

## TOOLS FOR TRANSFERRING LAY KNOWLEDGE IN LOCAL MUNICIPAL PUBLIC POLICY MAKING IN SLOVAK LOCAL MUNICIPALITIES<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Citizen participation can be considered a key part of public policy making and is also one of the reasons for the growing expert interest in this issue. This article focuses on specific knowledge, so-called “lay knowledge”, which can be identified as knowledge gained from “non experts” through civic participation. The article establishes when and how this type of knowledge enters the policy-making process via specific selected tools and provides practical examples from local and municipal public policy.

**Key words:** lay knowledge; local municipality; public policy; volunteering.

### Introduction

Knowledge, a certain form of rationality in public policy-making, is used as a kind of official tool and those favoring its use are attempting to bring transparency, system and expertise to the political process. Several types of knowledge have been identified by experts (see for example Lindblom & Woodhouse, 1993). This paper focuses on the lay knowledge “non-experts” can make available through civic participation. Scientific expert knowledge can be seen as the result of objective measurements, observations, statistical and analytical work (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). These are also methods of processing the outcomes achieved using already acquired knowledge. Lay knowledge, however, does not require the use of objective measurements. The knowledge may be acquired casually or through experience—so called “common sense”—which in some cases may help better identify the problem. Civic participation opens up options for citizens to exercise public control and it gives them an opportunity to engage in public policy-making. However, it can also be perceived as a way of transferring lay knowledge and it can be stated that civic participation is a means of transferring lay knowledge into the decision making process. The potential of such knowledge is that it provides the decision-making authority with alternatives which

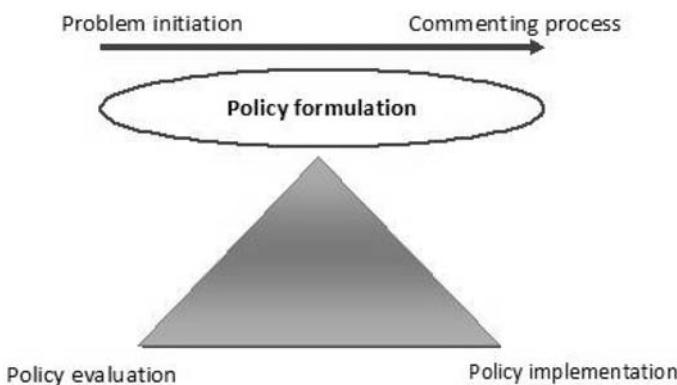
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may ultimately have a positive impact on the decision-making process. The decision-making process is enriched by these alternatives, because they come from policy actors (citizens), who are often closer to the problem than analysts. According to Higgins and Richardson, the ability of citizens to participate in the political process is one of the cornerstones of the decision-making process and this trend is steadily increasing (Higgins & Richardson, 1976). The aim of this paper is to highlight the importance and relevance of lay knowledge by describing specific tools for transferring lay knowledge and giving practical examples from local public policy. Effective public participation and thus lay knowledge can be described as a “straightforward beneficial” (Cleaver, 2001) and its simplicity, in contrast to the expert knowledge presented by experts and analysts, can bring diversity to the decision-making process.

### Transmission of lay knowledge in the formulation of public policy

Many authors divide public policy making into several stages, particularly (see for an example Lindblom & Woodhouse, 1993; Parsons, 2003) where there is a need for detailed description of the process itself or its individual stages. The basic policy cycle model used for the purposes of this paper is illustrated below (see Figure 1). We will try to ascertain when lay knowledge enters into the policy-making process. This is important in terms of identifying citizens as real actors in public policy-making, and therefore the occasions on which they are able to intervene in decision-making in practice.

In this model, policy formulation can be considered to involve the key transfer of lay knowledge, where citizens have several opportunities to intervene in the decision-making process. Policy formulation is a process whereby the problem is defined and understood, but it is also a process where possible solutions are ascertained and all the resources needed to achieve the objectives are identified (Lindblom & Woodhouse, 1993). At this point, it is therefore essential that the problem is clearly formulated and the priority objectives and resources required to achieve the objectives are identified. As the rational model of the



**Figure 1:** Formulation of public policy

Source: Maliková (2003).

policy process indicates (see Figure 1), policy formulation consists of several steps, which are important in terms of the opportunities created, but also in terms of motivating citizens as “bearers of a lay knowledge” engaged in the policy process. Initiating the problem is a stage in policy formulation, whereby efforts are made to identify the problem and what needs to be addressed. It is a step in which lay knowledge may bring a number of positives to the political process. Klimovský emphasizes the importance of involving citizens, stating that the outputs of most policies should be provided to citizens, especially on the local and regional level (Klimovský, 2008). It is important that citizens should participate in initiating the problem given their proximity and connectivity to the problem. They may identify the problem more clearly and more specifically. The policy process begins and is shaped by the identification of the problem (Fila & Schubert, 2000), and that depends on the specific policy and situation.

