COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY, A CHALLENGE FOR BOTH LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND CITIZENS - ROMANIAN EXPERIENCE –

Daniel SERBAN

1. Introduction

The essence of democracy is that it is a system of governing that is of by and for the people. These words are as true now as they were when first spoken in 1863 by American President, Abraham Lincoln. This concept of democracy is as valid for Romania as it was and still is for the United States, England and virtually any modern democracy. There is no reason to believe that this basic essence of democratic governance will change in the foreseeable future.

The implications of this truism are that democracy is more than free elections, though this is the essential starting point. Government of, by and for the people has to become and remain a partnership – a partnership between the people and the elected officials in whom they have invested their trust. This trust must also extend to all officials and institutions of government. In democratic countries all over the world, this trust is established through honesty and transparency on the part of officials and through people being given an opportunity to play a role in government, even on a day-to-day basis. The responsibility of the people is to take advantage of this opportunity, and government, both national and local, should encourage citizens to participate in day-to-day governance. Today, in Romania, this process is well underway, but there is much yet to be accomplished. Both government and citizens are increasing rapidly their understanding of the power and potential of democracy in Romania.

Partnership between the people and government depends upon citizens having access to information that effects their lives. For instance, the citizens should be involved in the local budgeting process. They should be made aware of what the budget is and have an opportunity to influence it through public meetings, debates, hearings and citizen advisory committees. Government should learn about people’s satisfaction with essential local government services and public service delivery through surveys, interviews, focus groups, public meetings and other techniques of citizen participation.

Local council meetings should be open to citizens and their proceedings should be made a matter of public record. Citizens should be invited to participate as volunteer representatives on different task forces, commissions and advisory committees designed to help government fulfill its responsibilities more effectively, especially on the issue of specific public service delivery. Citizens performing in this manner can be very creative and helpful in finding solutions to problems and assisting with the everyday tasks of government operations and management. Some mayors of Romanian cities and local government councils already have started the practice of using citizens advisory groups to help them in the governing process, and one of these example is cited herein.

In conclusion, citizen participation, while essential to democracy, is not always easy to achieve. Sometimes public services tariffs are too high, quality is questionable and the beneficiaries have no input neither in debating the service provider strategy nor in monitoring the clients’ satisfaction. Sometimes it takes political will, persistence and a disposition to educate both officials and citizens about their responsibilities in a democracy to make it happen. This paper provides concepts, insights, tools and one example - Brasov - that should be helpful to both practitioners and theoreticians, as they advance the principles of democracy in Romania.

1 Training and Citizen Participation Program Manager, Research Triangle Institute Romania, Bucharest
2. Why community involvement in public service delivery?

In a broad sense, a public service deals with such things as roads, heat, water, sanitation, parks and schools. In short, public services are at the heart of basic human needs, along with food and shelter. It stands to reason that in planning for the future improvement or expansion of these services, the collective will of the people should be consulted.

However, there is much about the public services that is very technical and that requires expert judgment and political will. Consequently, strong public demand for a project does not mean that it must be immediately included in the local government development plans. Sometimes, there are complex engineering issues to resolve, legal issues that must be dealt with, and finance issues that involve detailed either negotiations with banks or other lending institutions, or hard political fights in the local council on public services restructuring. Certainly, there is much about the public services delivery process that must be left to the experts and professionals.

However, citizens can help define needs, set priorities, and endorse changes that may be needed as a plan is carried out. If the people are excluded from the process, government will not fulfill its responsibility as partner with the citizens in democracy and this brings with it some serious consequences. Excluding citizens from the public services delivery process - which often happens in Central and Eastern European countries - is a mistake. It will:

- Undermine the trust in government that is so essential in a democracy;
- Intensify the objections of those who oppose the projects included in the service development;
- Create political problems for elected officials; and
- Aggravate possible resistance to any increased tariffs, taxes, fees or rates that might need to be levied to pay for the project or plan.

So, the prudent course for local government to take in delivering public services is to make the process as transparent as possible, by

- Informing and educating the citizens as to what decisions are being made and why;
- Explaining what financing is being considered and what financial constraints exist;
- Involving citizens in the process where it makes sense to do so; and
- Proactively seeking public interest and support.

