion meeting involving a relatively small circle of specialists or a meeting of long-term partners does not need the application any special methods. Methods are useful for larger groups such as in public participation, that involve a great number of people, who are not very experienced in taking part in such processes. Before choosing a specific method you need to answer a couple of interrelated questions.

1. Objective

What needs to be achieved? The choice of method depends on what you want to achieve (i.e. collect information about the current situation, generate new ideas, get feedback on different alternatives, reach a decision etc.). For example, if your objective is to collect different opinions, then methods requiring a small number of participants might not be well suited, because they would not guarantee adequate representation.

2. Participants

How many participants do we need? For example, methods that focus on active discussions are meant for relatively small groups of people, and may not be suitable if the objective is to make a decision with wide support.

How are the participants chosen? In some cases you know that you want specific people on board. Sometimes it is necessary to engage representatives of specific stakeholders. In other cases you might need a representative sample of the society, while in another situation the best solution would be to use open participation, where everyone is welcome. Some methods are built around joint discussions between experts and so-called regular people.

What kinds of participants are expected? One must take into account both the level of knowledge, and previous experience with similar discussions. Bear in mind that less experienced people need more versatile methods. If translation is needed, then it is more difficult (but not impossible) to conduct group discussions; if there is a lot of moving around then you need to think about people with wheelchairs etc.

3. Resources

How many people do we have, and what are their skills? Some methods require more coordinators than others, or they might require certain characteristics and skills that not all people possess. In this case you can either outsource the organization of the event, but even then you will need the presence of someone responsible for public participation, because simply reading the memos does not provide the same information, and insight as actually being there, and understanding why and how some decisions were reached.

How much time do we have? Some methods provide results within hours, while others take days and rushing things would not yield a desired result. Hereby we are talking about the time that is needed to conduct the event, but you should also take into consideration the preparatory work and that the whole public participation process may comprise several events of such nature.

How much money do we have? Almost all public participation methods will require some extra expenses, but the costs of different methods vary considerably. Some require thorough preparatory work (eg. representative sample to find participants or conducting studies, that will probably have to be outsourced). What is more, the costs of events may vary to a great extent, i.e. it is cheaper to do it in your own building by your own people, but it may yield poorer results. You must also take into consideration the costs of transport and catering, and maybe even accommodation, depending on the duration of the event. It is not custom in Estonia to pay participants for their effort, but if we expect meaningful contribution then it would only be fair to do so. (At the same time you should bear in mind that this reimbursement should not affect the nature of the proposals being made.)

4. Context

What has gone on before the meeting? Generally, it is not advised to use more playful methods in conflict situations where people are feeling angry or scared, ready to start fighting for their rights.

OVERVIEW OF METHODS

The following section provides an overview of methods that we believe could use some more exposure in Estonia. These are mainly the kinds of methods that bring the participants together in one room. The list is definitely not comprehensive. Each method has its strengths, and weaknesses. Different methods are suited for different objectives, and usually we recommend utilizing several different methods in order to reach different stakeholders. It is important to have an understanding of different options in order to select the most suitable ones for your public participation process or use them in combination to develop something new altogether. More experienced coordinators can try out new methods just to change things up, and for the purposes of a little personal motivation.

We have decided not to delve too deeply into the methodology or description of different variations. For further information we recommend taking a look around the Internet.

1. Methods to kick-start meetings.

In situations where people (especially if they are not experienced in public participation) are expected to make active contributions, and not just passively take in the information, you should allow some time for people to get to know each other, and help create a trusting and friendly atmosphere.

The traditional rounds of introductions where everyone states their name, occupation, and reason for attending is not quite enough in this case. We recommend avoiding this you have more than 10-15 participants, because it will take up too much time, and no one will be able to remember so many people anyway. Instead we recommend dividing the participants into smaller groups, and together with introductions have them work on a small warm-up task (eg. drawing a picture about the issue at hand or one´s own personal experiences with it, finding a suitable illustration from a selection of photos and magazines allocated for each table, suggest a saying or a pop song that describes the issue etc.). Later each group can present themselves and their results to others. This type of "warm-up" should not take more than 15-30 minutes, but it is nevertheless an important part of the process, helping the participants overcome their initial nervousness and get them in tune with the programme.

In addition, you should also give the participants a brief overview of the objective of the meeting, and the results you expect to achieve, as well as how the event fits into the rest of the public participation process.

2. Methods for presenting information.

More often than not, participants attending events that are aimed at collecting peoples´ opinions and proposals, find themselves welcomed with overwhelmingly long and detailed presentations. By the time the schedule get around to the the discussion, the participants are already so worn out, and confused by the overload of information, that their own contribution comes out rather meager.

Although it is understandable that the coordinator wants the participants to have all the necessary information, to anticipate questions or false interpretations, but usually this is a place where you must make some compromises. In-depth information could be sent to participants beforehand either by mail or shared online. However, it is important to bear in mind their ability to process large amounts of new and complex information (i.e. while it is important to make available all relevant documents, we recommend preparing special summaries, and in case of a younger audience, we recommend using videos instead of written texts).

A good way to avoid overlong presentations is **the pecha kucha method**, which comprises 20 slides, each shown for 20 seconds. Of course it is possible to set other time limits, but the main principle is to present only the most important information, and in a lively and interesting manner. Instead of traditional PowerPoint slide shows we recommend using more versatile presentation programmes (eg. prezi.com.). Please try to avoid jam-packed slides with unattractive designs.

Another method you might consider using is the one derived from the human/living library method, where the participants can choose between different experts with whom they can discuss the issue for about 20 minutes. This type of discussion circles are suitable for groups of about 10 people. When the time is up then people go to the next specialist. There could be 3 to 4 such preliminary discussions preparing the participants for the main discussion ahead.

It would be great if the experts could be available also for group discussions to be held later (eg. if the participants should need additional information etc.). If the objective is to collect participants´ opinions then the role of the expert is that of a neutral information source, and they must ensure that they do not tip the conversation in a personally preferable direction.

3. Methods for discussions, collecting information and ideas, and making plans.

In order to engage more participants in active discussion, we recommend dividing the audience into smaller groups of about 5 to 10 people. If possible you can give each group a neutral discussion leader, who will take notes and makes sure that everyone has a say in the matter, that the group stays on track, and that the discussion is kept civil etc. As an alternative the group may choose such a leader amongst themselves. Depending on the objective of the coordinator, these groups can either be comprised spontaneously on the spot or perhaps you might want to ensure that each group has a mix of different occupations, regions, age groups, nationalities, men-women.

