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Effective Communication at Local Level

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Part One: Introduction[1]

This paper emphasises the role of adequate information policy of local authorities in promoting social and economic development. Information policy is understood as an activity of local authorities intended for:

❑ provision (dissemination) of information on the activities of local authorities

❑ consultation with citizens and other institutions on implemented programmes and undertakings essential from the perspective of the local community, or

❑ any other facilitation of communication between local authorities, citizens and organisations.

My focus on local authorities does not mean that they are exclusive authors of information policy of given community. Contrary, I believe that other institutions and inhabitants at local level as well as national and international players can be also vital elements of information-shared community. However, these are local authorities that are responsible for shaping local democracy and wealth of their constituents. The importance of local politicians and officials lies in the fact that they have power to make ultimate decisions. Government is also the biggest receiver, producer and holder of information.

It is quite obvious that synergy of efforts undertaken by local actors may strengthen local development. It is assumed that their input in solving local problems will be more significant if they are able to communicate effectively. In principle, exchanging views, ideas and experience locally and globally may bring necessary expertise as well as understanding, engagement and support.

Therefore the main task of this paper is to advocate the need to design and implement appropriate information policy of local administration. Public opinions surveys reveal that almost half of the Polish population critically assesses the information policy of local authorities. Furthermore, like in many Western countries, Poland is also affected by low participation in elections, lower commitment to the

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[1] This paper summarizes the content and the result of a research project carried out by the author in 2001/2002 within the framework of Open Society Institute Budapest - Hungary / International Policy Fellowships in. Views and policy recommendations expressed here are those of the author only and not of the Foundation Open Society Institute. All errors and omissions rest with the author. The research paper: „Problem of access to information and effective communication at local level", can be viewed at http://www.policu.hu/~sakowicz. Comments and suggestions should be sent to sakowicz@policy.hu

political process and lower trust in government. This lead us to the statement the quality of democracy and citizen engagement in the political process in Poland still needs to be improved. Thus the essential problem of information policy for local authorities in Poland is:

How to develop and upgrade communication practices at local level so that participation in democratic process is strengthened?

Part two: The scope of the problem

This paper refers to the broad spectrum of the right to information which usually entails ideas of: freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of publication (press), freedom to gather (obtain) and disseminate information as well as idea of transparency and openness (Stefanowicz 2001). This set of rights is stipulated in the Constitution and secondary legislation, of which newly adopted Law an Access to Public Information is the most essential. The argument for freedom of information is straightforward: democracy requires that citizens be free to receive all information which may affect their choices in the process of collective decision-making (Sadurski 1999). However, despite the new legislative act broadening the access to information, Poland still faces some hindrances concerning execution of this right. The main obstacle constitute ambiguous specifications and unclear provisions, many of which will be the subject of courts jurisprudence.

It is, of course, essential that rights embracing free expression and communication are necessary for the healthy functioning of democracy, self-governemnt and so on. But this is not the most important point of my inquiry, the point is to find out **why this particular right is not effectively used and ways to improve it**. In order to consider this issue, it is not enough to accept an uncontroversial thesis about the relevance of freedom of information to democratic process, we must determine what is the general objective of having this right and how this objective can be fulfilled.

OECD rapport *"Citizens as partners"* announces that new forms of governance rely on better information, consultation and public participation as key elements for engaging citizens in policy-making (OECD, 2001). In a representative democracy, public participation in political discussion is a central element of the political process.

Participation and consultations are mechanisms for identifying and aggregating the will of constituents. If the point is that **information is prerequisite of public engagement**, the long - term objective of this paper is to make 'public' involved in public participation, public deliberations, setting public agenda and solving public problems so that socio-economic development of communities can occur.

Why focus on municipal level?

In spite of the fact that information and communication technology (ICT) can help us to overcome many of the barriers imposed by distance, people are socially active foremost within borders of their municipalities. Next, some public policies are likely to be locally generated and relevant only to a specific area. People act more responsibly when they control their own environments than when they are under the control of others. It stands to reason that when communities are empowered to solve their own problems, they function better than communities that depend on services provided by outsiders. Thus the formulation of such policies can be seen as a matter for the local community.

Furthermore local level is the ideal environment for the individuals and their associations to mobilize and to improve government services. In principle, the small size of a local community as defined by a local identity, defined territory, inhabitants and common local interest can yield greater co-operation among social and political actors. Finally, local self-government can be more responsive to the needs, requests and demands of individuals or groups. The important assumption is that the use of Internet and other modern technologies can facilitate flow of information but whether it broadens and deepens participation in the democratic process is still under examination.

Although municipal level is the tier of government closest to citizens it does not mean that power to make decisions cannot be shift further to smaller units than municipalities: urban districts, neighbourhood groups and villages in rural areas.