A public service development plan supported by the public is likely to be easier to implement, achieve more satisfactory results and enhance the democratic process.

Also, the community should assist local officials in assessing needs and preparing project proposals. For investments that concern community services, each city hall department should seek and solicit citizen input in developing its proposals. Such input will almost certainly improve the proposal by making it more realistic. As in the following examples, such input may even create savings for the local budget by showing that it is possible to delay capital investment:

- For instance, the solid waste division might conduct focus groups to determine whether it will be possible to gain public acceptance for measures (such as selective separation of waste) that will reduce the volume of solid waste. Public acceptance of such measures might extend the life of the present landfill, delaying the need for investment in a new landfill.
- Or, a public meeting to discuss options for improved solid waste collection might suggest that better traffic and parking enforcement would improve access to waste collection points at apartment buildings, making collection faster and more efficient and avoiding the need for investment in additional trucks.
Or, a survey of users of public transportation might show options (such as revising routes or integrating private van transportation) that delay the need for purchasing new buses.

This whole process is close to the heart of democracy. Democracy is more than simply elections: it is a partnership between the people, who provide the government with resources, and the government, which uses those resources to meet people’s needs. In democracies all over the world, the people play a part in deciding how money is spent, and local governments need to welcome, encourage and facilitate that role.

3. Background of Romania

For almost 50 years, up to 1990, Romania (22 mil. inhabitants) was administered at the central level. The new Constitution of 1991 includes provisions for devolving powers and responsibilities to local government. Subsequent laws ² have further developed these initiatives. The Law on Local Public Finance has been approved in Parliament in 1998 and has been enforced on 1st January 2000. A new Law on Local Public Administration has been approved on March 2001. Together, these new laws will reinforce the independence of local authorities and necessitate considerable organisational and staff development and change.

According to Romanian legislation, the local government units are legal entities, have full capacity, own a patrimony, and hold the initiative in everything related to the administration of local public interests, exercising authority within their established territorial-administrative units. For the purpose of ensuring local autonomy, the public administration authorities of communes, towns and counties elaborate and approve the revenue and expenditure budgets, and are entitled to institute and collect local duties and taxes.

3.1 Program background

Much has been accomplished over the past few years in the area of local government strengthening in Romania through United States Agency for International Development and other donor programs aimed at decentralization and local government improvement. Romania Local Government Assistance Program (LGAP) implemented by Research Triangle Institute (RTI) since 1999, directly supports USAID’s Strategic Objective 2.3: More effective, responsive and accountable local government. The underlying objective of RTI’s Citizen Participation element was to work to strengthen civil society by enhancing the ability of citizens to participate in local decision making and civic activity. Effective Citizen Participation (CP) requires that both the Local Government Units (LGU) and local citizens value and promote participatory activities. RTI succeeded to work with both sides: with LGUs, encouraging proactive outreach to interested citizens and citizen groups, and with citizens directly (through Romanian experts and Romanian civil society NGOs) to educate citizens as to the purposes and rewards of CP and to encourage informed and constructive citizen response to LGU outreach activities (such as public hearings).

After two years of intensive work and commitment, the citizen participation/citizen information projects revealed some experiences that can make an external auditor believe that this country is on the right way to democracy. Below are briefly presented the most sound results collected in Brasov, a 350,000 inhabitants community, well known in the world for its tourist attractions.

3.2 Brief description of Brasov experience

For Brasov, the year of 2001 brought the second sequential budget public hearing. The first (in 2000) was held without technical assistance and was regarded by the city as a failure, since only about 30 people attended. The second, with LGA/CP technical assistance, drew almost 600 attendees and triggered a wave of CP responses from the city, including establishment of a Citizens Advisory Committee on Transport to assist the city in making decisions on public transportation. A second important outcome of the hearing was creation of an Education Advisory Group to evaluate the needs of the schools for repair, rehabilitation and capital improvement. A third and highly significant

outcome was creation by the CIC of 35 neighborhood citizen committees to monitor neighborhood priority needs, including capital improvement.