World cafe is a method of group work that allows for a more creative approach. The premise of the world cafe method is that the most interesting discussions take place over a cup of coffee or tea. For this method you need to rearrange the room to a cafe-like setting, so that the discussions can take place sitting around the tables. After a certain amount of time, say 20 minutes, people change tables (duration depends on the number of planned rounds, but the whole thing should not take longer than a couple of hours). You could also designate a specific topic for each round (eg. first what is good about the current situation, secondly what are the perceived problems, thirdly what kinds of changes are needed, and finally how to achieve the desired results). Between each round you can ask a couple of tables to summarize their discussion. As an alternative you can divide questions and topics among different tables, and in that case all participants must stop by each table (in different order). Remember that the key points of discussions must be written down.

In order to facilitate discussions between different people the number of participants in a world cafe setting should be at least a couple of dozen. However, it is suitable also for a bigger crowd of hundreds, provided that you have suitably big premises at your disposal. The world cafe method is well suited for collecting and disseminating information; getting feedback on the current situation and future plans; generating new ideas and plans; but also for selecting the best solutions.

The open space method provides even more freedom to the participants. The main premise of this method is that if you give people, who have something on their minds, an opportunity to meet, and discuss things, then they will most probably come up with a solution. Thus it is important to ensure that participation is completely voluntary, i.e. the event is attended by only those people who really care about the issue. The open source method does not preclude certain modifications in terms of more specific social groups (eg. inviting only young people from a certain area). The topic may be open or very specific, eg. the environment, city district development plan etc).

At first each participant can pose questions in a larger circle, on a topic that they are interested in and willing to lead a discussion on (eg. if the general topic is public health, then the discussion might be about how to de reduce smoking). After having introduced the problem to the others, they select a spot for discussion. All discussions can go on at the same time, but if there are a lot of topics/groups, and not enough room, then they can be held in subsequent rounds. The optimum duration for one discussion is about 1-1,5 hours.

After all questions of interest have been posed, each participant must decide which discussions they would like to partake in. It is possible that some topics are of no interest to others, and in that case the person can either work alone or join some other group. The "voting with one´s feet " rule applies, i.e. as soon as a participant feels that the discussion does not offer them anything or there is nothing to learn, they move on to another group. There are four general rules: Whoever comes is the right person (i.e. those who are actually interested in the topic, and are competent enough to have an opinion); Whatever happens is the right thing to happen; When it starts is the right time and When it's over, it's over. The open space method entails a very flexible approach on behalf of the coordinator, as opposed to nervously sticking to preconceived schedule. All the discussed ideas and solutions are written down, preferably with a list of proposed action to be taken. All this information should subsequently be made available to everyone.

The open room method can be used with 10 or even hundreds and thousands of people. It is best suited for situations where nobody knows the "right" answers, and it is necessary to engage a large number of people. It is a good method for finding new ideas, and solutions, collecting opinions, activating people, creating ownership about presented ideas etc. However, the open room method is not recommended if the coordinator is not ready to relinquish control or if there is a clear expectation regarding the outcome of the discussions.

The fishbowl method is recommended if you need to hold a discussion with a large number of people. You need to move 4 to 5 chairs in the middle of the room to form an inner circle, and the rest of the chairs are positioned in outer circles. The right to talk is reserved only to those sitting in the inner circle, and one of the inner chairs must always be empty. When a person feels that they have something to say then they go and take a seat in the inner circle, and the person that has been there the longest will have to leave their spot (you may also limit how many times a person can visit the inner circle). This way you can avoid something that usually happens at large meetings, where a couple of chatterboxes take up all of the time or when dozens of people try to talk at the same time. This method is best suited for situations involving collecting feedback, discussing pros and cons, but also for collecting new ideas.

4. Methods for reaching a decision, and ending the meeting.

Each discussion does not have to end with a decision (eg. if the objective is only to collect ideas, and opinions). However, each meeting should end with a conclusive summary, and information about what is to become of the results. Try to avoid ambiguity, and promises that you cannot guarantee you can keep (eg. "we will send these proposals to the minister, who will surely take a serious stance"). If you promise to keep the participants updated with subsequent developments then you should tell them how and when you plan to do it – and make sure you keep your promises! Even if the objective of the discussion is to reach a decision, the participants must be aware of what that means (eg. whether it will be sent to someone just for information, or will it be implemented somehow).

The Occupy movement that spread in the US, and other countries at the end of 2011 based their decision-making on reaching a consensus in order to ensure that the usual majority voting would not exclude issues that are important to the minority. Consensual decision-making may not be the preferred mode of voting for all individual participants, but it is nevertheless acceptable to everyone. The general mood is "graded/measured" already in the course of discussion by using the following hand signs: waving hands with fingers pointed up (up twinkles) signifies agreement, whereas when fingers are pointed down (down twinkles) it means disagreement, flat hands mean being unsure of your position. Differences of opinion must be voiced as early as possible in order to try to solve them.

The proposal reached in the discussion is put to a vote that everyone can take part of, in order to avoid interpreting silence or inaction as support. Each participant has a right to use a veto called "hard block" (holding hands up and crossed). However, in order to avoid people reverting to the veto too lightly, the person must also explain their stance, and offer an alternative solution. This might lead either to a new discussion, or the opponent is given some time to find a certain amount of supporters in order to open the discussion once again. You may decide that each participant can use the veto only once or twice, or that a massive majority is also deemed a consensus (eg. 90% or 100%-3 etc.). In any case, differences of opinion are taken seriously, with solutions being actively sought.

The most common form of decision-making is voting, either by a show of hands, writing on a piece of paper or using special remote control devices. The problem with a show of hands is the possibility for group/peer pressure (eg. if the participant might be afraid to express their opposition in the presence of others). If there is a choice to be made among different alternatives then you should specify whether the participant must choose one preferred option or if they can vote for all acecptable solutions (the alternative that gets least opposing votes wins, despite not being the first choice of the majority).

