

Summary of World Cafe thematic workshops

Conference "Best practices of citizen engagement in the Baltic Sea region"

2nd June 2017

Organizers: Centre for Public Policy Providus and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

Conference agenda: available [here](#) (link)

Conference recording: available [here](#) (link)

Participants: 20 participants from Latvia and 20 participants from the Baltic sea region - Germany, Denmark, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Sweden.

Conference language: English (with translation to Latvian)

Rationale: despite widespread fears that democracy is in retreat in Europe, there have recently been many inspiring new civic initiatives in the Baltic sea region – such as the ever-growing number of large-scale democracy festivals (Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia), successful experiments with online engagement of citizens in decision-making (Germany, Estonia, Finland, Latvia) and impactful protest demonstrations to protect the values of democracy (Poland, Latvia). The regional conference organized by Centre For Public Policy Providus aimed to profile most impressive cases of citizen engagement and to bring together activists who would be interested in best practice sharing in order to create new initiatives.

1. Improving e-petitions and idea crowdsourcing tools

1.1 What works?

Priority ideas

- Feedback. Both e-petitions and idea crowdsourcing tools can work to mobilize people – but if people do not see the results, they are unlikely to participate again
- Coalition building and pressure on politicians – for e-petitions to be successful they need to be a part of a broader coalition of politicians, NGOs, activists who would push the idea forward
- Different strategies for targeting different groups – older people can be reached through libraries, community centers while young people can be reached by working with school administration. It's important to have those strategies.

Other ideas

- Idea crowdsourcing actions on how to spend the public money (as an alternative to participatory budgeting)
- Working with regional activists
- E-petitions in combination with paper petitions for people who do not use internet
- Effect public interest lobbying process after the petition has been submitted to the parliament
- It's good if a petition is not just a single event but part of a continuous activism – that helps to increase a network of activists who may later collaborate in some other contexts

1.2 Common problems

- E-petition system which allows politicians to easily discard an idea and not to work on improving it
- Platforms and systems that are flooded with petitions/ideas – there should be at least some quality check before an idea gets submitted to the government or parliaments
- If an e-petition is a stand-alone event without any previous/later discussion and a coalition of activists
- Promoting an idea solely in your own information bubble
- Activism that only aims to inform the public rather than to facilitate engagement
- Submitted petitions do not have any leadership who could advocate in favor of the idea once it is in the parliament

2. New forms of non-internet citizen engagement

2.1 What works?

Priority ideas

- Citizen groups and civic panels that have at least some decision-making power and that provide true to life experience to citizens (of how hard it is to reach a political compromise)
- Engaging people in developing public space – for example, a library
- Municipal politicians organizing small meetings with people in their own neighborhoods
- Using guerilla approaches and tactical urbanism in raising social issues with small budget

Other ideas

- Developing a well-designed participatory process that ensures productive participation and exchange, but at the same time prevents aggression and too much criticism
- Working with social designers to engage citizens in giving quality feedback about services that they have received
- Democracy festivals where citizens are invited to discuss issues of a social importance in a positive and engaging atmosphere
- Non-formal events, for example, a coffee with politicians
- Facilitating face to face neighbor communication (home café festivals)
- Inviting politicians who are against some idea for a chat/meeting with activists and other citizens

2.2 Common problems

- Authorities pretending to want a dialogue and organizing useless events that look participatory but will not change anything
- There is no continuation to the ideas that have been collected – no-one assumes leadership to push them forward
- Citizen panels being used only for simple, non-sensitive issues
- Expecting that people will somehow find out about the discussion without doing one's best to reach them
- NGOs that represent only one man's agenda, without a team and activists

3. Improving communication between citizens and their elected representatives

3.1 What works?

Priority ideas

- Participatory budgeting – people being empowered to decide on spending a specific amount of municipal budget
- E-petitions that allow to influence the parliamentary agenda. This tool works only if it provides high civic/media engagement, if there is some quality control and if political parties are also engaged.
- Deliberative events where people are the ones deliberating, and governmental officials are the ones listening

Other ideas

- Organizations that are capable of taking citizens' needs to politicians and state officials (intermediaries between the public and the state)
- Well-thought out publicity campaigns that adds pressure on the decision-makers
- When it is the people/civil society organizations that organize events and invite politicians to participate, not vice versa
- "E-mail attacks" in some cases

3.2 Common problems

- No feedback or very slow feedback to people who have made an attempt to participate
- Public consultations without a specific goal
- Addressing wrong politicians with wrong questions
- Live streaming of parliamentary/governmental meetings
- A person who is not well known has trouble getting his/her voice heard

4. Colorful and impactful protest demonstrations

4.1 What works?

Priority ideas

- Having a long-term goal
- Having a credible, well-known leader
- Branding of the demonstration or idea – using common symbols (for example, everyone dressed in black or using black profile picture)

Other ideas

- Having a bigger group – not just one political party or one interest group
- Framing movements/demonstrations as a festive idea, allowing people to have fun
- Being flexible/spontaneous – using emotions that are important at that very moment and that might launch a snowball effect
- If it can better lead to the long-term goal, it might be a good idea to coordinate with the government/different political parties

4.2 Common mistakes

- Not having a clear aim
- Not having a common idea that holds everyone to high moral standards
- Lacking leadership – not having a person who sets the agenda, aims, tasks
- Not having thought about best communication channels to invite people to join
- Lacking elements that would be memorable and noticeable