Specific objectives on program in Brasov:

- To elaborate the budget on programs for 2001 according to Law no. 189/1998 (as another expression of the actual budget, containing the economic classification);
- Community Program development, evaluation and assessment (for each specific program);
- Increasing citizen awareness and involvement in working out the budget on programs;
- Develop specific citizen participation tools to improve public service delivery.

3.2.1 Outcomes on the last listed objective

1) Citizens’ Advisory Committee on Public Transport

As mentioned above, Brasov conducted a very successful Public Budget Hearing this year, attended by 578 people. A full report is available on the hearing. It was conducted with technical assistance offered by RTI. This is the second year in succession that Brasov ran a public hearing on its budget, but sought RTI assistance this time to improve the quality and impact of the hearing – last year only 35 people attended and the meeting was of little consequence. This year the questioning from the public was quite relevant and strong.

One important innovation that flowed from the meeting was the creation of the Citizens’ Advisory Committee on Public Transportation. This 16 member group of volunteers from various fields and professions was selected to serve an indefinite term following their own rules and procedures. The group composition is: 6 employees of state owned and private companies located in Brasov, 1 unemployed person, 4 retired persons, 4 high school students, 2 university students, all living/working in different districts of the city and daily customers of the local public transportation company, an owned city hall company. The selection process may be described as follows.

On April 27, 2001 the Citizen Information Center (CIC) of the City Hall did a press release and sent it to the local media of Brasov (mainly to local newspapers), in which was stated that the citizens of Brasov were invited to become members of the CCC that will analyze the quality of the transportation services and the affordability of the tickets and subscriptions.

Criteria for selection were:
- Various ages (teens, youth, adults and elder people)
- Different professions (pupils, students, employees, unemployed, retired persons)
- Geographical distribution of candidates within the boundary of the city
- Meaning of transportation facilities use (long distance to school/office – intensive use of public transportation, very short distance to school/office and – no need for bus transportation, daily use of the transportation – kindergarten, occasionally use of transportation – shopping, visits, doctor, etc.).

Then group was created. The principal purpose of the group is to help the city and its transport public utilities to make funding decisions on transport, which was voted the third priority in the budget public hearing. The Citizen Advisory Committee met almost on a monthly basis or more frequently if was needed. The first task of the group was to fill out a questionnaire on preferences regarding various options on transport fees, subsidies, taxes and bus purchase. A series of meetings with city hall departments, local councilors and transportation regia followed.

In all that process, the members of public transportation committee became aware of their responsibilities concerning the evaluation and monitoring of the public transportation services, got educated on technical and financial issues concerning this public service, proposed concrete actions for transportation services improvement.

They are all volunteers and they are committed to support the local government initiatives and the service provider to get to better performance bringing their feedback to the table.
Even though the transportation company representatives mistrusted the usefulness of such committee in the beginning, now the service provider is more open and careful to client's suggestions.

Also, the City Hall departments have found very useful the cooperation with such committee and furthermore intend to use this CP instrument on different other sensitive problems of the community.

2) Education Advisory Group. A second important outcome of the hearing was a result of two focus groups held on education funding priorities held prior to the budget hearing. The results of those focus groups, involving principals, teachers, administrators and accountants, plus the public discussion in the budget hearing, was the creation of an Education Advisory Group to evaluate the needs of the schools for repair, rehabilitation and capital improvement. A decision of the mayor made the group legal and its members quickly set about making rules and establishing an agenda. To date, the group has assessed 80% of the city’s schools. This is a group of education officials similar to the focus groups, and not a citizens’ group like the Transport Committee.

3) Citizens’ Information Committees. A third and highly significant outcome of the public hearing was the creation by the Citizens’ Information Center of 35 neighborhood organizations to monitor neighborhood priority needs, including capital improvements. The city’s eight districts consisted of anywhere from 1 to 5 neighborhoods. These were broken down into their 35 component neighborhoods. In each neighborhood, a volunteer Citizens’ Information Committee of 8 to 10 people was established. These committees include leadership of the local schools, a family doctor, representatives of major functioning companies, representatives of small companies, food stores and the housing owners’ associations. A maximum of 350 is involved and this is roughly one person per every 1,000 of population. Teams of two people from the CIC work with each committee.