The voting process itself can also be made more exciting. For example by writing each proposal on a separate piece of paper, and putting all of them on the wall. Participants are then given stickers that they can put on the paper(s) with their preferred idea(s).

If the stickers are in different colors then they can be used to indicate either support or opposition, or the degree of support (eg.. definitely for, for, neutral, against, definitely against etc).

In addition, you can have the participants evaluate different aspects of the propositions. For example at the 2013 Rahvakogu seminars the authors and experts were asked to evaluate their relevance (i.e. does it pertain to the problem at hand), and effect (i.e. does it bring about positive change). As a result the proposals that were deemed most relevant and effective were sent for further and final discussion on the following day. You can also evaluate the degree of innovation, feasibility etc., whatever is deemed important in a specific case.

When making conclusions at the end of a meeting, do not forget to ask the participants what they thought of the event. It will give them a chance to formulate the experiences gained, and lessons learned. It will also provide the organizers with valuable feedback that can be utilized in the organization of subsequent events. You can use a concise written feedback survey.

TO SUM UP

- **The selection of a suitable method will help you achieve better results,** and it will make the whole participation process more interesting, and simpler. However, in order to have success you need to plan, and organize the whole process very thoroughly.

- **Good public participation entails knowledge of different methods,** being flexible, and knowing how to utilize the methods according to your needs or how to combine them. It will take some time to get a feel of these things, and it will only come with experience.

- **When choosing a method you need to know the objective of public participation,** and evaluate what type of engagement is involved.

- **However, the final result depends not so much on the choice of method, but on the trust between partners,** and also clear and open communication on your behalf.

9. How to Communicate, and Disseminate Information?

„The communication just isn´t working!" "There´s not enough information!" "We weren´t told about the decision that was made." Unfortunately such statements are often heard in association with public participation. Public participation is a two-way process, which entails talking and listening. The following chapter provides an overview of methods for disseminating and collecting information. We describe in more detail what kind of information participants may need.

One of the main prerequisites for public participation is that the prospective participants have access to information that is relevant for decision-making. However, simply granting access to information or making it available, is not enough for good engagement. Public participation is an active process, where the person responsible for decision-making seeks active contact with people who are affected by the decision, and who might want to join the discussion.

The most prolific communication is always reciprocal (eg. if the government provides information about its activities, then they will have to deal with feedback from citizens). The same is valid for NGOs, who engage their members and target groups in various activities.

We cannot stress enough the importance of constant and open communication during the whole public participation process. Without adequate and clear information it is not possible to discuss things, negotiate, consult or state an opinion.

Open communication

Since the coordinators are usually in possession of more information regarding the draft legislation as compared to the participants, then there is a danger that they might dominate the discussion. While it is possible to submit proposals, the coordinator (eg. public official) may have their own plans and preferences. That reduces openness to new ideas, and is not conducive to a meaningful dialogue. If the coordinator prefers a certain solution, then they should provide a reasonable explanation.

The organization of the public participation process must motivate the participants to take active part, and make an effort to ensure that the decision is thoroughly discussed. If the general perception is from the beginning that the decision has already been made "behind closed doors," then people will be less willing to share their opinions. This might be the case when the document submitted for review is already very detailed, clearly in final stages, and approved within the agency. This leaves the participants with not much choice, either accept it or not. The latter case will breed confrontation, which will require time and patience to overcome, and might lead to unnecessary strife (perhaps also in the media).

In order to ensure trust you should disclose who has been involved in preparing the draft document, and who has been able to submit their proposals. That is the reason you should disclose all the authors and involved experts, including the members of permanent advisory boards or designated working groups, that have discussed the issue. During public participation the minutes of meetings must list the main discussion points, including dissenting opinions, if the group was not able to reach a consensus.

Participants should have a convenient way to follow the changes made to the draft document during the whole process. You can either share updated versions via e-mail, or better still, upload the documents to a website.

You should decide together with the participants how the different working versions of documents should be disseminated. If you want organizational representatives to discuss these issues with their members and other stakeholders, then do not mark the materials as meant only for internal use or as classified.

If you want to ensure that unfinished drafts do not cause public misunderstanding, and that they would not be considered as final decisions, then please mark the documents as such. The most important thing is to discuss with participants your mutual expectations and conditions with regard to disseminating information.

Any kind of information benefits from being clearly expressed. The language used by officials and lawyers is often a professional jargon, as documents need to be legally sound. Your partners might not always understand the meaning of complex wording, but the main ideas behind the decision must be clear to everyone involved. Therefore you need to edit those texts to ensure that simple and clear language is used. We recommend adding an explanatory informal summary, that lists the main changes (eg. possible consequences of different alternatives or impacts). For public consultation, state the discussion points, and when listing alternatives, use neutral wording in order not to sway the opinion in your preferred direction. The more complex the text, the more time you should devote to explaining its contents to the participants, and the public (eg. by organizing seminars, trainings, or compose a FAQ handout and section on web page).

If the participants are having a hard time finding the necessary information from official documents, then the officials usually encounter problems when analyzing feedback. Each participant expresses their views based on their own individual experiences. Most of them have no or little knowledge of the political or legal background. Therefore you need to include this type of information and clarifications in the discussions. However, don not get bogged down in trying to ensure the eloquence of the wording, because it is more important to understand the meaning behind it. We recommend grouping the submitted proposals based on their main arguments. This will give you a better overview of the general directions in which the arguments are leaning.

The processing of submitted opinions, and new proposals is a natural phase in every public participation process. It is not enough to make a list of submitted arguments.

It will look like information is neatly compiled, but it is not really usable. You must process the input received from participants, and present it in a manner that is understandable to both sides, and also to the media.

Communication channels

Your objective is to find such communication channels that your participants, and stakeholders use as their main sources of information. These could be, for example, social media, web sites or mailing lists, NGO newsletters, print materials handed out at conferences etc.

Many stakeholders contact officials directly in order to get the information they need. This helps establish good contacts with partners, but it is also quite time-consuming and is not really transparent with regard to other participants.

An official request for information is not a particularly good method to use in public participation, because it is passive and one-sided information sharing. Each request must receive an individual answer, which, pursuant to law, must be sent within a spefic timeframe. We rather recommend making a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) section on your web page in order to provide answers to the most popular and pressing questions.

