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Why do citizens participate (or not) in official schemes? Reflections on the implementation of a self-diagnostic tool for local government

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The paper discusses the opportunities and challenges that 23 European municipal authorities encountered when implementing the self-diagnostic tool designed by a team of British scholars. The tool has been designed to enable local policymakers and practitioners to understand the factors that support and hold back citizen participation in officially sponsored methods. The argument of the paper develops a theoretical and methodological analysis of the 'road test' of the 'CLEAR' tool. It draws upon the experience, challenges and limitations encountered by municipalities in Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Spain. The analysis emphasises three issues: the redefinition of the tool's five diagnostic factors; the commitment to a multi-perspective assessment of citizen participation; and the level of self-reflection that municipalities developed in their self-diagnosis.

Self-diagnostic tools for local government in the context of broader measures of democracy

Participatory democracy has started to be understood as a complementary institutional process to democratic representative institutions (xxx). It provides more opportunities to generate inclusive strategies (at least at the local level) and it provides a more continuous participation than electoral schedules. Participatory democratic institutions have become more common in policymaking partly due to decentralisation policies and government agencification experienced within the last 20 years in various countries across Europe (Burns, et al., 1994; Denters & Rose, 2005). As a result, opportunities to develop a closer relationship between governmental organisations and different groups of civil society, as well as individual citizens, have been created. In this sense, participatory institutions are tending to reach a point in which they seem to have ceased to be innovative within

national and local level discourses, and instead they have tended to become part of the common ingredients of good practice which countries pursue throughout the formulation and implementation of policies (Council of Europe, 2004; OECD 2004). However, what is more in vogue within academic and practitioner debates are the different approaches that can be built in order to assess the level or quality of participatory democratic processes at the national and subnational levels.

The interest in measuring democracy has been observed in the work of many European and American scholars since the 1960s (Lipset, 1959; Schedler, 2001). The work of these scholars has focused on the national level and on the representative institutions of democracy, such as the characteristics of the electoral system, the freedom that the population has in the political system, and the stability of a democratic regime based on a country's economic and socio-political contexts. One of the characteristics of these studies is that the judgement of democracy is developed by external observers that establish their criteria based on theory and expertise, rather than collecting evidence from the perceptions of political actors in a specific country (Schedler, 2001:78).

In contrast, but by following this path of measurement and assessment, democratic 'barometers' started to be developed across different world regions in the 1990s. The Eurobarometre, for example, is a questionnaire that is distributed to different citizens across European countries in order to learn about populations' opinions about democracy and its relationship with the country's economic development, governmental structures and management, and individual quality of life. The relevance of this form of measurement is that it provides a picture of how democracy is interpreted from the internal agents' perspective. In other words, a country's own citizen perceptions are considered in trying to understand the experience and expectations of national democracy (<http://www.esds.ac.uk/international/access/eurobarometer.asp> - accessed 12/12/06). However, this approach of measuring democracy is still not considering the relationships between

government structures and other groups of civil society or citizens, which is important to the understanding of participatory democracy underlines.

An approach for measuring the government-civil society relationship has been the 'democratic audit criteria' developed in the UK by Stuart Weir and David Beetham (1999). The audit model focuses on institutional democratic performance. Criteria are arranged across four components that extend beyond the areas of civil and political rights and electoral democracy to include two further areas: accountability of government and a democratic society. Furthermore, the principle of political equality includes not only inclusiveness of suffrage, but also inclusiveness throughout the operational side of a political process (Weir & Beetham, 1999: 15). This approach has developed criteria which are applicable not only at the national level but which are also useful to audit local government openness, accountability and responsiveness to the local public. Other approaches for measuring the relationship between government-civil society are the criteria produced by international organisations such as the OECD and non-governmental organisations such as the Centre on Budget and Policy Priorities, which have been interested in measuring the access to information that the public has with regards to the operation of public finances and services (<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/60/43/1899427.pdf>; <http://www.internationalbudget.org> –accessed 12/12/06). These organisations' main interest is to assess the existence and access of public information; however, some criteria have been developed to assess citizen understanding and involvement within public finance policies.

