

Creating our futures

ECTP-CEU

European Council of Spatial Planners
Conseil européen des urbanistes

Working group on participatory Democracy

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Call for interest

As announced at the General Assembly of Cascais (Portugal) and approved by the Executive Committee, the working group on public consultation is taking place.

The workgroup shall start by the end of January in order to be able to deliver a text at the beginning of summer 2014. The deadline is dependent upon the Ministerial Session of the CEMAT Council of Europe organized by the Greek Presidency which will coincide, in June, with the closing of the Greek Presidency of the European Union.

I therefore propose, as a first step, to think about the basic concepts of this form of democracy and produce a “Charter of Participatory Democracy” which is based on the model of the great conventions of the Council of Europe, would be short and concise, and carries a strong political message.

We, spatial planners, are relevant in defining the principles that should found this form of democracy as a counterbalanced power to the Representative Democracy during the development of urban projects.

The civil society to which we, as experts, belong, shall define all the rules and duties that require the exercise of direct democracy and the implementation of participatory processes to decision pertaining to spatial planning.

If you are interested in the work and you have, by the end of June, the time required for this reflection, I suggest you send me your motivated application.

I think a group of four to six people would be enough to carry out this task, knowing , of course, and especially that all contributions and testimonies of experiences will be appreciated in order to trace the particular circumstances of different countries of the European Continent.

Orientation for a European Charter on Participative Democracy for sustainable development of the European Continent.

Preamble:

According to historical contexts, cultures and territories, the experience of direct democracy and public participation in decision-making is very diverse. Some countries have, in fact, a great experience of direct and participatory local democracy. Others are still in statements of intent or even in denial of the fundamental right of public participation in the development of their living space while respecting diversity.

Across countries, territories and cultures, the practice of public consultation is more or less developed. However, all the knowledge, skills and attitudes are living matters whose analysis should identify a “balance sheet / diagnostic” (strengths and weaknesses) of the participatory democratic expression in the last decades, and identify assessment in a prospective goal with the objective of a “**better-living together in diversity**”, stated as a priority and fundamental principle by the Council of Europe.

The development of a European Charter of public consultation for sustainable spatial development of the European continent is an opportunity for exchange, dialogue and substantive exercise of public consultation among qualified people from different countries. It can only be a collective and transcultural work. The text should state the essential principles and be accessible to all participants in spatial planning.

Development

This note is a contribution to the common reflection that takes as its premise the tripartite approach to fundamental human rights and based on the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity democracy. The “Age of Enlightenment” was focused on representative democracy, but has also laid the foundations for a participatory discussion with the debate opened by the freedom of the press, the emergence of public debate and universal suffrage which will be becoming the main benefit.

In a more individualized society, public consultation has become vital. The pursuit of the general public or common interest, must lead to the three major phases of the exercise of participatory democracy: information, participation and membership.

True freedom applied to public consultation requires to specify the intrinsic nature of the participatory democracy. As a matter of simplification, the term of “consultation” will be adopted. Henceforth arises the issues of information, communication, trade, consulting... Is Freedom intrinsic to democracy in all its aspects, or should it be part of a scope of field, identifying minimum, essential themes (low threshold), and the fundamentals? Can freedom be exercised without access to full information? But what is the relevant level of information? How to ensure access to information?

To ensure equality before the consultation, it is necessary to ensure an adequate level of shared knowledge. This requires a concerted civic education (schools, universities and training), the result is sensitive to medium and long term. In addition, to ensure the freedom of choice and equality before the analysis, it becomes necessary, case by case, to provide targeted training. But what are the professionals to guarantee independence, the transversality, the expression of cultural and social diversity? Does Equality occur in the phase of participation? Does Equality presuppose a co-design policies and territorial projects?

The fraternity is a reflection of the diversity, heterogeneity and taking account of the most disadvantaged. Living together in diversity requires consideration of differences, specific needs. It induces the questioning of “scale” of the dialogue: open to all, or on the basis of a voluntary or sampling reflecting the population? What then should be the range of representation? Shared reflection, free dialogue, equality and solidarity opens the way to decisions shared by all citizens with the prospect, the public interest and the common interest across the territory ensuring social and cultural cohesion. Fraternity, should it find its fulfillment in the adhesion to the project which, in extension, secures territorial cohesion?

Conclusion

Public consultation, as a long breathing, finds its rhythm into its constituent parts that fit as it grows, with its expression, its evaluation and physical or policy that is given to it. It focuses on an issue, a topic but can also generate many other questions or proposals, with the ultimate goal to improve the quality of life of people in accordance with the general interest and diversity.

To inculcate with a culture of public consultation, means to define a culture of dialogue: a knowledge, an “apprehension” of the other that passes through listening, respect for differences and understanding of the motivations of each. We need to be able to do the different perceptions of the general interest emerge through successive exchanges with the aim to access a collective and cohesive expression.

Knowledge of cultures and expressions of consultations in the different territories of Europe should be a prerequisite for a first assessment such as to establish a shared visionary and realistic Charter.

The European Charter on Urban Planning invites us, as visionary experts, to offer propositions that integrates our vision of an integrated and integral territory populations.

I suggest that the working group structure is based on three stages of reflection:

1. Information as the basis of the participatory approach , element of freedom
2. Consultation / development that allows everyone in the respect for diversity, to speak on its own or shared on an equal interest
3. Adhesion / assessment which takes into account the needs of everyone in the construction and guarantee respect for the common good of the fraternity.

These three stages of the same responsible approach must ensure the integrity of fundamental human rights in the exercise of local and participatory democracy.

Remains a highly political issue: who should organize the participative Democracy? The necessary independence of this form of expression would be democratic if the representative Democracy can assume the right to organize its counterweight? Is it not to the civil society to take control of its destiny?

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