

Summary

Citizen participation with impact?

The study presented in this report has investigated how Norwegian municipalities involve citizens in political decision making in the periods between elections. The study is based on quantitative data and interviews in 16 case municipalities and literature studies.

Offering measures for citizen participation is shown to impact on the possibilities for citizens to be heard, on the decision-making process and on the actual decisions.

Participation pattern

The number of participative measures offered by a municipality does not seem to affect the level of citizen participation, but it does affect citizen's perceptions of whether the politicians listen to their concerns. When the municipality offer different opportunities for participation, people tend to be more content with the politicians' responsiveness, regardless of whether they actually use these measures.

Citizens who engage in municipal decision-making between elections do not represent a cross section of the population. Statistical analysis shows that those who attempt to influence municipal decisions have higher education and higher income than the average population. Interviews in the case municipalities confirm the impression of participatory measures mainly attracting already politically active people with relatively high social status. Getting into dialogue with those who do not show up – the young, the old and disadvantaged groups – is thus a challenge for both politicians and municipal employees.

An important reason why these groups do not show up is that the threshold for participation is perceived as too high – some forms of participation requires for example a lot of prior knowledge as well as for example the confidence required to speak in front of an audience. One way to lower the threshold for participation is to meet people where they are – at school, at work, at the shopping mall. Another way is to establish councils representing specific groups that are otherwise rarely heard.

Moreover, people are in general most inclined to participate when the issue they are asked to engage in is specific, concrete and with clear consequences. If one wants citizen involvement in a specific issue, it is therefore important to show what consequences different decisions will have on people's lives.

Some forms of participation inspire people to engage not only in a specific issue, but to develop a more lasting political interest and involvement.

Especially formalized and institutionalized participation measures such as youth councils and village councils appear to encourage long-term participation. This applies even if the participation in the first place was related to a particular issue. For people to be inspired to participate in the long term they must feel that they are heard when they choose to get involved.

Decision-making process and decisions

Making citizens care about, and involved in, policy development; to inform about, to explain and to get acceptance for political decisions; and to improve the basis for decision-making – these are the main reasons why municipalities invite citizens to participate in decision-making processes. The study shows that citizen participation do indeed improve the decision-making process – both

politicians and municipal employees think that input from citizens makes decisions better informed and alternatives more thoroughly considered. Although people's involvement does not always lead to decisions that are different from what they'd otherwise have been, such involvement makes decision makers look at the issues twice. The issues that attract citizen interest are hence dealt with more thoroughly than the issues that do not attract such interest.

Sometimes, however, citizens are invited to submit their inputs at a very late stage in the decision-making process, at a stage where a number of details are sorted out and the alternatives are rather limited. The interviewees differ in their opinion of the stage in which citizens should be involved. The advantage of late involvement is that it is easy for citizens to respond to an issue when the options are fairly specific. A disadvantage is that, at such a late stage, citizens' real influence will tend to be relatively limited. Also, what they can and cannot influence is not always clearly communicated, and citizens often expect being able to influence more than they actually can. In any case, it is important that the citizens see how their input is used. Feedback routines for informing citizens on the status of an issue are underdeveloped in all case municipalities in this study – as for feedback routines there is clearly room for improvement.

Citizen participation has some downsides as well. Politicians sometimes feel obliged to take into account input from people, although they do not agree with the input. This is most problematic when politicians feel compelled to prioritize individual cases rather than a comprehensive and long-term policy. Citizen participation can also make it difficult to implement unpopular but necessary measures – for example to close down a school with very few pupils. Citizen involvement, especially combined with media coverage, may lead to decisions that politicians feel is necessary, be postponed or given up.

Citizen participation between elections represents a democratic dilemma. On the one hand, it seems legitimate and fair that those affected by a decision are allowed to have their say. On the other hand, citizen participation will always involve a danger that those who participate receive a disproportionate amount of influence at the expense of those who do not participate. Although politicians and municipal employees feel a responsibility to voice the views of those who do not participate in municipal decision-making between elections, biased impact is a consequence of citizen participation that one may have to accept.