

Name of Exercise: Local Agenda 21 strategy for Kladno, Czech Republic

Location: Kladno, Czech Republic

Participation Exercise under which Article? *Article 7, Capacity Building*

Purpose of Participation Exercise:

To involve the citizens of Kladno in the decision-making process and preparation of the Local Agenda 21 strategy.

Background:

In July 1998, the Institute for Environmental Policy (IEP) initiated the implementation of a Local Agenda 21 (LA 21) process in the Czech city of Kladno. Based on the LA 21 framework the aims of the IEP were:

- to determine the current level of awareness and views of the public towards environmental and social issues and to assess their willingness to participate;
- to raise awareness of both the public and public authority officers;
- to improve communication between single stakeholders in the city (local authority, public and other stakeholders).

In the past, Kladno (72,000 inhabitants) was a town with a flourishing heavy industry. Today it faces a lot of economic, social and environmental problems. However, thanks to the modern approach of the local authority, the situation is improving considerably.

This project and the single sub-projects (including public participation) serve as a case study project for the Czech Republic.

Participation Techniques Used:

1. As a first step to involve the public, in October 1999, the IEP decided to assess the attitudes of Kladno's inhabitants using *socio-ecological research*. The public opinion research was carried out on a representative sample of Kladno inhabitants and questioned their attitudes to social, environmental and other issues of city life. The respondents were chosen according to where they live, so that whole areas of the city were proportionally covered. The people were visited at home and interviewed. The interviews were based on an extensive questionnaire (10 pages) and the answer forms were completed either by the interviewer or by the addressed citizen. The interviewers were from the local NGO, which made the interviews less official. Also, their knowledge of local problems was a great advantage. The whole process took about two weeks. Due to the method of approaching people directly 838 citizens out of the total 1000 questioned responded.

The results of the research were not very optimistic, showing a poor social climate and a lack of information among the citizens. Only 7% of people took an active part in the life of the city. Sadly, more than a third of citizens considered their chances to influence the development of their city to be the same today as it was during the Communist era and 26% believed that they were even lower. They could not see any other way to influence the municipal policy, except through elections. Moreover, inhabitants were not convinced that decisions made by the City Council could influence their lives. The inhabitants did, at least, agree on one thing: they should not only be concerned with their own problems but they should also take an interest in public affairs.

As regards their attitude towards the environment, almost two thirds of respondents did not think that they could do anything to protect it. They left these issues to the NGOs, but only an insignificant number actively co-operated with them. Only 14% of respondents were willing to participate in a decision-making process. As for their willingness to participate in specific activities, respondents were willing to work manually in their neighbourhood, either to clean it up (almost a half of them), to help plant trees (about a quarter) or to manually help to protect the environment (10%).

On the other hand, the younger generation is much more optimistic, as we found out in the **Students' Parliament**, for example, and also through our close co-operation with a local environmental NGO. The Students' Parliament was organised by the local NGO with the help of the IEP on Earth Day (22 April 1999). The event was attended by about 120 high school students from the Kladno region. It involved discussions about actual environmental problems, especially at the local level but also at regional and global levels. The students defined the most important problems and then they had an opportunity to discuss them with the local representatives and to present their views on how to solve them.

2. Based on information from the research, the IEP convinced representatives from the local authority that public participation could be advantageous for them. The results of the research and their interpretations were summarised in a final report, several copies of which were made available to the local authority. Key findings were also presented to the vice-mayor (who is responsible for the development of the city and for LA 21) and, in the form of a slide lecture, to the City Council. The IEP offered several possibilities on how to solve the problem of a lack of communication within the city. After several rounds of negotiations and discussions, the City Council finally agreed on establishing and financing a working group. It has to be explained at this point, that public involvement is still very unusual in the Czech Republic.

Following this agreement, the IEP carried out a massive campaign to encourage citizens to participate. The main aim of the campaign was to inform citizens about the chance of taking part in decision-making processes in their own town. Again, we found the help of the local NGO very useful.