Preliminary information regarding planned decisions could be sent to stakeholder **mailing lists**. This will allow for interested parties to keep themselves informed with issues, and reduces the number of individual phone calls, or e-mails, that officials must deal with daily.

An important part of the process is collaboration with the **media**. The public must be informed already when the preparations are underway. For example, we recommend sending out a press release upon commencing the drafting of a new development plan. The press release should also state the names of members of the working group, list the main themes of the plan, and contact details for further information. Thus, interested parties that wish to have their say or would like to be kept informed on this issue, can let you know of their interest in the matter.

On your **web page** should be a special section for background information, FAQ, and summaries of discussions held. **Online public engagement platform** or a **thematic blog** is an interactive channel where you can post the draft decision, and invite stakeholders to comment on it (see Chapter on "Online Public Participation").

The coordinator should not just sit and wait for opinions to be submitted through official channels, they should also monitor the discussions going on in **web platforms**, including social media, and on stakeholder websites or forums. You can do this by monitoring topical keywords (eg. subscribe to a RSS feed or procure media monitoring).

Various **events** are a good way to organize an active discussion. Usually there are officials or experts present, but you should also arrange a possibility for discussion. When organizing discussion meetings we recommend using an experienced moderator, who is not directly associated with any of the parties. This will ensure an unbiased discussion, and lets you concentrate on the results.

ADEQUATE, TIMELY, and RELEVANT information

In the course of the public participation process various methods are used to disseminate information, and communicate with partners. The general public is usually informed at the beginning (i.e. when commencing preparatory work), during the process, and in the end, when the decision has been made.

We recommend that you inform you partners early on about the need to make a decision, and the plan for public participation. The more active you are in spreading this information, the easier it is for all participants to plan their time accordingly, and prepare their statements.

This will also enable those, that are not on your list of traditional partners, to come forward. They may inform you of their wish to participate, and continue contributing actively. These kinds of expressions of interest should always be welcomed.

1. **What kind of information do participants need at the beginning, i.e. when thepolicy-making starts, and you contact the stakeholders with an invitation to join the process.**

- Draw attention to the links between the upcoming decision, earlier agreements, and work plans. Usually the need for draft legislation or a strategy is already scheduled in the government´s programme or in the ministry´s work plan.

- Share the results of the impact assessment analysis. List all identified target groups that will be affected most by the proposed changes. Representatives of those groups are the ones that should take part in the public participation process.

- Annex or link explanatory materials (eg. simple summary of main points, and most important changes). It is recommended to list main discussion points as questions, because it will facilitate the submission of opinions.

- Describe your plan for public participation (i.e. give an overview of when and how you plan to organize participation activities). Set the dates for meetings, conferences, or information days in the calendar.

- Remember to add the contact details of the responsible person.

- Describe whether and where the proposals submitted by participants will be published.

- Describe clearly how the agency plans to process the submitted proposals: when and how will participants receive feedback, and what is to become of the decision or document afterwards (eg. when is the official round of approval with other ministries, when will the materials be submitted to the government etc).

- All the materials related to the public participation process (i.e. background information + working documents) should be made available both online, and also on paper if deemed necessary.

- If you wish to engage stakeholders who speak other languages, then you should also make an effort to translate the documents, even if only in summary form.

How much time do participants need to formulate their opinions? You should reserve at least 4 weeks for written consultations (incl. web-based submissions of opinion) as recommended in the code of good practice. Bear in mind that NGOs need time to discuss their positions with their members. This periood gives them time to weigh in on the matter, which in turn will guarantee high quality, and more legitimate input.

In some cases there are even longer periods for collecting opinions on draft legislation (eg. at least 8 weeks for environmental impact assessments).

2. What kind of information do participants need during the process?

- Minutes/memos of discussions, including dissenting opinions.

- Interim summaries of proposals submitted during the process, and working versions of the document which have incorporated the changes based on the proposals.

Documenting the course of public participation is necessary for the purposes of publishing all arguments brought up in discussions. If the submitted opinions are written down, the participants will better understand how the decision was arrived at. For example, at meetings you should definitely write down all the compromises, because otherwise next time you will have to start the discussion all over again.

3. What kind of information do participants need at the end of the process?

- An overview of the changes, proposals, and opinions that were taken into consideration as a result of public participation.

- The final version of the decision, that will be submitted for official decision (eg. to the government).

The results of public participation should be presented as a conclusive summary of submitted opinions, and the changes that were made based on those proposals. First make sure that the participants are aware of the results, and then you make them public.

Draft a general reply based on opinions submitted in the course of the process, i.e. a summary of proposals with reasons for incorporating or not incorporating them into the final decision. NB! This does not mean that you should reply separately to each submitted opinion!

The general response must disclose the final position, that was reached as a result of this collaborative process. It is enough to simply list the main proposals (based on several similar opinions). In addition it would be nice to list those proposals that were in clear opposition with the decision that was reached, and describe the arguments why they were not used as input.

The general response is incorporated into the explanatory memorandum that accompanies each draft legislation or development plan, when those documents are submitted to the government.

To sum up

- **One of the essential prerequisites for public participation is constant communication with the participants.** Prepare a plan when and what kind of information is needed at the start, during the course, and at the end of the public participation process.

- **Do not limit notifications only to the decision that was reached.** That is not deemed public participation, it is more akin to persuasion or delegation.

- **Choose communication channels that are already actively used by stakeholders as their primary sources of information.** Be the most active communicator, and keep yourself up to date with submitted opinions as well.

- **Openness breeds trust.** Give your participants an overview about what kind of information will be made available to the general public, and when. This will ensure that your messages are clear, and commonly shared.

- **The more complex the issue, and the more facets to the problem, the more you need to explain.** Use clear and simple language, i.e. do not get lost in the jungle of professional jargon, and do not just keep referencing legislative acts.

10. Online Participation

This chapter will discuss the most widely used online solutions for public participation, and we will give some tips regarding what should be taken into consideration when engaging online.

Online communication has become prevalent, and offers new means for active participation in society. People want to know what the government is doing, and how it affects them. They are also interested in what changes are coming up in areas that are of special interest to them.

Communicating clear and adequate information regarding public decision-making is one of the essential prerequisites for public participation. This information can be found in the government´s action programme, and from the work plans of various ministries, which are all available online. In addition, there are also ministry press releases published on their websites, and information on discussions in working groups, and other public participation events.