Once the problem has been identified and selected, the focus will turn to the content of the policy, and then the authorities will formulate a plan and the implementation methods. In democratic countries, government decisions on policy content is a public matter, and should be accessible and understandable to citizens (Malíková, 2003). At this stage of policy formulation lay people may be involved. This is the final phase of policy formulation and it is during this phase that citizens may participate via the commenting process. Participation in this phase is of different significance than that at the beginning. Lay knowledge frequently enters the policy process at the beginning of policy formulation, when citizens can participate directly in identifying the problem, or at the end of this phase, when they can contribute to existing solution design but only via the commenting process. By focusing on the moment at which lay knowledge enters the policy process, we can better understand the intensity, impact and real influence of public participation.

### Tools for utilizing lay knowledge

To make effective use of the lay knowledge possessed by “non-expert” participants requires the successful implementation of tools enabling the transfer of information to key stakeholders who represent local municipalities (Shirky, 2008). Participatory democracy has created a significant number of tools ranging from providing simple informational channels to directly involving non-experts in solving a problem.

For public participation to work there must be a pool of “non-expert” participants, linked to the participatory process by factors such as profession. The profession may then be affected by a particular public policy amendment, or relate to a location that will be somehow changed by a particular project or they may have an interest in public affairs that motivates them to make use of the participatory tools provided by the public authorities. These participants are not motivated by money, nor are they forced to become involved through a responsibility or a contractual obligation. They are part of a general public that articulates its needs and opinions or gives feedback during participatory processes because they have a voluntary civic inner need. They need not have a particular type of education or professional occupation.

The literature provides different kinds of scales showing levels of public participation. Some utilize **participatory ladders** (Arnstein (1969), Connor (1988), Potapchuk (1991),

Bruns (2003), some utilize a **spectrum of participation** (International Association for Public Participation (2000) or a **participatory continuum** Creighton (1995). The models attempt to display levels of public participation within public decision making and the degree of influence the public has on the final decision.

For the sake of this paper, we have chosen the spectrum of participation offered by the International Association for Public Participation because it provides the clearest breakdown of different degrees of public participation. The Spectrum is being implemented in various participatory schemes all across Europe and is becoming a standard for public participation improvement. It is also an easy way of identifying the key attributes of the participatory tool being implemented. It can be applied to the current situation regarding public participation in Slovakia, which involves varying degrees of public participation in public matters. These range from informative to spontaneous empowerment and can be initiated by lay knowledge holders from the bottom up.

| INCREASING LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT   |  |  |   |   |
|---|--|--|---|---|
| INFORM  | CONSULT  | INVOLVE  | COLLABORATE   | EMPOWER   |
| <b>Public Participation Goal:</b><br><br>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions. | <b>Public Participation Goal:</b><br><br>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.   | <b>Public Participation Goal:</b><br><br>To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.                                    | <b>Public Participation Goal:</b><br><br>To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.                       | <b>Public Participation Goal:</b><br><br>To place final decision-making in the hands of the public. |
| <b>Promise to the Public:</b><br><br>We will keep you informed.   | <b>Promise to the Public:</b><br><br>We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. | <b>Promise to the Public:</b><br><br>We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. | <b>Promise to the Public:</b><br><br>We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible. | <b>Promise to the Public:</b><br><br>We will implement what you decide.                             |
| <b>Example Tools:</b><br><br>• fact sheets<br>• web sites<br>• open houses.   | <b>Example Tools:</b><br><br>• public comment<br>• focus groups<br>• surveys<br>• public meetings.   | <b>Example Tools:</b><br><br>• workshops<br>• deliberate polling.  | <b>Example Tools:</b><br><br>• citizen advisory committees<br>• consensus-building<br>• participatory decision-making.  | <b>Example Tools:</b><br><br>• citizen juries<br>• ballots<br>• delegated decisions.                |

**Figure 2:** The Public Participation Spectrum

Source: International Association for Public Participation, IAP2's Public Participation Spectrum.

