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Influencing and enhancing externally driven initiatives: the use of participatory approaches in local government, Poland

By **WIESA SERWATKO**

Poland is one of the former Warsaw-pact central European countries that have applied for membership of the European Union (EU). It is anticipated that they will be invited to join within three years. The central government is based in Warsaw and has regional and local government bodies, the latter being called 'communes'. The commune in Poland is a community of inhabitants living within specified boundaries. A commune council and its mayor have the responsibility of overseeing the commune's good running, satisfying inhabitants' needs and properly maintaining the commune's resources. The commune authorities are given financial assistance to do this – usually from central government but increasingly from external sources, especially the EU. In 1998, Zbojna Commune, situated in the North Eastern part of Poland, took part in the EU ECOS Overture Integratev Programme as a partner and test area.

From the beginning, it was determined by the EU Programme (as is still standard EU practice: guest editor's note) that plans were to be developed for the Zbojna Commune in three directions:

- Developing agri-tourism
- Increasing milk production
- Improving the natural environment

Instead of just waiting for the Programme's partners and experts to say what the actual plans were going to be, the

Commune authorities wanted to influence the scope and scale of any proposed changes. And instead of the elected representatives doing this themselves, they thought it would be better to consult with as many inhabitants of the Zbojna Commune as possible, so that the new strategies being developed would reflect the wider public's expectations and priorities and enhance the chances of the commune's citizens taking responsibility for them. They were also hoping that results produced this way would be more difficult to ignore by the EU's officials and consultants.

In 2001, the EU programme (via the Scottish partner, the Cairngorms Partnership) provided expertise to assist the Zbojna Commune council to engage with the citizens of the Commune. After preliminary discussions it was agreed that in order to show citizens and the EU that this was not a Commune-only or Commune controlled event, while some of the consultation facilitators should be Commune officials, the majority should be citizens of the Commune. To start the process, a search and interviews began for candidates to be the facilitators, who would undertake the consultation among the local population. When recruiting commune officials and local people to be facilitators, we were looking for people who:

- could take part in two days of training and work for a following three days;

Consulting residents at the Zbojna Commune



- were confident, open, knew the commune's area and liked working with people; and
- were self-aware and could keep their own opinions to themselves.

We found 17 people (six men, 11 women) who met the criteria and who agreed to be facilitators: four Commune officials, 10 citizens (three 'professionals', three farmers, two unemployed, two students) and three NGO workers (guest editor's note: the facilitators were not picked to be representative of the wider community – but to be individuals who, it was hoped, would be effective and relatively neutral, so that the final results would be seen to be representative of the wider commune). Facilitator training was held six weeks later. The training gave the facilitators insights and ideas for using different methods to engage with, and get information from, inhabitants on selected subjects. Also it was stressed that while it was essential to get opinions from as many people as possible, it was more important that those people represented different social, age, and gender groups, i.e. that the range of consultation should be the widest possible.

During training it was agreed to use the H-diagram method during consultations. This method allowed people to express on a single sheet of A4 paper what they think about the three proposed directions for the Commune's development. Each person consulted could write negative aspects, positive aspects and propose their own ideas for each direction. They could also indicate on a scale from 0 (terrible) to 10 (excellent) how good an idea they felt each of the EU proposed directions was for the future of Zbojna Commune.

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During the training, the facilitators were told to always try to pass the pen, and if for any reason they had to write for anybody, that it was very important to openly write exactly what the consulted person said, so that they could read their own words at the end of the event.

After training, facilitators were divided into three teams. Each team had its own base (two youth club rooms in small outlying settlements, and the meeting room in the main Commune office). In this way, consultation was being carried out in all parts of the Commune. To ensure uniformity and assist with any problems, the trainer, the Commune secretary and the translator kept in touch with each of the teams. During the two days, the facilitators reached and talked to 410 commune inhabitants in different age categories, both women and men. What does 410 mean? It means that 10% of Commune inhabitants, from every village in the Commune, expressed their own opinions on the proposed direction for development. Most importantly, those opinions were almost certainly sincere, because they were completely anonymous. About 3,350 opinions and ideas were collected during consultations, which gave the local authorities leverage with the EU programme in their bid to develop the Commune the way its inhabitants wished.

Developing a commune-wide strategy with social consultations usually costs a lot of money and it is also very difficult to gather people at meetings to get their opinions. The methodology we used was very easy and efficient. During five days 17 people were trained and then conducted wide consultations in different parts of the Commune. Our aims were reached by using little money: the budget (not counting the trainer's inputs) was less than 200 Euros/US dollars. Commune authorities paid only for the paper and pens that were used by the facilitators, and their travel expenses. This information, gathered by the facilitators and recorded in the report, will significantly inform Commune planning and development for a long time to come.

A farmer completing a H-Diagram and (bottom) analysing residents' responses



Summary of results

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In the H-diagram, 377 inhabitants commented on the following:

Agri-tourism

This proposed direction for development within the commune was given the highest score of 10 points by 119 people. Between 5–10 points were recorded by 290 citizens. With 76% of inhabitants expressing a positive opinion about agri-tourism, it indicates that local government should develop this idea.

Milk production

Of the 377 comments received, 91 Commune inhabitants gave this proposed direction for development 10 points; 290 inhabitants gave a score of between 5–10 points. This shows that milk production is also considered an important direction for development.

The natural environment

On the subject of developing the Commune's natural environment through careful management, 43 inhabitants gave a high score of 10, and 196 inhabitants gave a score of between 5-10. This showed that 53% care about their natural environment, whilst expressing concern about pollution and degradation.

All the opinions, suggestions and ideas given by the Zbojna Commune inhabitants about the proposed directions of Commune development are recorded verbatim in a report, and are available in the Zbojna Commune office. Everyone can read that report; the people who gave opinions can find them, and most importantly, their words are not changed. Most inhabitants willingly answered all the questions. Assurances of anonymity meant that people openly shared their considerations. This method has also made people think about the current situation in the Commune: about what is wrong, what is right, and what can be done to make everyone's lives better. Commune authorities have discovered that inhabitants are interested in what is going on in the Commune and in their neighbourhoods. The Commune society has become activated, and has asked to be involved in planning how the Commune develops. Some of the opinions obtained showed that inhabitants did not trust the Commune authorities who maintain the Commune's resources, so it was beneficial that most of the facilitators were not connected to local government, and that those answers given were an indication of how sincere and frank people were prepared to be, given the opportunity.

The results of the participatory consultation are already being used for actualising the Commune development strategy and to formulate plans with some confidence that they will be socially accepted. The Commune development strategy until 2010 was elaborated according to this thinking –

**Analysing
the results
of the H-
Diagrams**

the end result we envisage will be equitable development, whilst maintaining or improving the natural environment. One important result is that new developments (and hopefully external experts' advice as well) will take into account local opinions. Having the strategy developed in this way gives the Commune the chance to take part in other programmes, and allows for greater opportunity to receive financial resources from outside (e.g. European Union) to implement strategic development activities within the Zbojna Commune.

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Wiesia Serwatko is a Commune citizen, and acted as the translator during the consultation training and facilitation.