The Internet does not preclude or substitute for other communication channels, that can also be used for public participation with electronic means. Although the Internet offers great tools for disseminating information, it does not guarantee better engagement. For best results we recommend using and combining various methods, and communication channels.

How to use the web in public participation?

Whatever e-participation method you decide to use, it is important to remember that it is first and foremost a public participation method, and it is of secondary importance that it is also an online-tool, and therefore you need to abide by the general public participation principles also in online processes.

Today it is quite common to conduct public discussions online. **E-consultations** are a great tool for collecting stakeholder or public opinions about a specific problem or draft legislation. The results of the consultation are not binding, and they do not generate an automatic decision. There are several types of e-consultations or web discussions: official (opportunity to participate in political decision-making), or unofficial (mapping the range of general opinion, and attitudes on a specific question). Afterwards these opinions are analyzed in order to identify positions that are supported, and also the main counter-arguments.

In some countries there is a central public participation web platform, as the main governmental channel for conducting public consultations. There you can find working versions of draft legislation, and opinions both by the stakeholders, and the general public. Since the average length of draft legislation documents tends to be very long and detailed, we recommend adding a concise explanatory summary describing the main points of discussion, and post questions you need feedback on. When working online it is important to ensure that the materials posted are unambiguously clear, because people rush through online content, and do not actually read texts but only skim them in a hurry.

It is important to ensure that each consultation has a designated leader who is responsible for upholding the dialogue with people sharing their opinions, and providing feedback. The summary response must highlight why certain proposals were incorporated, while others were not.

In addition, several ministries use blogs to draw public attention to certain topics.

All materials meant to be shared online for the purposes of public participation (incl. background information, and related documents, eg. relevant legislation) can be linked with your agency´s website. In order to ensure that online participation tools are used more actively, we recommend notifying the public via the media, and through the mailing lists of your partners. Online communication should be complemented by traditional public participation (eg. events, discussions in working groups etc.).

Depending on the situation you might need to make online content available also in print form (at least the general summaries). This will make the information accessible also to those people who do not use or have access to the Internet.

The Internet is a public information channel, and therefore you should be careful in handling personal information. Participants must be notified how their data will be used. In some cases you may need to limit public access to information, and create a web platform just for a closed circle of participants.

There are several methods you can use for online public participation:

- **Feedback, publishing submitted opinions:** You can use web surveys, reply forms or answer via e-mail.

- **Newsletters:** Regular notifications, and preliminary information regarding upcoming consultations, and the state of on-going discussions.

- **Recorded videos, and live transmissions from events (eg. conferences):** For example you can upload a video of a spokesperson (eg. minister, expert), and arrange an interactive communication session on your blog or facebook page.

- **Dialogue with various stakeholders in their web spaces.** For example the discussion may be conducted in a special forum or on some organization´s facebook wall. Often the most complex, and controversial questions are discussed in these channels, because the discussion is spontaneous and informal.

- **Sharing tools, and wiki,** which allow for joint drafting, and editing of documents. For example, invitation-based file-management (eg. google docs or dropbox) are a great means for preparing, editing, and approving draft versions of documents.

- **E-initiatives** are a great way for citizens to influence politics by submitting their proposals for policy changes online.

- **E-petitions** or calls for action are basically protest campaigns which allow citizens to send the govenment complaints or protests, and collect signatures. Some platforms are well-suited for collecting opinions, discussing the content, and co-edit the petition before official submission.

TO SUM UP

- **Plan your online participation well in advance.** Decide what kind of information needs to be published online, and when. When conducting discussions online you must decide which channel(s) to use, how long it will last, who will be responsible, and how you plan to respond to submitted opinions as they come in.

- **We recommend combining online participation with other methods.** Advertise the opportunity to take part in e-consultations. Invest time and money to find and notify potential participants. Let them know when the consultation begins, and how to make their voices heard. Communicate with the media, advertise, link with other web platforms, send direct e-mails. Ask your partners (eg. NGOs, companies etc) to help spread information. Use social media networks and link your web page with others.

- **Analyze the results, and give feedback.** Reserve time to review the results of online consultations. Prepare a conclusive summary, and publish it as soon as possible after the submission of opinions. Let participants know what is going to happen next, and how the final decision will be made.

11. How to Reach a Decision?

Public participation is not a thing in itself, but a useful tool for achieving better results. In the course of public participation you will often encounter conflicting ideas, and proposals, because the participants have different interests, expectations, and needs. How to reach a decision with all those factors at play? The following chapter deals with analyzing information, giving feedback, and getting results via public participation.

We recommend setting realistic expectations for the process as a whole, and for the result in particular, before you commence public participation. Usually the coordinator assumes that partners are interested in participating and contributing their time and proposals. Unfortunately that is not always the case, and some invited participants might not even show up for meetings. It is the responsibility of the coordinator to maintain the participants´ attention and motivation. Public participation should start from reaching a common understanding regarding the objectives, because later you will be comparing your results to these very same goals. We would like to stress that the coordinators themselves must know why they need others to contribute, and what are they trying to achieve through public participation.

In addition, officials should not expect that non-governmental partners will reach an agreement among themselves, and partners will come to the meetings with already formulated proposals. That is not how civil society works. Positions emerge through discussions with NGO members while trying to find common ground. Such homework takes time, but is extremely necessary, because as a result wider consensus is reached. The coordinator´s mission is to ensure that those most affected are able to make their voices heard.

We have stressed throughout this handbook that the more complex the issue, and the wider its impact, the more stakeholders you need to engage, while trying to balance various interests at the same time. But how to accommodate different interests when trying to reach a compromise?

If an interest group has very clear-cut positions on a specific issue, then you should also interview other participants in order to get a broader view of all the arguments. You should also definitely publish all dissenting opinions, and analyze them together with the participants.

Public participation is akin to negotiations, such where one party does not have to win, or the other does not have to lose. The main objective of public participation is the aggregation of different expectations, and wishes in order to reach a result that is acceptable to all parties involved, and preferebaly better than the initial proposal.

In negotiations the key to success is thorough preparation, and to do that you need to choose the right tactic.