According to the International Association for Public Participation, the tools are divided into five groups defined by the degree to which lay representatives participate in solving local or wider issues.

The first level, Information, aims at providing the public with balanced and objective information. The one-way flow of information is moderated by the public authorities and local people are mere recipients. The second level, Consulting, creates space for public feedback on the issues being solved. In this case, although the public authorities provide an open channel for ideas, complaints, etc., they do not guarantee anything. The third level, Inclusion, attempts to include the public in the process via deliberate planning or regular meetings. This enables public participants to engage continuously and provides them with opportunities to influence the process. The fourth level, Cooperation, sees the public as a partner in every aspect of decision-making. It gives them an equal voice in choosing the correct solution. The fifth level transfers the entire decision-making process to the public (Leighninger, 2010). The public decides what needs to be done and the public authorities simply execute the decision.

In order to analyze how lay knowledge may influence public policy, we present four public participation tools. These represent different levels of participation and have different outcomes relating to the transfer of lay knowledge into the public policy making process. Each tool will be accompanied by an example from real processes implemented in Bratislava, Slovakia.

The first, less participatory tool, is Public Comment, where members of the public are given an opportunity to express their opinions or ideas on a certain topic. The second tool is Public Hearing and it gives the public greater choice in influencing public policy by making decisions according to rules defined by the public authorities. Public discussion represents the fourth level of public participation and elevates the public to the position of partner to the public authorities. Direct Involvement, the highest participatory tool, directly involves the public, as lay knowledge holders, in solving a particular issue or problem.

## **Public consultation**

Public Consultation represents the second level of public participation that enables the public to give feedback on issues. The general public gather in meeting halls in order to articulate their opinions on topics such as urban development, social policies, community projects etc. The topic is selected by the public authorities attending the meeting and they are first to speak and present the idea being discussed.

### **Example 1: Petržalka highway**

*Over the last forty years Bratislava has seen a significant increase in the number of inhabitants. This led to the vast development of housing estates, mostly built on the outskirts of the city. Transportation was also part of the development and tramlines were established in order to transport large numbers of inhabitants to the city core. The initial intention was that the largest of the housing estates, Petržalka, would be connected to the core via a metro line. However, the collapse of communism and the decrease in public spending put paid to these plans and so Petržalka was not connected to the core via metro or even tram. Crowded bus routes became an everyday transport issue.*

*Things changed when the European Union offered to fund a tramline to Petržalka. There was little information available about the project. The first sign that something was going on came when Petržalka district office received an application seeking approval for the felling of over 2000 trees in the area where the future tramline was to be located. A petition movement was immediately established to prevent the tree felling. The movement received another push when the tramline project was expanded to include a four-lane highway running along the tramline. Blogs, articles and social networks started to criticize the construction of the tramline citing the highway, the destruction of greenery and the increased traffic it would create in Petržalka as reasons against the project.*

*Inevitably a Public Comment meeting had to be held to enable the public to confront the public authorities. The meeting was attended by hundreds of inhabitants and the room became overcrowded. Following a negative response to the presentation on the tramline, the participants individually articulated their complaints about the four-lane highway highlighting the negative impact not only on the surrounding area, but also on the tramline, which had been the centerpiece of the project from the start. There were few positive comments and the outcome was immense disagreement with the project.*

*This example shows how Public Comment meetings can influence public policies if there is sufficiently strong pressure from the public. The lack of non-expert public support for the highway meant that the public authorities were unable to argue that the highway had attracted a mixture of opinion and could therefore be built. The clear “no” from the participants could not be ignored despite there being no legal barrier to constructing the highway. However, public pressure and the potential political losses outweighed the benefits of building the highway.*

*As a result, the Mayor of Bratislava made a public promise that the four-lane highway would be dropped from the project (SME, 2013). However, the final project is still being prepared and it remains to be seen whether lay knowledge will win out ultimately in preventing the construction of the highway.*

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The aim of meetings like these is to enable the general public to gather in person and suggest amendments and proposals or to formulate complaints in a controlled environment that is monitored and recorded for further use in implementing a decision or policy and in making progress in the specified area. As the public representatives also present the topic being discussed they are also defendants. The aim of the meeting is not to implement the policy or project but to discuss whether or not a previously conceived of project or policy should be continued or discontinued.

