

***Citizen participation – a cornerstone for urban safety
and the prevention of criminality***

by

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Citizen participation – a cornerstone for urban safety and the prevention of criminality

Safety is everybody's business. This idea was central to the founding fathers of the European Forum for Urban Safety, a network bringing together 300 local and regional authorities from all around Europe. Working on crime prevention issues since 1988, the European Forum for Urban Safety (EFUS), has been underlining the importance of citizen participation for the prevention of criminality and in the combat for urban safety against crime. This vision of safety as a public good, which requires the active participation of citizens is most clearly expressed in the 'Saragossa Manifesto', where the member cities of the Forum have summarised the principles and values guiding their efforts in the prevention of criminality:

“Safety is an essential public good, closely linked to other public goods such as social inclusion and the right to work, to health care, education and culture. Every strategy using fear is to be rejected in favour of policies furthering active citizenship, an appropriation of the city's territory and the development of collective life. Access to other rights also favours the right to security (Art1)

...the participants wish to see effective integrated global policies set up, aimed at fighting the effects of crime as well as its causes such as social exclusion, discrimination in rights, and economic inequalities.

...our commitment as administrators and representatives of our communities is to create a place for dialogue and encounter between populations of different origins, and an alliance between civilisations (Art 4)...By developing integrated, multisectoral approaches, and with the support of regional, national and European authorities, urban policies are innovative if they do not put security solely in the hands of justice and the police. (Art 9)...

It is the role of local councillors, to encourage bringing together all inhabitants of their city regardless of philosophical or sexual orientation, ethnic, cultural and religious group or legal situation. This role is ensured by the vigilant respect for the equality of all in access to city services...

The Police must exercise their authority in close collaboration with citizens... (and) base their acts and the preventive vision, first of all complete and balanced, of citizens' problems, from proximity and collaboration with the citizen..." (Security, Democracy and Cities – the Saragossa Manifesto, 2006).

The European Forum for Urban Safety stands for a participative approach to crime prevention. It aims at decreasing the distance between citizens and public authorities in prevention activities and encourages an active local participation.

This approach counting on the involvement of citizen is not unique to the EFUS, but is widely recognised and used by other international organisations, such as the Council of Europe or the European Union.

Why should citizens participate?

One can argue that participation has an intrinsic value: it is good that people are actively involved as citizens in decision making in their communities. Their care for the community and their fellow citizens is what makes a society cohesive. A cohesive society, in which people are and feel included, scores well on primary prevention by reducing risk factors. Where there is trust among citizens fear of crime is low and where people watch out for each other there is less space for criminal activity.

More directly, participation is crucial in helping to sustain the legitimacy of decisions and deliver accountability. It could be argued that local authorities would not be able to act as effective community leaders if they lacked a base of popular support, especially when it comes to safety policies.

Likewise, without the participation of citizens in prevention measures and policies there is an information problem. Governments do not have all the information necessary to formulate good policies and services that fit the safety needs, the fears of and dangers for their citizens.

The debate around citizen participation in public decision-making started in the 70's as a theoretical issue and as an answer to the deficiencies of the representative democracy. Despite the different reflections on participative democracy, initiated by theoreticians like Pateman (1970), Macpherson (1977) and Poulantzas (1980), the general idea is to find new ways of access, beyond national and local elections, to the public decision-making (David Held, 1987), both at local and national level. The common idea of what we actually consider as participative democracy is the citizens' right to directly participate in the resolution of public problems in order to improve everyday life. Among the conditions for achieving participation is an open system of information, transparency and communication towards citizens before, during and after the decision-making process.

However, the meaning of citizen participation has evolved since and it is more explicit both in theoretical and practical use. Nowadays it is used quite differently than the term of participative democracy. The term citizen participation refers mostly to the notion of shared responsibility, otherwise called, co-responsibility and it is based on the liberal principle that not only the state but also individuals have responsibilities for society's well-being.

This citizens' right to participate is sometimes laid out as a duty and used to argue for less involvement of the state; however, a participative approach and the idea of shared responsibility should not be reduced to a retreat of the state. Guaranteeing the safety of its citizens is still one of the most prominent tasks of the State and remains a central reason why States exist. These responsibilities of the State are essential, what changes with a participative approach is the manner in which the State fulfils them.

According to the Council of Europe, co-responsibility is one of the tools for achieving social cohesion¹. That includes the sharing among citizens of a global objective for the society's welfare.

In practice, this shared responsibility can be translated into associative approaches. That means that the actors' roles and responsibilities are defined through the development of interpersonal or inter-institutional relations based on "free and open communication".

The associative approach aims to eliminate certain control procedures in the interests of greater transparency, the mutual recognition of the responsibilities of the various actors or services, the clarification of their respective roles, improvements in co-operation, involvement in the assessment of benefits, etc. This approach makes it possible to lay the foundations of a system that involves the actors' assuming joint responsibility for social cohesion, and thus safety.

