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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4277477>**THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT***Armine HOVHANNISYAN, Valentina BODRUG-LUNGU**Moldova State University*

In this article, we explore several ideas focusing on civic engagement. It is emphasized that today we are living in a period of major transformations in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which puts people, activities and institutions to the test. According to the theories of representative democracy and participatory democracy, participation is associated with the understanding of democracy and the relationship between citizens and the state. At the same time, the term civic engagement includes several meanings such as participation, involvement, cooperation, responsibility, commitment etc. We conclude that civic engagement can manifest itself in various forms - individual volunteering, community involvement efforts, organizational involvement, which can include the direct approach to a problem through personal work, community activity or involvement in the work of representative democracy institutions. Civic engagement implies not only the willingness to engage actively, but also the skills necessary to participate, to correlate the rights with the respective responsibilities.

Keywords: *civic engagement, participation, democracy, rights, responsibility, volunteering.*

ASPECTE TEORETICE ALE ANGAJAMENTULUI CIVIC

În prezentul articol sunt valorificate un șir de idei ce vizează angajamentul civic. Se subliniază faptul că azi trăim într-o perioadă a unor transformări majore în contextul pandemiei COVID-19, prin care se pun la proba încercării oamenii, activitățile, instituțiile. Potrivit teoriilor democrației reprezentative și ale democrației participative, participarea este asociată cu înțelegerea democrației și a relației dintre cetățeni și stat. Totodată, însăși noțiunea de angajament civic include mai multe sensuri, precum: participare, implicare, cooperare, responsabilitate ș.a. Constatăm că angajamentul civic se poate manifesta prin diverse forme – de la voluntariat individual, eforturi de implicare comunitară, implicare organizațională, care pot include abordarea directă a unei probleme prin munca personală, activitatea comunitară sau prin implicarea în activitatea instituțiilor democrației reprezentative. Angajamentul civic vizează nu doar dorința de a se angaja activ, dar și capacitățile necesare pentru a participa, a corela drepturile cu responsabilitățile respective.

Cuvinte-cheie: *angajament civic, participare, democrație, drepturi, responsabilitate, voluntariat.*

Introduction

Participation in political, social, economic and cultural life is a fundamental human right recognised in a number of international human rights treaties, starting with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR provides for the right to participate in government and in free elections, the right to participate in the cultural life of the community, the right to peaceful assembly and association, and the right to join trade unions.

According to the theory of representative democracy (Besley & Coate, 1997 [1]) and theory of participative democracy (Barber, 2003 [2]), participation is associated to the understanding of democracy and the relationship between citizens and state, but also as an essential to democratic governance.

The active involvement of citizens in the co-creation of public initiatives has been embraced by the European Commission as a relevant topic on its reform agenda. In this line, citizen engagement has become one of the criteria to select the city to be designated as the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) of the year.

We support Peter Lauritzen position that "Participation means to be involved, to have tasks and to share and take over responsibility. It means to have access and to be included" [3]. Participation and active citizenship are about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and, where necessary, the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society [4].

Participation, involvement, cooperation, responsibility, commitment is associated with the term "civic engagement".

What is civic engagement?

Civic engagement or civic participation is any individual or group activity addressing issues of public concern [5]. Civic engagement "is a process in which people take collective action to address issues of public concern" and is absolutely "instrumental to democracy" (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013 [6]).

Research by Youth.Gov suggests civic engagement involves "working to make a difference in the civic life of one's community and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make

that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes" [7].

We note the importance of the multidimensional approach to civic engagement (political/legal dimension, social dimension, cultural dimension and economic dimension).

Political/legal dimension refers to political rights and responsibilities; involvement and co-creation of legal framework and public policy; participatory issues; advocacy and non-discrimination etc.

Social dimension concerns the relationship between an individual and several services (health, education, social assistance etc.) by co-production, solidarity, volunteers and support groups etc.

Economic dimension concerns the relationship between an individual and the labour market: protection against discrimination and sexual harassment, LPA accountability, anticorruption etc.

The cultural dimension of approach to civic engagement refers to the consciousness of a common cultural heritage. Increased participation of citizens in the protection of cultural heritage aligns well with steps towards increasing decentralization in many policy areas, and may also help alleviate the pressures of dwindling public budgets for heritage protection [8].