Why does central government also matter?

Undoubtedly, central government actions and programmes must support local authorities' efforts in improving communication and applying ICT. In the second half of 2001 Poland adopted several vital legislative measures, programs and strategies

strengthening access to public information and use of ICT. These include: law on public sector information, law on electronic signature, E-Poland strategy. But whether the adopted measures guarantee truly effective access to information and contribute to the creation of knowledge economy is debatable.

As for the new technologies, at the moment the critical mass of net users is not achieved as the only 15-20% of Poles have access to Internet. Poland still lags behind when compared to the EU. The number of Internet users per 100 inhabitants is only 1/3 of the EU average. The main reason for that is high cost for Internet connections, low number of public Internet access points and lack of training focused on Internet and computer usage.

Part three: Application of the reform

The need for change

The benefits of reforming the information policy of local authorities go beyond the improvement of democratic participation. Depending on the scope and scale of policy action the following advantages of new approach may be reached:

❑ Enhancing quality and effectiveness of government services

❑ Bringing people and organizations closer together

❑ Increasing economic activity, skill-building and inward investment

On the other hand, the lack of proper policy accelerating the reform of information policy of local authorities may lead to the risk of expanding the technocratic, unresponsive style of government. Absence of innovative approaches may create barriers to the full use of the opportunities offered by the new technologies. Those local self-governments without an appropriate information policy and use of ICT find themselves in a competitive disadvantage vis a vis their more adapted counterparts. Furthermore, the gap between " information elite" and the rest of society may be widened. Access to and exploitation of information will remain the privilege of an educated minority, who either consciously or unconsciously, will exercise the form of domination, which could jeopardise the foundations of democracy.

Options for consideration

The reform should be based on three premises. First, information policy of local authorities should be locally driven: to large extent depends on attitudes and habits of local authorities (central government has little impact on how local authorities communicate with inhabitants). Second, sharing information reduces the ' paperwork burden' on the citizen; streamline work processes; and enriches the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policy. Third, new information and telecommunication technologies (ICT) are not a panacea, but they may provide means for enriching and improving communications and flow of information.

The expected result of the reform should be the improvement of active participation at local level: building partnership between local authorities and citizens, in which the latter actively engage in the decision and policy making process.

Formulation of strategies

Given the fact that public participation and economic development is based primary on knowledge and information the necessity of implementation of strategies strengthening the effective exchange of information is inevitable. Local development should be based on local requirements and potentials and supported by a wide range of public, private and voluntary section authorities and agencies. Hence, most emphasis must be placed on upon locally-based policies. Research shows that are still few municipalities, which address effective communication as a challenge and short-run or long-run goal.

At present four strategies for upgrading information policy of local authorities are proposed (Table 3). Their focus is either narrow (training of local officials or broader (community informatics). But it is worth mentioned that truly effective exchange of information requires engagement of all local stakeholders. Therefore proposed strategies are rather mutually inclusive than exclusive. Of course, not all of them may refer to given community in the same scope. For example, if there are local authorities which are performing very well in providing passive information but they lack strategies for activating citizens - the info-centre program may very appropriate. Parallel to mentioned strategies there is a need for **popularisation of the best practices** in the field of information policy of local authorities and other local stakeholders. Within this field much attention still should be devoted to promotion of

different forms of **information provision** and **consultation mechanisms**. Awareness raising is essential because neither local authorities nor citizens and local institutions appreciate enough the benefits of effective communication. Best practices identified during the research are for example: Szczecin (spread of information about city's finance), Sokolów Podlaski (very broad information about local authorities performance via website), Krosno (NGO's established portal focused on providing information on municipal matters).

Table 3

Strategies	Focus on	Possible outcome
1. Monitoring and supporting of legislative action	Central government, parliament, local self-governments	Appropriate adoption and enforcement of legislation ensuring easy access to information
2. Training of local spokespersons and people responsible for communications in local offices	Potential 'supporters' and 'opposition'	Change of attitude towards dissemination of information, strengthening the capabilities for development of information strategies
3. Creating of Info-centres (Telecottages, Telecentres)	Municipalities in rural areas, usually on underdeveloped territories	"Bring" the information to local people and provide opportunities to use the information in different ways: to work, to learn or to play
4. Introducing community information projects (3-5 digital communities), usually in medium sized towns	Innovative self-governments or/and active local leaders (champions)	Enhancing local community through exchange of information and integrating local authorities, enterprises, schools, NGOs, libraries, and other public institutions, providing means for delivering on-line services by ICT

Part Four: Implementation issues

(*what actors should be involved, how to find resources?*)

Strategy 1 : Monitoring and supporting of legislative action

Activities concerning monitoring and supporting the execution of the right to information should be carried out by media, NGOs and think-tanks. The interpretation as well as in some cases the text of any number of standard provisions of access to information law will require modernising to keep pace with rapid changes so that truly effective access to information can occur.

