

COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING IS THE ONLY POSSIBLE WAY FOR CHANGES: REFLECTIONS ON PUBLIC PARTICIPATION EFFORTS

Essay by Anna ATAMANCHUK, co-founder of the public organization "Velokryvbas"

I live in Kryvyi Rih. When I hear anything about the participativity from the city administration, the first reaction is to ignore it. It is wrong, though. Every time I assure myself that this time something good will definitely happen, I invite other passionate people, and we start work. Involving concerned citizens and groups to discuss and make joint decisions is the only possible solution for high-quality and necessary changes in the community. Is it possible that the city executive committee knows about all the problems if the community does not report them? Probably not. Can the problems they don't know about be solved? Definitely not. How to ensure that the city administration develops the necessary and convenient projects? One should ask communities and involve those who are particularly active in collaborating on these projects. Civil society in our city as well as in other cities of Ukraine, as a rule, are accustomed to the fact that someone will do everything for them. If the water leaks, someone will call, somebody will come and fix it. But nobody fixes it even after a week passes. There are several possible developments: some people begin to nag at the government, others continue to ignore and wait for "someone" to come, and some get outraged, find the telephone and leave the statement, and also learn that no one has reported on this problem before them. At this exact moment the third group starts to understand that no one is going to solve this except them. They find all the emergency phones, save them and immediately report any problems that they see. In most cases, such people are not understood, and they are often asked "Do you have to take charge of everything?" I say yes. I do have to take charge of everything. I am happy that the number of such responsible and conscious people grows, and they have started to unite and create public organizations and initiative groups. Unfortunately, most citizens do not understand that we do it not for a salary, but because we care. The efforts of responsible people are often taken for granted, which is demotivating and sometimes abusing.

In my opinion, there are several options for involving the community in urban development management. As things stand today, the Public Budget is more or less successful tool, and public hearings and profile commissions under the executive committee are not effective at all. Provided that the approach to these tools is changed, it is possible to obtain really high-quality and effective models of involving citizens in the detection and solution of the city's problems, as well as to make the urban development human-oriented. The ideal model is a balanced interaction. One of the options is that the city administration initiates discussions on global issues, such as the inaccessibility of pedestrian underpasses for low-mobility groups. They invite interested parties and relevant groups, profile commissions, departments, designers, urban planners, etc. to the discussion. Such discussions may result in several different projects, where simple solutions can be implemented fairly quickly, but more global solutions must go through all the procedural aspects, budgeting, design, etc. Such projects can be really convenient and useful providing that users' opinions are considered. Nowadays, most reconstruction projects are not submitted to the community for discussion and we do not know anything about them until they start to be implemented. In this situation it is impossible to exert influence. Another option is that initiative groups, public organizations and concerned citizens make a statement to the lead department of the city executive committee indicating the problem, and the city executive committee gathers working groups involving people, who applied in advance, and draws the solutions. I think the problem of our cities is that the city administration does not feel bound to consult, or simply listen to the opinions of the community. It is necessary to prove to the city administration that the open discussions of the renovation projects and the involvement of the community are beneficial for the administration itself.

I can say that all levels of administration start to gradually understand the mutual benefit of involving citizens in discussions of some community development issues. Citizens feel their involvement in the changes of the city, and the administration receives feedback from people who need change. It is important for this interaction to really take place between caring, active citizens who have experience and understanding in the discussed issues and the city administration. Also, it is important that community opinion should be considered, provided that it is appropriate and practical. Currently, in the situations where it is necessary to discuss controversial or doubtful issues while the decision which has already been made remains unchanged, the city administration practices the involvement of "pet" public organizations. One of the effective tools for involving the community in solving the city's problems has been the creation of petitions in recent years. People are willing to get involved in the process of signing and distributing a petition if it is really important to the city. Some petitions went up to required thousand votes within three days. The community learns how to talk about problems with existing tools: personal appeals, petitions, deputy appeals, appeals from initiative groups, public

budget, participation in working groups of lead departments, etc. It is important that people learn about these tools and use them.

At the beginning of my sustained public activity, the city administration of Kryvyi Rih tried to ignore our appeals as much as possible while using our events in their reports during the sessions. We were invited to discussions as well as to program and concept drafts establishment, but there were only talks and promises without any further actions. Today we have several public unions that constantly keep the city administration in tune with their inquiries, appeals and petitions. Of course, the attitude to organizations has changed, because previously there was one NGO, and now there are more than ten. I will add that there are people, such as people with disabilities, who cannot be easily ignored, especially by the city administration. If the request comes from vulnerable groups, it is responded more efficiently and quickly. By the way, the city administration has learned how to monitor posts on social networks, as well as how to respond in a timely manner, if it does not require projects or additional approvals. As for business, Kryvyi Rih is quite a specific city with agreement prices estimated in millions between the metallurgical business and the top of the city administration. They contract social partnership agreements and they get a reduced rate on land tax, and this has been going on for years. Enterprises also run individual projects, both their own and in cooperation with the community. I think the cooperation between business and community specifically in our city is more effective than the cooperation between city administration and community.

As long as the participants of the transformation process do not understand the need, convenience and benefits of multifaceted cooperation of all participants, they are reluctant to accept the idea of participation. When responsible citizens present successful cases of cooperation on the project of different parties, such as the city administration + public organization + business, which led to a positive change in the urban space, the attitude changes to a more favorable one. When there is a possibility to implement such project and cooperation in the city, the administration itself becomes the initiator of such processes of interaction in the future. It is important that all parties of such processes agree on several common goals and principles, adhere to them and do not betray previous agreements. Most citizens do not put much thought on why and how certain changes occur, they are accustomed to the fact that all decisions are made by “someone” and it is impossible to exert influence. I believe that conscious citizens can make changes. It’s not fast, but no one will do us any good except for ourselves. At least, we need to say what we need for our well-being.

The most effective were the direct actions with deputy’s appeals. Also, in recent years, it became easy to join the working groups and commissions of relevant departments in the city executive committee. Petitions, even those that really need support and implementation, have not been put to the vote in recent months. Thus, the city council sabotages this tool of effective participation.

Specifically, in our city, I consider that the greatest success was achieved through the direct action when the people in wheelchairs took sledgehammers and smashed the newly installed street curbs. The day before the action, the workers were asked to lower the curb at the pedestrian crossing under repair, but the workers refused. Prior to that, the guys have already appealed to the city executive committee to consider the needs of low-mobility groups in the current and major repairs, reconstruction or construction of infrastructure. So, they had no choice but to fight for the possibility of barrier-free movement at that intersection. As a result, the curbs were lowered and high-quality repairs were carried out at several dozen more intersections with lowering of curbs and installation of tactile stone. People who create technical task, designers, performers are mostly healthy men who do not think about the social component of our buildings, our streets, or urban space in general. Therefore, people who seek for quality change need to take the initiative, write, speak, shout, press (within the law) about problems, and demand quality solutions from the administration. They should constantly monitor all stages, from the technical task to the implementation. It’s not easy, but otherwise, it doesn’t work now. The participation in my city is still at the initial stage, but we are able to bring it to a decent level, provided that the administration is ready for healthy relations with the community and its needs.