Since public participation involves several parties, then conflict cannot be avoided because the parties have differing interests. They have different starting points, and they might use different terms when talking about the same things. Sometimes participants show up already pre-set for quarrel and confrontation. In such cases the coordinator should not try to avoid debates, but try and mediate by finding a solution that could be acceptable to all parties involved.

You need to reserve some time to deal with these types of situations. We recommend the following approach: each of the parties should state their main agenda as clearly as possible, because it will help avoid empty rhetoric, and endless complaining about details.

This puts all the cards right on the table, everyone will have a better overview on what´s at stake, and you can start building solutions.

The final results of public participation

Providing feedback about the progress, and the results of public participation is the most important task throughout the whole process, because otherwise participation loses its meaning as such. Negative feedback is also necessary, and it must be done sincerely, because usually there are reasonable grounds for rejecting certain proposals. If there is no meaningful and timely feedback, then it will result in loss of trust, and later it will be difficult to convince the partner to return to the table.

In order to have input for the final summary you need to write down all the decisions, and joint solutions that were reached during the process. Each meeting should be accompanied by a memo, i.e. transcript of main discussion points, and decisions made. Such memos are shared between all participants, and their feedback is taken into account.

You should also record differences of opinion, especially if you are not able to solve the situation during the meeting. This allows you to address these issues at the following meeting or discuss at a special meeting convened for the purposes of finding a resolution, especially if the dispute is related to important factors that hinder the public participation process itself.

EXAMPLE

If the public participation process drags out too long, then there might be some turnover in NGO representatives. Therefore it is useful to write down, and publish all differences of opinion that have ended in compromise. If necessary you can also ask outside experts to come in and help you resolve differences among participants.

The most common way to communicate the final results of public participation is to write a summary providing a concise overview of submitted proposals, the decision, and reasoning behind it all. A well written summary will allow the participants to understand how their contribution affected the course and outcome of the decision-making process. However, it is worth noting that the objective of decision-making is to find a consensus, and therefore the final document does not have to indicate who specifically submitted which proposals, because the focus is on the changes that were incorporated into the final document. This also makes this document suitable for publishing, because information is not linked to specific people.

One reason why people are sometimes disappointed in public participation is because participants are not given a chance to review the document in the final stage. For example, if there was no time to deal with differences of opinion, and some participants felt that their opinions, and previous agreements were not adequately presented.

It is necessary to give the participants a chance to review the final document before the decision is made in order for them to see whether their proposals were taken into account, and make any final amendments if necessary.

If the discussions have been conducted via permanent consultative bodies (eg. advisory board, committee, working group) then they should also be included in final discussions for reaching the decision. If the coordinator takes the decision-making solely upon themselves, then it might cause discontent among the participants, especially if they find that some important proposal was not included.

Your summary of the public participation process should include the following:

- **Introduction.** State once more the objective of the public participation, and describe the nature of the decision to be made;

- **Describe the participation process.** Provide an overview of the activities undertaken in the framework of public participation, and list the contributing stakeholders;

- **Provide an overview of submitted opinions** together with comments, i.e. what was incorporated, and what was not;

- **Indicate clearly what types of changes were made** based on these proposals as compared to the initial draft version. Highlight the new ideas that were also suggested;

- **Annex a list of participants,** minutes of meetings, and other relevant materials, and documents.

- **Describe how and when the next stanges in decision-making process will unfold,** and where the participants could find information about it.

Find a suitable level of generalization, and do not let your descriptions get too detailed! It is better to highlight major milestones (eg. agreements reached), and changes in objective or content that were brought about by the public participation.

Actually, this type of summaries are normally required for draft legislation by the regulatory rules for legal drafting. Therefore you can use this text as feedback for participants, and also incorporate it into the explanatory memorandum of the draft legislation. In addition, in the later approval rounds between different ministries it will be easier to comment on the decision if the explanatory memorandum contains an overview of the proposals submitted in the course of public participation, and whether they were taken into account or not.

Implementing the results of public participation

Another important factor in public participation, in addition to effective organization, and open communication, is how effectively the results are implemented. While the collaborative relations with the participants might have been excellent during the process, they may still view the overall experience as negative if their proposals and ideas are not taken into account in the final decision-making process.

It is important that decision-makers are actually ready to incorporate the opinions submitted by the participants (i.e. consider different arguments when making the decision). In the end, the responsibility for decision-making lies with the coordinator, but the solutions and alternatives offered by the participants are the foundation.

The success of public participation is affected by the support lent to the officials conducting this process by their management and colleagues. In addition, the general organizational culture, and values of the agency also play a part (eg. is there an internal code of practice or guidelines for public participation; whether and how much the management values activities related to public participation etc).

What is more, the coordinators themselves need to be skilled in explaining the results of public participation within their organization, and defend them if necessary. This is especially relevant if the final decision must be approved by the head of the organization. In addition it is important to constantly monitor the implementation of the decision, and the proposed changes. It is important to collaborate with partners in order to ensure effective implementation. Even if the decision made in the course of public participation is subsequently “frozen” or rejected, then participants must be notified thereof in order to guarantee their willingness to participate in future decision-making processes.

To sum up

- **Compare the results of public participation** with the initial objectives which were formulated at the onset together with the participants.

- **Try to create a space for discussion,** where people listen to each other´s positions, and respect different opinions.

- **Different interests and positions** manifest themselves at public participation events, and therefore it is inevitable to have some differences of opinion, disputes, and sometimes even conflict. In order to find a compromise everyone will have to clearly explain their position, and the role of the coordinator is to find among these differing interests and needs, the common denominator that is closest to the general objective.

12. Evaluating the Progress, and the Results of Public Participation

All tasks we perform, especially those that we are not that experienced in yet, should also entail evaluation of our performance, and what kinds of lessons can be drawn for future reference. However, evaluation is also the first thing that is left undone due to time constraints, leading to those very same mistakes being repeated in the future. Although more orthodox authors might not agree with us, we nevertheless recommend that putting even a little thought into the evaluation of the process is better than nothing at all.

Your guiding principle should be feasibility. You do not need to evaluate the process after each tiny and routine consultation. (NB! However, it is always important to write a summary, and give feedback!) After longer and more elaborate processes the least you can do is to convene the main participants once more, and discuss what happened, and what you achieved.