During the campaign, a range of means and methods were used, such as:

- national and local newspapers and the local radio station, which became our medial partner;
- posters on notice boards, at bus stops, in doctors' waiting rooms, in supermarkets etc.;
- information material and notice boards of the local authority;
- personal letters to all important stakeholders in the town: businesses, important institutions, schools, etc.;

personal letters to those people who were involved in the public opinion research and provided their address for further information.

3. The **initial meeting** was attended by 50 citizens. In addition, two representatives of the local authority were present (the vice-mayor and the Head of Environment Department, who is also a LA 21 co-ordinator), as well as people from the only local NGO. Admittedly we were a little bit disappointed at the attendance after the extensive campaign, however, based on our experiences not only from Kladno, but from the whole Czech Republic, we were expecting even fewer people.

The meeting took part in an assembly room of the local authority. It took place on a weekday, in the late afternoon, so that people were able to come after work. The aim of the first session was to persuade citizens that participating in the working group was an effective and useful way of influencing the life of the city. The presence of local authority representatives was very important in helping the people to understand that in this way, they can become equal partners of the local municipality.

The first session, as well as the two following sessions, were organised and facilitated by the IEP. At the third meeting, an official representative of the group was elected who now takes care of the functioning of the group. The first few meetings involved presentations by the IEP, city representatives and the local NGO (e.g. introduction to LA 21 in Kladno; possible ways of active participation in the life of the city; the idea of the working group: its opportunities and constraints; important development projects in Kladno, etc.). The sessions have also included answering numerous questions and extensive discussions.

4. At present, the **Working Group for Local Agenda 21** has about 20 regular members and the meetings are attended by a range of other citizens interested in particular problems. Each meeting is also attended by representatives of the City Hall – namely the vice mayor, a LA 21 co-ordinator, and any other people particularly relevant to the programme of each meeting, such as specialists from the state administration sector.

The sessions are now held every 3 weeks. Sessions now focus on current and past problems of the city, which are often only caused by the lack of communication between the local authority and the public.

Who participated?

The working group is open for any Kladno citizen and information about its activities are published in the local press and on the Internet. Continual efforts are made to encourage as many people as possible to either become a member of the working group or to participate at single meetings which they find particularly interesting. The group also co-operates very closely with a local environmental NGO.

In addition, the working group is attended by local authority officials and representatives from various organisations, institutions and local businesses (Police, expert institutions, etc.).

Stage(s) at which public participated in the process:

The aim of the project is to establish continuous participation – a continuous dialogue between the public, local authority and all other stakeholders.

What information was made available?

Inhabitants of Kladno are informed about all important activities/decisions made by the local authority and can comment on them, either through the working group or on the municipality's web-pages. Information is provided through the information channels of the local authority, in local and regional press, on the local radio station, on web pages of the local authority and the IEP. Close contacts that have developed between the working group and local journalists are worth mentioning here.

What was the outcome of the public participation exercise?

The role of the working group is strategic in the sense of changing the attitude of local authority representatives from a 'command and control' position to the position of 'public service'. The working group will be also be one of the key subjects when it comes to assessing the LA 21 strategy at the beginning of the next year. In addition, the group is a very important tool for encouraging wider public participation or, at least, to improve their view of life in the city and their potential to influence it.

Examples of particular outcomes of the Working Group for Local Agenda 21 in Kladno:

- The working group comments on development plans of the city, which is an important contrast to the businesses that are pushing for building on the last green areas in the town.
- One of greatest achievements was initiating independent measures (by independent specialists, financed by the local authority), of noise levels, emissions and vibrations from the power plant that is being built inside the city. The accuracy of official measuring by the relevant regional authority is doubted.
- In Kladno there were two quarters without a gas supply, until now, despite promises made by the City Hall. Due to the lack of communication between the local authority and the citizens, people from these quarters were very angry and disappointed. The working group initiated several discussions between municipal representatives and the citizens, during which the solution to problem was found.
- Dirty streets are one of the most important problems for Kladno's inhabitants. The working group convinced the municipality to finance the provision of bags for the collection of dog excrement, which should help to clean up the town.
- Together with the local NGO, the working group focuses on the preservation, protection and regeneration of forests surrounding the town.
- An important sign that the attitude of the Local Authority towards the public has changed is an invitation of the working group co-ordinator to join the prestigious regional group for economic development.

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