Members of the City Council are invited to the meetings of the committees and when the council has a full understanding of the value of these committees, the Council will be asked for a general City Council decision to ratify the committees. We drew attention to the Dayton, Ohio and Puerto Alegre, Brazil experiences – these cities have long standing neighborhood-planning committees similar to the ones just established by Brasov.

Conclusions

It is obvious that these things can easily conduct an external auditor to the idea that Brasov is on the right way to democracy. However, there are still a lot of directions to be undertaken in order to consolidate the process, and on-going activities are a good promise of that.

On a general basis, here are some practical suggestions on increasing Citizen Participation at the local level in this field of expertise.

Each LGU must put together its own unique strategy for public participation in the area of public services delivery, reflecting local opportunities and realities. Here are some examples of elements that might be a part of participation strategy.

- A budget for each local public service that is in a format the public can understand, showing the relationship between expenditures and programs. If possible, make the format such that comparison with past years is possible;
- A press briefing on last year’s report;
- A public announcement, in public places and through the media, about the calendar of events for planning different activities, that are part of the specific public service development strategy;
- A community involvement calendar, identifying the points where citizens should be informed about specific activities or where their participation is possible or advisable;
- Announcements of city council meetings when a public service is going to be debated
• Invitations to the press to come into city hall and learn more in depth about the public services strategy, to be followed by a series of press articles on the financial and technical details;

• Establishment of citizens’ advisory committees by city departments or divisions that deal with public facilities such as streets, transportation, parks and recreation to determine people’s attitudes, expectations and priorities with respect to services provided by the department;

• Use of focus groups to explore attitudes, expectations and priorities as above;

• A web site for the public service company, which includes all types of information (budget included);

• Making brochures available through the CIC or public relations office;

• Keeping the public well informed about the process, taking care especially to educate and inform the public prior to a participation event such as a public hearing or meeting;

• Feedback to the public to let them know how their input is being used in the development public service strategy;

• Evaluation of the overall experience for lessons that can be learned and applied to next year’s strategy for citizen participation in the public service’ development process.
References


*Building Community Partnerships for Change, The CIMEP Approach*. (CIMEP – Community Involvement in the Management of Environmental Pollution – is an innovative approach to participation developed and applied by USAID’s Environmental Health Project. (Undated)


Wilcox, David. (undated) *Guide for Effective Participation*. 

7
Annex

IN INVOLVING CITIZENS IN PLANNING FOR CAPITAL INVESTMENT IN THE WATER UTILITY IN KHMELNYTSKY, UKRAINE

The City of Khmelnytsky, Ukraine, needed to make immediate improvements to its water utility. The city wanted to find out whether citizens approved the idea of taking a hard currency loan from an international lender to make the needed capital improvements and whether citizens would support metering of the water supply. Focus groups were conducted using the following questioning route:

1. What do you know about the water supply system in Khmelnytsky?
2. What is the degree of your satisfaction with the present status of water service and its regularity? Please explain.
3. What can you say about the quality of tap water?
4. What alternative sources of potable water do you use, if any, and why?
5. What and from whom have you heard about the plans to improve the city water supply system? Probe: What is your attitude towards a possibility of providing a loan for such a project by international donor organizations? How realistic and promising could such plans be?
6. How do you think the city could repay the loan? Probe: Could implementation of the project result in higher water prices? To what extent are the citizens of Khmelnytsky prepared to pay a higher price for continuous supply of quality water?
7. What is your attitude to the idea of installing water meters in apartments? Please explain.

From conducting focus groups, the city discovered:

- People are unhappy, even desperate, about the poor quality of the water supply. Although you could say “everyone knows this already,” in the context of applying for a loan it is useful to have some proof and some examples.
- Opinion was split on whether the city should take a loan, and the main reason against such a loan was skepticism about whether the city would use the loan responsibly.
- Participants were realistic about the fact that for better service, they would probably have to pay more.
- Participants supported metering.