EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This public policy document has been prepared based on the analysis of data from the survey on the mechanism of civic participation, conducted in 2023 and 2024, by the Strategic Development Consulting (SDC) - Skopje for the Local Community Development Foundation (LCDF) - Shtip, within the project “Organizational support for strengthening local democracy”. The analysis is based on a longitudinal research methodology that was initially conducted in 2017, through a survey with citizens, interviews with local stakeholders and focus groups, thus making a cross-section on the current practices and perceptions of local authorities and citizens in relation to civic participation.

From the analysis, it is clear that there are attempts by the local authorities to involve citizens, especially when it comes to informing about their activities. In that context, local authorities actively use all available means of communication, enabling citizens to have a general idea of the activities of their local governments.

However, challenges arise when it comes to the equal inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes. Despite the existing mechanism and tools presented in the legal framework, these are often perceived as complicated and binding to apply with minimum criteria, which on the other hand limits their use by the citizens and leads to selective use by the local authorities.

Citizens express preferences for direct contact with decision-makers, which is an approach that local authorities also consider to be the most effective. As a result, the forms of direct consultation, such as citizen gatherings and face-to-face meetings are the most common methods of involvement.

Citizens’ interests are focused on crucial topics such as the budget, urban plans and capital investments, but it seems that consultations are often superficial and serve more as a formality. Civil organizations point out that the authorities primarily involve citizens when they directly benefit from it.

In addition, there is a low level of citizens’ activities in approaching their local governments, which indicates the need to improve the approaches and mechanisms for citizen participation, as well as to increase the awareness and motivation of citizens to participate.

Although there is the legal basis and the will for citizen participation, additional efforts and improvements are needed for effective implementation and genuine inclusion of citizens in local decision-making. This analysis offers a set of recommendations to local authorities, citizens and other interested parties to improve the processes of citizen participation at the local level, with the ultimate goal of achieving greater transparency, accountability and effectiveness in local governance.

The COVID 19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mechanism and opportunities for citizen participation, with a shift to more digital forms of participation. Such a transformation represents both a challenge and an opportunity for municipalities to adopt and improve their strategies for citizen inclusion.

POLICY BRIEF

RESEARCH ON THE MECHANISM OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION

RECOMMENDATIONS OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Low readiness of the municipalities to involve the citizens, the citizens gave an average score of 2.34 on a scale to 5, for the readiness of the municipalities to include them in the decision-making processes, which indicates insufficient readiness and activity of the municipalities in this aspect.

Limited involvement through direct communication, a large percentage of respondents stated that they are not involved in decision-making processes or that the municipality does not contact them to share their opinion.

The need to improve the methods of inclusion, although there are different methods of inclusion such as public forums, social media, and surveys, the results still indicate that there is a need to improve the methods to make them more easily applicable.

The existing practice of inclusion, although the municipalities have different methods for the inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes, there is a particularly evident lack of consistency and effectiveness in their implementation. Citizens often feel that they are not sufficiently informed or involved in critical decision-making.

Citizens' interests and priorities, there is a clear interest among citizens for participation in decision-making related to communal and urban development, environmental protection, and social and youth policies. This indicates the need for greater focus on these areas when planning consultation activities.

Considerable lack of interest in participation, a high percentage of citizens expressed lack of interest or lack of participation in decision-making on local level. This indicates the need for better inclusion and engagement of citizens in democratic processes.

Reasons for disinterest, the most common reasons for disinterest include lack of time, resources, or a belief that their opinion will not be taken into account. More to this, a significant number of the citizens stated that they did not feel sufficiently informed or invited to participate.

Community forums, surveys and public forums are the most popular methods of participation, indicating a high level of direct communication and interaction between citizens and decision makers.

The citizens consider polls to be an important instrument for expressing their opinions and priorities, which indicates the need for municipalities to use polls as a standard mechanism for citizen consultations.

There is potential to improve online platforms for participation, such as online forums and social media, which can increase participation opportunities for a wide range of citizens.

Potential for a positive effect of essential participation, the majority of respondents consider that the essential involvement of citizens in decision-making has the potential to cause a positive effect. This shows that citizens believe that their more significant participation can contribute to better decisions and positive changes in their community.

Citizen participation is considered important for local governance - The majority of citizens see citizen participation as a positive contribution to decision-making, which indicates a high value that citizens place on their participation.

There is a need to increase the efficiency and visibility of citizen involvement - Although most citizens believe that their participation has the potential for a positive effect, there is still a need to improve the mechanisms of engagement in order to increase the efficiency and visibility of their contributions.

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