However, a more thorough analysis has the advantage of collecting more reliable evidence than just a gut feeling regarding whether the time and money spent on public participation was used wisely. In addition, it will help the co-ordinator to better plan, and conduct subsequent activities. If you write your analysis down, it will become a useful learning tool for both your colleagues, and the participants. For the latter it is also a sign of respect, an indication that there was genuine interest in their contributions, which will probably inspire them to take part in such processes in the future as well. Why not write an article to share your experiences, and make presentations at relevant events, or use them as input when planning trainings for your own organization, and for target groups.

Preparing for evaluation

At the end of the public participation you should evaluate the progress, and the results of the process. Both are important, because poorly organized meetings will probably yield poor results. You should evaluate progress towards long-term objectives (eg. increased cooperation, trust, reputation, civic activity etc.) reasonably regularly, perhaps once a year or every couple of years.

Evaluation of results will help you answer the following question: what did we manage to achieve? This question is much easier to answer if you managed to set clear, and specific objectives (see Chapter 4) in the beginning of the public participation process. This enables you to evaluate whether, or to what extent you managed to reach those objectives (eg. did you manage to collect necessary information about the situation to be used in subsequent phases of the process; did you manage to get any ideas to remedy the situation, or receive feedback to your plans etc). The more specifically your objectives, and success criteria were formulated, the easier it is to evaluate their achievement later.

Evaluating the path of public participation will help you understand whether you achieved your objectives or not, and whether it was due to your work as a coordinator or despite of it. These questions are important mainly to the coordinator, their organization, and other coordinators in order to learn whether and what should be done differently in the future. For example, which methods and why yielded the best results (as compared to other similar processes), how did the division of labor work inside the facilitating organization; what kinds of problems you encountered during the process; did you have enough time and money; could these result have been achieved in a more effective manner etc.

Evaluation can be conducted alone by analyzing your own work, and results. It is the cheaper and faster approach. However, if you want it to be more constructive, then we recommend including your participants in the evaluation process as well, because they will be able to give you a different perspective. In addition, you could also get valuable information (as feedback for results, and general recommendations for next time) from people who could have taken part in the process, but were for some reason unable to do that. Public participation can be evaluated either in quantitative (eg. results, surveys etc.) or in qualitative terms (eg. descriptions, interviews etc.). We recommend using a combination of both.

When choosing the method for public participation, you must also decide whether you will conduct the evaluation yourself, or outsource it to an expert or an organization. Doing it yourself is certainly more educational, while the main advantage of an outsourced evaluation, in addition to more professional expertise, is a more neutral point of view. What is more, when giving feedback, your partner organizations might be less forthcoming with critical remarks when they are speaking directly to you. Therefore, when collecting feedback yourself make sure that the questions would not guide the respondent to answer in a way that they think would please you. If possible you should guarantee your respondents´ anonymity, and stress that you are interested in constructive criticism.

Whether you evaluate yourself or use experts, either way it is important to consider evaluation issues already in the planning stages of public participation.

What to focus on during evaluation?

Albert Einstein has said that not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts. However, this should not be taken as an excuse to forego evaluation. Here are some recommendations that deserve your attention when evaluating public participation.

Four indicators that you can easily get data for, but which do not really indicate success of public participation:

1. **Number of participants or proposals.** It is relatively easy to count the number of people (or organizations) who took part in the discussions, or the number of proposals submitted in the course of the public participation process. It is necessary to keep count of such things, but it will mainly indicate poor rather than good performance. For example, if you expected 100 participants, and only 3 people showed up, or instead of dozens of proposals you did not receive any. Those numbers would indicate that clearly something went wrong (i.e. either the question presented to prospective participants was not formulated clearly or it did not seem interesting enough; perhaps you chose the wrong time and method for engaging stakeholders etc. (But it could also mean that people were satisfied with your plans, and saw no need for submitting their comments). On the other hand a hundred participants or ten proposals do not automatically mean that the public participation has been a success. Conflict is a fool-proof tactic to ensure active participation in great numbers, but we doubt if it is a desirable starting position for policy-makers.

2. **Participant satisfaction after the discussion or consultations.** We recommend asking participants for such feedback, and you can definitely use this information in planning subsequent events. If people leave dissatisfied or even angry, then you can count it as a failure. However, positive feedback does not indicate a major success. People may leave in a good mood, because they felt that they got everything off their chests, heard interesting and useful things, the room was nice, and the food was delicious etc. However, they will forget all of that soon enough, if afterwards they realize that their proposals were not incorporated into the final decision.

3. **Duration of the public participation process.** Short deadlines are a common criticism thrown at public participation coordinators. It is commendable if the deadlines are set according to participants´ needs and capacity, but the simple fact that you have a couple of months to submit your proposal, may not be of any use, if it does not bring about other positive consequences.

4. **Demographic profile of the participants.** It is great if the coordinator manages to reach out to all social groups that are deemed important in terms of the issue at hand (incl. minorities, and other not easily accessible groups), because their exclusion may leave you without important information. However, just the fact that there were ethnic minorities, young, elderly, disabled etc. people at the event, does not prove that the public participation was successful.

And here are four important indicators that are more difficult to measure:

1. **The effect of the public participation process on decision-making.** Although even just the fact of participation itself may be important from the point of view of civic education, people actually take part in such events, because they want to achieve something or prevent unwanted changes from happening. Therefore it is important to ask whether something changed as a result of public participation. For example, was there any new information, perspectives, ideas that would have otherwise been excluded; did you discover and remedy any deficiencies that could have hindered decision-making or implementation; in what way did public participation affect the quality of the decision for the better etc.

2. **The participants´ understanding of the decision made.** Although the phrase 'public interest' is quite widely used, it is clear that there is a multitude of interests prevalent in society. A good public participation result may be that if those groups whose positions were left in the minority, understand and accept the decision that was eventually made, and the process that led to it. Another important public participation quality indicator is giving feedback to the participants.

3. **Improved capacity of participants, and coordinator.** At the end of the public participation process you should definitely ask whether the coordinator and the participants learned something, whether this knowledge will be used in their organizations, will it lead to any operational changes within their organizations etc.

4. **Improved trust, and collaboration.** More important than the evolution of a specific decision are the meaningful long-term relationships where the parties do not consider each other as opponents, but see the other as a complementary collaborator due to different knowledge base, skills, and capacity. Therefore we recommend asking after each public participation process whether it fostered the creation of such relationships or not.