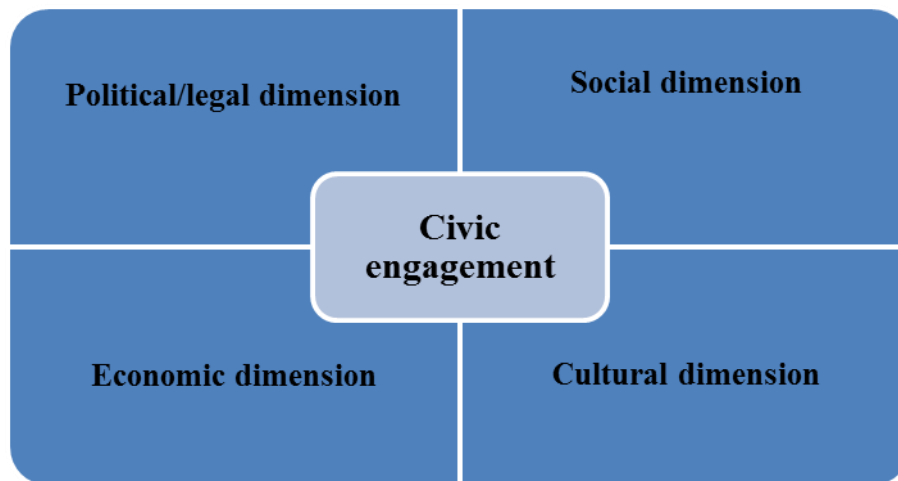


Fig.1. Dimensions of approach to civic engagement.

These four dimensions of approach to civic engagement are attained through socialization and participatory processes which take place at school, in families, civic groups, political parties, as well as through mass media and civil society organizations. In order to ensure better civic engagement, it is important to understand and to explore the interconnection between the dimensions.

Civic engagement can manifest itself in various forms – individual volunteering, community involvement efforts, organizational involvement, which can include the direct approach to a problem through personal work, community activity or involvement in the work of representative democracy institutions. In this regard, we should mention several means:

- Self-realization of citizens through involvement in community activities (sense of utility/co-participation/co-creation)
- Informing/consulting other citizens about emergency issues
- Community mobilization to solve social problems
- Informing/sensitizing the stakeholders on the citizens' needs etc.

Key success factors for the involvement of citizens include effective communication from the outset, at all stages and at all levels: assessment, programme design phase, resources collection, partnership establishment, dialogue between state structures and citizens' groups/civil society organizations, activities implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes. There is also a need to consider the diversity of the local population (based on gender, age, disability, socio-economic status etc.) and the opportunities for inclusive participation.

Experience has shown that citizen participation is most effective when stakeholders and citizens are asked to contribute:

- to identifying needs and problems;

- to discussions/deliberations on various possible solutions;
- to providing local information and local knowledge [9].

During Covid-19 pandemic, the most widespread form of civic engagement became volunteering, when thousands of citizens (women and men) organized actions in solidarity with people at risk, collecting resources and distributing food and hygiene packages.

At the same time, the need to monitor resources and governance interventions in the pandemic situation brought new challenges in civic engagement. It demands from citizens an orientation to the public good, a willingness to actively engage, and the capabilities needed to participate and deliberate well, including specific "virtual dialogue". These are tall orders, especially if citizens are disengaged and certain population groups are marginalized.

But genuine engagement in the 'co-production' of policy and services requires major shifts in the culture and operations of government agencies. In this sense, pressure from citizen groups can hold the governance accountable. It should be noted that politicians and public managers are subject to the pressures of those who confer legitimacy upon their activity and to whom they are accountable. This means that the so called "authorizing environment" greatly affects the behavior of local governments. Strong elected official support, indeed, offers stability and funding and is one reason why public administrators adopt citizen engagement mechanisms (Yang and Callahan, 2005 [10]).

We noted that in spite of potential reservations at the beginning of the participatory process, citizens are interested to learn more, to communicate about main issues, and to consider solutions in their communities, and to learn how to be more efficient in communication with local authorities, how to articulate their concerns, and with whom to communicate.

Experiments with social media have shown that using this tool can be very fruitful, and today it is necessary to combine social media and direct communication with people in the field.

Citizen engagement is formed when women and men consider themselves part of the community, can influence it, participate in its development and contribute to its well-being. Therefore, citizen engagement is also understood as a practice – the practice of playing an active role in the society, working towards the betterment of one's community through participation to improve life for all members of the community. Citizen engagement is a concept based on democratic principles and values such as pluralism, respect for human dignity and the rule of law.

Conclusions

We conclude that citizen engagement can be considered as one of the core elements of a democratic society to raise the level of citizens' responsibility for addressing several problems (at community and national levels) and implementing solutions (to influence people's behaviour and lifestyles).

Civic engagement implies not only the willingness to engage actively, but also the skills necessary to participate, to correlate the rights with the respective responsibilities. Citizen knowledge is a relevant factor concerning characteristics of participants associated with better participation outcomes. Actually, citizens with strong knowledge of the issues can give better input to the decision-making process. Thus, specific attention to education/training programmes on civic engagement should be paid.

In the pandemic context, it is important to encourage citizens to become involved and share their opinion, and appropriate incentives (like useful gadgets or similar small awards) can help significantly. Where a new measure is restrictive and brings "limitations" to citizens' lives, it is necessary to provide citizens with alternative solutions.

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