As underlined by the European Forum for Urban Safety, this approach goes beyond information of citizens and occasional consultation, but aims at the implication of citizens in all stages of policy or a measure so they can actually influence everyday life. Citizen participation can add value through-out a cycle of policy making: at the beginning (in a diagnosis of the status quo), during policy formulation and in the aftermath in the evaluation of policies and measures.

Clarifying the sharing of responsibilities and the involvement of the people concerned in the process of reflecting on the measures to be taken, is essential for several reasons: it facilitates the link with the action by involving those for whom it is primarily intended; it helps improve the quality of the exercise; it provides a better response to the objectives of social cohesion in terms of participation, citizenship and better mutual understanding; it makes for a better sharing out of objectives and greater effectiveness as regards the action plans and programmes. The public authorities therefore need to build bridges with their citizens.

¹ Council of Europe, Concerted development for social cohesion indicators, Methodological guide, 2005 (www.coe.int)

The Council of Europe has shown itself the importance of this approach precisely for safety questions. A recent publication² shows that policies to deal with difficulties with young people from disadvantaged urban areas are often ineffective because they are not designed with the concerned populations. This results in policies that are based on wrong assumptions and stereotypes, which in the end are unable to solve the problem, because they have missed the actual target. Preventive measures have to take into account stakeholders and need to give them a voice. The question is how this can be done.

Methods to involve citizens

The European Forum for Urban Safety encourages its members to always take into account the advantages of involving citizens into their preventive measures and policies. **It is known that people participate** when they have the capacity - the resources, skills and knowledge- necessary to do so. People participate when they feel part of a group or community: they like to participate if it is important to their sense of identity; when they are enabled to do so by an infrastructure of civic networks and organisations; when they are directly asked for their opinion. Finally, people participate when they experience the system they are seeking to influence as responsive.³ Local authorities can use these five factors to encourage citizens to participate, especially in the way they ask and involve them directly.

To offer citizens' opportunities for participation, local authorities can draw on a variety of instruments:

- *consultation instruments*,⁴ to find out the citizens concerns,
- *deliberative methods*, to reflect on an issue in order to come to a judgment about an issue,
- *co-governance mechanisms* to give citizens significant influence during the process of decision making
- *direct democracy* allowing citizen to set an agenda and to make or recall decisions
- *e-democracy* to propose new forms of joint deliberation and decision making

² Council of Europe, Guide to new approaches to policies for young people from lower-income neighbourhoods, Strasbourg, Council of Europe Publishing, 2006.

³ See Council of Europe, "CLEAR - A self-assessment tool for citizen participation at the local level", Strasbourg 2008

⁴ EFUS, Local Democracy, Social Cohesion & Security, 2007 (electronic version)

They allow for different levels of implication⁵:

- *Information*: in this case, citizens usually receive one-way information- newsletters, media coverage of audit plan, statistics, studies and emerging results-.
- *Consultation*: in addition to ‘information’, communities can share their ideas or comments to public authorities by the means of interviews, written submissions, surveys, meetings with community groups for data analysis or feedback on audit report.
- *Involvement*: here, public authorities work directly with communities by taking into consideration their aspirations. There is an interaction with community groups to discuss issues and explore viewpoints, for instance, joint workshops or discussion of draft report before publication.
- *Collaboration*: public authorities partner with communities in each aspect of the decision: community representatives are members of the planning group and leaders of audit work in certain areas. They influence in the selection of priorities and the audit report is usually written in common with public local authorities.
- *Empowerment*: the final decision making is placed in the hands of community bodies. That means that community representatives chair the Steering Group of the project, they decide the priorities and the content of the final report.

In the context of safety questions, *consultation of inhabitants* is most common and often an integral part of the crime prevention process. Consultation can be done by surveys, which give a representative overview, but also on a more permanent basis. The member cities of the European Forum for Urban for Safety organise their prevention work in local partnerships bringing together police, justice, education, housing services, social services and other partners like the civil society associations (NGOs, specialized organizations that represent community groups) and the private sector.

In their partnership work arrangement, cities can provide a permanent citizen commission that works regularly with the players of the “*Safety Service*” in the implementation of the prevention strategy. This citizen commission does not meet exclusively for exchanging questions and information; it also has a technical role and makes proposals. It is for this reason that it brings together technicians and inhabitants rather than elected officials. Here, the consulting of inhabitants falls within a more complex strategy of joint work that aims at enriching the debate and the development of local action.

⁵ categorisation of the International Association for Public Participation, see for example EFUS, Guidance on Local Safety Audit, Paris 2008

Consultation of inhabitants can also be implemented for specific projects or important events. In the case of important events, and in consideration of the primordial involvement of the inhabitants, consultation becomes a fundamental strategic instrument for the elected officials who decide to favour the citizens' role and call them to work concretely on a particular initiative.

The same applies to particular situations, such as crisis, which generally oblige the mayor to give a rapid and clear response and inform the inhabitants on the way the municipality decides to intervene. This situation exposes the officials to the immediate judgement of the inhabitants who, finding themselves in a position of insecurity, demand solutions. In these particular situations, the pressure of the inhabitants, combined with the fear of committing errors, often pushes officials to rapidly organise a consultation to identify key concerns and provide adequate responses afterwards.