<u>Recommendation</u>: As oversight of freedom of information legislation is carried out by courts, there is a need to upgrade the capability of Poland's judiciary system and establish the Information Ombudsman or Freedom of Information Officer.

<u>Partners</u>: Transparency International, Centre for Monitoring of Freedom of Press, Think Tanks and Journalists

<u>Costs</u>: Activities of NGOs and journalists in this area are usually undertaken on daily basis. Additional cost would be the post of Information Officer. But if there is an Officer on Personal Data Protection why shouldn't be one protected the rights of freedom and access to information. A much more complicated matter constitute the problem of the reform of obsolete judiciary system. This has to be rearrange if Poland Poland wants to join EU in 2004.

Strategy 2: Training of officials responsible for local government - citizens communication.

Research reveals that there are no spokesperson in every municipality. Lack   of official responsible for providing information is more visible in small rural municipalities rather than in towns and cities and constitute obstacle for effective flow of information. Although dissemination of information is regulated in most of the questioned cities, only in few cases the strategy for communication as well as channels of information are identified and properly implemented.

The rational behind this program is not adequate training concerning communication with citizens. Most of workshops and seminars for local officials were focused mainly on marketing and public relation issues. Thus the new program of training should more emphasize improvement of government-citizens interaction.

Recommendation: To prepare and implement adequate training for officials in order to overcome the resistance for change and enhance their capabilities concerning interaction with citizens. To influence municipalities so that all of them has the post of information (communication) officer.

Costs of training: around 3 thousands of USD for one person multiple by 1000 (particularly from rural areas) makes 300 000 USD.

Partners for implementation of this strategy may constitute experts from School of Public Administrations, Practitioners, Non-Profit Organisations like FRDL (Foundation of Development of Local Democracy in Poland). Sources of founding should come from local authorities as well as donors and central government. The costs for creation of new posts of communication officer should be covered by local administration.

Strategy 3: Creating Info-centres for citizens based mainly on rural areas

Plan for establishing Telecenters was proposed and stipulated in central government programme two years ago but until March 2002 was not successfully implemented. At present, different actors and civic organisations like Foundation of Information Society in Poland, are trying put ideas of infocenters into practice. Within this strategy subproject containing IT and computer training should be provided. Very important will be innovative approach, for example, ' flexible training' (Internet bus or 10 laptops moving form one place to another, adjusted to the needs of inhabitants).

Recommendation: To support creation of Infocenters tailored to local needs.

Central objectives: Provide information on legal issues, European Union; help to face the unemployment and overcome the mentality shift concerning information era

Costs: Establishing and running Infocenter for the first year may cost form 100 000 to 200 000 USD.

Partners: Local administrations and central ministries, NGOs (Foundation of Information Society in Poland, Association ' Cities on the Internet'), international donors

Source of financing: Public private partnership, local authorities, fees

Challenge: Coordination and issues of sustainability

Example: Very few in Poland compared to more than 300 telecottages in Hungary

Strategy 4 : Community Information model

Projects involving building the community information model are usually very expensive and their cost may reach millions of dollars. That's why implementation of community informatics projects require very profound analyses of needs of inhabitants and careful examination for whom and for what purposes should be built.

<u>Recommendation:</u> To foster elaboration of the model and introducing pilot projects of community informatics in order to identify the social and economic impact of ICT on local community in CEE. Since there is lack of systemic information about results of practical implementation and usage of new technologies, the more studies on these issues are required.

<u>Requirements</u>: giving the priority to community-based projects than top-down approach, favourable external circumstances like high Internet penetration, law on electronic signature and regulations protecting on-line privacy and security.

<u>Partners</u>: In order to build sustainable model of community networks a cooperation between all local stakeholders should be achieved. (local authorities, NGO-s, businesses, IT-companies, think-tanks and so on).

<u>Source of funding</u>: UE, World Bank, UNDP, public-private partnership.

<u>Examples</u>: there is no example of implemented community informatics project in neither in Poland nor in other countries of CEE. Best practices may come from EU cities like Antwerp in Belgium or Ronneby in Sweden.

Part Five: Communication analyses

Strategies and recommendations developed in the course of the research refer to wide spectrum of stakeholders: local and central government, individuals, NGOs (OSI) and international organisations. In a rapid changing environment exemplified by development of information society - a *status quo* referring to access, proper use and exchange of information cannot be a proper solution. Therefore all state and non-state actors should become a strategic partners in implementation of proposed strategies.

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