To sum up

- **Address evaluation** as part of the whole process, and plan it from the start together with setting objectives.
- **It is best if you analyze** the progress of public participation, and its results together with your partners.
- **Evaluation will help you** better plan and organize subsequent public participation projects, and it will also provide valuable information for your colleagues, and to the participants as well.

13. Concluding Remarks

If you have ever taken ballroom dancing lessons, then you probably remember your first awkward steps, your body stiff with exertion, eyes on your feet, silently mouthing the rhythm. But what do you know! After some practice you are able to take more audacious turns, listen to the music, converse with your lovely partner, make sure you do not bump into other couples swirling on the dance floor, and actually enjoy dancing. Well, it is the same with public participation.

With constant practice, public participation will become a way of thinking that enables you to instinctively choose the most suitable activities, methods, communication channels etc. You develop collaborative relations with your target groups, and partners who learn to trust each other, and understand that they are all working towards common goals. There will always be differences of opinion, which is totally natural, and even necessary. What is important is that everybody knows that their ideas will not be excluded without review, and thorough discussion.

14. The Short Version

1. Preconceptions, and expectations.

- Public participation will enable you to become better at your job by avoiding mistakes, making thoroughly discussed decisions, gaining more support, and achieving smoother implementation. Public participation is not a favor to somebody else.

- The success of public participation depends mainly on your ability or reach the necessary participants, foster their interest, and understanding, and find the best means to communicate with them. This requires resourcefulness, flexibility, but first and foremost, a caring and considerate attitude towards those who contribute to your cause.

- Do not expect rapid results from public participation. Establishing meaningful partnerships entails trust, and experience which will only develop in the course of time. Do not feel discouraged if your first attempts do not yield desired results, be ready to learn form these experiences, and change your behavior if necessary.

2. Planning public participation processes.

- We do not recommend undertaking public participation just to “tick the box”. Use this method only when you are actually interested in, and need the input provided by the participants. If you do not have the time or resources, or if the decision has already been made or if there is only one solution, then it would constitute only an imitation of public participation, which can endanger your relationships. In such cases you should inform the stakeholders of the decision made, and explain the reasoning behind it, but be ready to hear out their justified outrage.

- Formulate an objective for public participation (preferably together with prospective participants), eg. do you need to collect information on the current situation, new ideas, notify someone, get feedback, make a decision etc. Make sure that your participants have a commonly shared understanding of the objective. Do not be surprised if their expectations turn out to be different from yours. In that case you should discuss it immediately, and find a way to resolve the differences.

- Do not forget engaging your colleagues as well, and make sure that within your organization the objectives for public participation are perfectly clear, and supported by everyone.

- Discuss what you need for successful achievement of objectives, ie. how much time, people, money, skills, etc. Prepare a realistic time-schedule (with buffers!), and a division of labor, and make your plan available to everyone.

3. Finding participants.

- Analyze whom this decision will affect, who might be interested in this topic, or has relevant experience, whose support is necessary for future implementation of the decision.

- Do not avoid critics! Because that might cut you off from important information. In addition, the excluded parties might find their way to the media or politicians, which could be nerve wrecking, and you may even have to start from scratch.

- Do not limit yourself by collaborating only with your usual partners. Take time to consider whether there might be others who should have their say. Your current partners can be of great help in finding, and recruiting new partners.

- Bear in mind that a fancy name, and a large membership are not adequate indicators of organizational capacity. You will get a much better picture by learning about their activities (eg. check out their web page, talk to their partners, members or financiers etc).

- Discuss your expectations together with your participants. Do you need their personal expert opinion or do you need them to collect, and represent someone else´s positions (eg. member organizations, target groups).

- Maintain good working relations with your partners, because you will probably need their opinions, and to keep collaborating with them in the future.

4. Communication

- Do not presume that all participants use the same communication channels as you. Find out what is the best way to reach them, eg. mailing lists, events, umbrella organizations, meetings etc. Your other partners will probably be able to help you with that.

- Make sure that the majority of your partners are better at practice, than theory. They have probably not read the same reports, might not be aware of legal provisions, have not taken part in the same meetings as you etc. However, they probably have the best information about the actual current situation. Use them for what they are good at, i.e. engage them early on for the purposes of collecting information. Having been included from the start, they will later be better equipped to comment on the draft legislation.

- Explain to participants in a simple manner what the upcoming draft legislation might change in their lives, why it should be important to them, and why you are interested in their input. A personal approach usually yields better results. It is great if you are able to formulate specific questions, not just comment on the draft legislation.

- Decide what are your rules for communication (eg. in case of problems we will first try to work it out amongst ourselves, and not go straight to the media, working versions of documents are for personal use only etc.). However, bear in mind that if your partners do not like the decision, then they have the right to say so in public.

5. Discussions, and consultations.

- Decide which public participation methods are best suited to your objectives. For example, open room, world cafe, simulations etc., may all be more interesting for participants, and generate better input than traditional meetings, and written consultations.

- Discuss with your partners, how much time do they need for preparing their proposals.

- If you expect them to discuss draft legislation also with their members or target groups, then you need to give them ample time to do that. If there is not enough time, then send an early notice, so your partners will know to plan their schedules accordingly, and are able to commence working on the draft legislation as soon as they receive it. However, short deadlines should be the exception, because public participation is a natural part of the decision-making process which takes time.

6. Feedback, evaluation, and decision-making.

- The partners that contributed to your work will want to know what becomes of their proposals. People understand if you explain why certain proposals cannot be incorporated. However, if there is no explanation, then people remain uninformed, and might grow angry, which reduces their motivation to take part in such events in the future.

- Do not presume that someone will tell you the “right” answer or that it will emerge from the opinions submitted by the participants. It may happen, but often the parties have different opinions, and you cannot expect them to simply reach an agreement. At the end of the day, the responsibility for decision-making, and its consequences lies with the coordinator who must be able to explain why certain choices were made.

- Once you are finished you should take time to evaluate what has happened, (eg. did public participation fulfill its objective, and what lessons did you learn). The evaluation can be done alone by yourself, or together with the participants who will also have an opportunity to draw lessons for next time. We recommend sharing your knowledge, and experiences also with your colleagues, and keep applying these principles in your work.