The participants are a combination of volunteer experts and lay participants who are either involved in potential petition initiatives or whose area of work is affected by the policy under discussion or the urban area of their interests is being changed. This participant pool represents a mixture of lay, or even expert, knowledge expressed as feedback, assistance, willingness, anger or other emotions that the topics may trigger. However, the process of public comment restricts the ways in which lay or expert knowledge can transform the outcome of the process.

The outcome of public comment is set by the public authorities organizing the event. Whether lay knowledge can be used to influence policies or projects hinges on the

willingness of the authorities to include it in the resulting policy or project. The process is usually determined by a show of desire on the part of the general public and the possible changes needed for the political benefits to outweigh the financial ones. Public authorities usually avoid setting formal deadlines or obligations. The public is therefore unable to follow up on the public comment and compare the actual outcome with the overall feedback, requirements or opinions articulated during the comment process.

Public Comment may involve conflict between two lay groups where one group is in favor and one against. This occurs particularly during Public Comment on urban development that benefits a certain section of society over another.

## **Public hearing**

A public hearing is part of the third level of public participation. It provides the public with greater voice when it is used to select the activities, projects and initiatives that ought to be discussed. Public hearings usually deal with small local-scale projects that satisfy the specific needs of a smaller number of inhabitants. In comparison with Public Comment, Hearings may steer policies or projects depending on the lay knowledge participants. The public authorities stipulate the topics to be discussed and the process for approving projects or policies.

Public Hearings are designed to give the public authorities a sense of what is needed in a particular location. Hearings usually deal with issues such as green spaces, parks, leisure activities, sports, social services and other aspects of community life. They provide face to face feedback and, if thus defined, specific projects delivered by the communities.

### **Example 2: Participatory budgeting in Bratislava**

*One of the current mayor's more interesting promises was the implementation of participatory budgeting in Bratislava. It is a mechanism whereby the public defines the public authority goals and projects. The citizen defines how the public budget will be used. A system was therefore created whereby groups regularly meet to consider particular topics (environment, youth, transportation, open-data and pensioners) and attend a large final public hearing to decide which of the groups' proposed projects are to be implemented by the public (Feik, 2013, December 20). This system includes examples of advanced use of lay knowledge and public participation. However, the way in which the authorities restricted the public's role means that participatory budgeting in Bratislava has slipped down to the level of Public Comment.*

*The first two rounds of Public Hearings encountered problems at the project implementation stage. The public authorities were unable to provide support for citizens implementing the projects. Only a small proportion of the projects and ideas were therefore implemented. Furthermore, the promoters of participatory budgeting in Bratislava, an association called Utopia, criticized the public authorities of the politically misuse of the participatory budgeting project and accused them of frequently breaking the participatory rules (Utopia, 2013). As a result, participatory budgeting in Bratislava now consists of the authorities outlining ideas that are then voted on via internet voting. Here, lay knowledge was successfully used to motivate the public authorities into implementing participatory budgeting (Feik, 2013, December 20). However, it could not prevent the budgetary mechanism from being transformed to suit the needs of the public authorities.*

The public is represented by lay knowledge holders, active local inhabitants who provide expertise or have needs associated with the area in which they live or spend most of their time in. They articulate their needs in relation to improving the quality of life of communities living in blocks of flats or terraces. Experts or inhabitants from more distant locations or city districts are not usually represented so long as more controversial policies or projects are not being discussed.

The outcomes of Public Hearings relate to local needs outlined in specific projects or ideas for tackling problems in the area. The participants may define a location where new interventions are required to improve the local quality of life. The public authorities are given a clear plan on how to develop certain local areas in keeping with the needs of the inhabitants. However, the method of implementation, the tools used and the kind of intervention are usually the responsibility of the public authorities.

## **Public discussion**

Public discussion is one of the most frequently used forms of the fourth level of public participation. It elevates lay knowledge holders to the status of partner to the public authorities and they are therefore involved in every aspect of decision-making, seeking solutions, identifying issues and selecting solutions. Thus, participants now have influence over actual policy-setting, while taking responsibility for the choices made and the impact they will have on the lives of others. This gives the lay knowledge holders the ability to translate needs, interests or ideas into future interventions or policy changes, thus obtaining the power to shape the community.