A particular challenge for any measure is to obtain a certain degree of citizens' representativity and in particular to reach those who are in socio-economically disadvantaged situations. As argued above, these populations are less likely to get involved, though they are usually the one in most in need: Crime is not only a problem for the well-off population, but usually hits the hardest those who are in the least favourable situation. Involving citizens in safety and prevention measures requires a proactive strategy reaching out to these vulnerable populations.

Different methods of associating citizens to measures for urban safety are also necessary in different situations, depending on the stage of the policy making process, on the input that is decisive and of course local and situational circumstances.

Citizens participation in crime prevention

The European Forum for Urban Safety tries to mainstream a participative approach for the prevention of criminality. Activities in various fields of urban safety make use of it.

One of the most prominent examples for citizen participation are *local safety audits*. They provide a clear picture and understanding of crime and victimization, which is the foundation to targeted action to reduce crime and increase security, and consequently social cohesion. In order to be comprehensive, the audit process has to involve many actors and stakeholders, including citizens and communities. Indeed involving communities improves the quality of audit results, including a better understanding of problems, the development of more appropriate responses and a higher level of community interest and ownership.

As explained in the guidebook on local safety audits of the European Forum for Urban Safety groups of people who share any interest or attribute that gives them a particular perspective on crime or its prevention, otherwise called 'communities of interests',

should be actively involved. This includes, for example, women, ethnic minorities, young people, homeless people and businesses. These communities of interest are often strongly represented by civil society. They form the voluntary organisations and institutions in a city including charities, non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, business associations, coalitions, advocacy groups and many others. A commitment to this should be one of the principles underpinning not just the safety audit, but all work relating to the crime prevention strategy.

The guide showed that citizen participation practices differ from city to city. For this reason, each city's needs to decide how to translate its commitment to a participative approach into practice.

The creation of participative institutions by local authorities does not necessarily prove active citizen participation. Elected local officials should not be content with participative approaches alone, but on the contrary, they should always be aware of preserving them in the best possible way: satisfying material needs, supporting meetings with local and national elected etc. Creating participative approaches is one issue but preserving them and improving them according to society's demands is a great democratic challenge both for local communities and national governors.

Other examples for participations on the ground have been brought together at the EFUS conference precisely on *local safety strategies* and participation of citizen which took place in Gliwice, Poland, in 2006:

- Cities ask citizens to contribute to safety by doing their share, which means watching out for others and not to look away, calling authorities and proposing themselves as witnesses, doing what they can to improve situational prevention at their homes, cars, etc.
- Some cities use websites on which citizens can report to the appropriate public authorities any public problem in their neighbourhood including safety issues. The demands are registered and treated by local authorities which, if needed, intervene in the field and provide a response to citizens.
- Some cities invite citizens to participate in workshops to drafting of safety projects and in the evaluation of practices,
- Some cities give individual citizens the possibility to assist at the local safety council. This cornerstone of concertation at the local level is very often only open to representatives of institutions or civil society organisation.
- Other go as far as to encourage their citizens to be themselves part of safety patrols in their neighbourhoods. Associating citizens to this type of "policing" measures is a quite delicate undertaking. Experiences show that to be successful they need to follow a clear set of rules and ethical standards and especially have to

be accepted and supported by the whole population. This kind of measure could potentially be dangerous for volunteers as well as for the general population as they are not specially trained.

- Cities propose proximity services in close coordination with citizens' initiatives and associations on the spot open to the public.

Citizen participation is not only valuable in traditional safety issues but also question such as drug abuse, as the EFUS-Project Democracy, Cities and Drugs has shown. Its aim was precisely to reinforce the capacity of the civil society (NGOs, health, criminal and justice services, communities, including visible minority ones, and drug service users) and their cooperation with the local policy makers to promote a better health and care for drug users. One innovation is that inhabitants of a particular area of a city are also associated to the effort. Understanding the mutual situation of residents and drug addicts making use of specialised services can make a significant contribution to a peace in a particular neighbourhood of a city and to reduce the feeling of insecurity. Citizens and neighbourhood councils are associated to the initiative and can contribute to it. They can also be part of efforts to perpetuate the monitoring over time though collaboration committees.

These different examples from the members of the EFUS network, show that citizens participation can be very valuable in all areas of crime prevention. The European Forum for Urban Safety therefore promotes this participative approach as an underlying principle for prevention activities. Many cities know about the value of citizen participation in their effort for urban safety and their measures to prevent criminality. EFUS supports them in optimizing their policies and methods with an exchange of experiences and practices. Active citizen participation is never acquired once and for all. If participation is actually only about informing, if citizen have the impression they are only asked before elections and that their view is not really taken into account, a participative approach becomes an empty shell. Keeping a dialogue with citizen on safety issues and measure is a permanent investment. Though, it is an investment which pays off in terms of greater safety. 21 years after its foundation of the EFUS, Gilbert Bonnemaïson's words are particularly timely: safety is still everybody's business.

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