### **Example 3: Not Found**

*There are no examples in Bratislava of a Public Discussion that corresponds to the characteristics of this kind of tool. There have been different attempts that embody some of the characteristics. However, we could not identify an example embodying all characteristics. It has not been possible to develop a fully-fledged Public Discussion in Slovakia owing to a combination of legislative and political barriers.*

*There is no provision in the current legislation for a political body incorporating political and civic representatives within an equal power-sharing structure. Attempts to create such a body have been limited to non-formalized structures with no direct responsibility for particular issues, projects or initiatives. Bratislava Council is currently developing a new participatory tool that will establish a collaborative public/civic body that will meet to discuss the future of the Petržalka tramline. It aims to involve people more directly in decision-making processes that affect their own surroundings and to go beyond a Public Hearing, but not require direct involvement.*

*Nonetheless, there are political barriers owing to the reluctance of politicians and civil servants to share their decision-making powers. They fear that this would lead to lengthy discussions, expensive but hard to implement solutions, a failure to compromise, legislative constraints, the need for more staff to manage such an extensive participatory process and an increase in overall workload. Thus, it is no surprise that public participation is limited only to informative tools and discussions, whilst Direct Involvement occurs spontaneously from bottom up.*

The aim of this tool is not only to give people the power to shape their communities, but also to take responsibility for their own ideas. Power-sharing between public authorities and community representatives make it possible for lay knowledge to be used within communities that are the subject of public policy or public projects. This enables the bottom-up transfer of knowledge, thus increasing the likelihood of feedback from local communities on decisions, projects and policies. Policies may therefore avoid problems or issues associated with from-the-table decision-making processes. The participants in public discussions are selected representatives from local communities or stakeholders who may be affected by the policies or projects. They provide lay knowledge and possibly expertise. They represent a synopsis of the local community standpoints and bring them into the decision-making process.

### **Direct involvement**

The extent of direct involvement in a particular project or intervention is the highest and fifth level of public participation. It gives the lay knowledge participants the power to make decisions on what is needed and what is right for their communities and it means they can implement the project or intervention to their own liking in terms of quality and quantity. The public authorities are reduced to the position of a donor investing public resources into projects or interventions, suggested, introduced and located by the communities. However, this tool is controversial in the sense that it questions the role and importance of the public authorities in improving the quality of life in its own jurisdiction.

#### **Example 4: The Green Patrol**

*The Green Patrol is an informal initiative that started out as an idea thought up by two brothers collecting garbage from the streets of Bratislava. It later evolved into an officially approved volunteer initiative dealing with the whole process of illegal dumping, from identifying illegal dumps to disposing of them. The City Council later lent support to the initiative via the Participatory Budget and by providing large garbage cans for transporting the garbage to the garbage disposal facility (Čupka, 2013, December 20).*

*This now widely recognized initiative started out as positive criticism and it led by example, but it has been unable to influence public policies in the areas being tackled. Thus far conflict, misunderstanding and the public authorities' lack of a proactive approach to issues being formulated by the Green Patrol have dominated mutual relations.*

Direct Involvement gives local communities the power to steer projects to their own liking. It provides them with public authority resources, accounting and know-how and the freedom to implement projects and interventions to the local community's liking. It also transfers responsibility for the decision making from the public authorities to a service provider representing the lay knowledge holders and limits the role of the public authorities.

Participants tend to be lay knowledge holders because projects and interventions directly involving non-expert participants seek to involve as great a variety of volunteers as possible. They are therefore generally restricted to simple manual labor that does not require special skills or knowledge. Nonetheless, the participation of local communities guarantees a high quality of work since the individuals bear responsibility for their own quality of life.

## Conclusion

Civic participation is not only a means of informing the citizens, but it is also a significant part of the decision making process. It can be seen as a mutual learning experience (Klimovský, 2008), whereby the authorities obtain important information from citizens about their expectations and requirements. The advantage of this is that “lay knowledge” may lead to alternatives being introduced into the decision making process and that citizens may enrich this process, especially at the “problem initiation” stage.

Public participation and lay knowledge can provide public servants with a source of important site-specific ideas, initiatives, simple solutions and a volunteer skilled workforce and can be a means of gathering complaints, rejections and criticism. Using participatory tools that involve lay knowledge holders makes both political and economic sense, where they create opportunities for policy changes involving citizens and where costs can be reduced owing to the use of direct lay knowledge feedback from a specific site or policy area.

However, the examples given here of the use of participatory tools provide evidence suggesting that lay knowledge is still not being used to its full potential. This is due to the lack of public participation tools, the inability of civil servants to interact with the public on matters involving them, and the public’s inability to formulate its own needs and desires.

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