At the more local level, NGOs and academic groups have developed approaches for measuring participatory democratic processes. The development of these approaches have been more recent, such as the Local Democratic Assessment Guide produced by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (IDEA, no year); a proposal for indicators measuring the quality of public participation produced by the IGOP, University of Barcelona (Anduiza & de Maya, 2005); and the self-diagnosis tool produced by LGRU, De Montfort

University and IPEG, University of Manchester (Lowndes et al., 2006a, 2006b).

These three approaches are similar in that an emphasis is put on citizen participation within local policymaking. However, the extent and perspective through which these approaches emphasise citizen participation vary.

The IDEA guide is directed to local users and practitioners to assess the quality of democracy in public local institutions. The aim of this assessment is to improve these institutions' degree of responsiveness to social problems and to offer people a more effective voice in the decisions that affect their lives (IDEA, n/d: 3). Due to the nature of IDEA, the guide develops a strong emphasis in the section related to local representative democracy, which refers to the electoral system and procedures in the locality. However, there are some questions throughout the model that assess the methods of participation existing in the locality, the extent of inclusion of community based groups and NGOs, citizens' access to information and information transparency, and the extent of citizens' voice influencing the provision of public services. The IDEA guide is a broad model which assesses the quality of local democracy by focusing on representative and participatory institutions and that offers users and practitioners an alternative to start generating an internal evaluation or self-diagnosis.

The system of indicators developed by the academic team at the University of Barcelona, is a guide designed for politicians and practitioners to evaluate the quality of participatory processes only (Anduiza & de Maya, 2005: 9). In general, the ideal values that the indicators show will rank higher insofar as a participatory process (or set of many participatory processes) in a municipality or any organisation has:

- a wide range and high representativeness of the population involved in the process;
- the themes developed in the process are of relevance to the citizens involved;
- the information, deliberation and expression mechanisms designed for citizens to participate are accessible and complete; and

- the process favours a political participative culture.²

This system of indicators has a very specific and narrow focus, but develops an in-depth assessment about the quality of citizen participation across different processes existent in a municipality or organisation. It is argued (Anduiza & de Maya, 2005: 28) that this approach to evaluation is the continuation of a series of internal and external evaluations carried out previously in a society which is acquainted to a culture of critical evaluation. The approach develops a simplified and systematic comparative framework between different processes of participation.

The self-diagnosis tool (CLEAR) produced by the team of British scholars is the one that is to be examined in detail in the following sections of this paper (Lowndes et al, 2006a; 2006b). However, it is worth noting how this tool differentiates itself from the latter two. This approach provides a 'greater degree of support for policy makers and practitioners trying to make positive changes to their practice of citizen consultation and engagement' (Lowndes et al., 2006b: 285). The tool focuses upon officially sponsored participation initiatives but it puts an emphasis upon the understanding of the citizens' perspective about participation (idem). Like the IDEA model, this approach offers an internal evaluation but specifically of citizen participation and how policymakers respond to it. The self-diagnostic tool works as a complement to the indicator system insofar as it provides a framework to identify whether participatory processes exist within local policymaking, whilst the indicator system evaluates the extent to which citizen participation has an impact on the local political participatory culture.

The CLEAR framework: a self-diagnostic tool

The CLEAR model emanates from the theoretical and empirical insights based on a specific research project developed in Britain.³ It argues that participation is most likely where citizens (Lowndes et al., 2006b: 286):

- Can do – that is, have the resources and knowledge to participate;

- Like to – that is, have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation;
- Enabled to – that is, are provided with the opportunity for participation;
- Asked to – that is, are mobilized by official bodies or voluntary groups;
- Responded to – that is, see evidence that their views have been considered.

The theoretical insights of the model are based on three dominant explanations of the factors that drive local participation: people's socio-economic status (SES) (Verba et al., 1995); social capital, understood as the importance of relations, trust and reciprocity (Putnam, 1993); and local institutions, in particular the impact of rules (Lowndes et al., 2006a). However, a specific focus is given to local institutions, as they are considered to be a factor that complements the resource and social capital approaches.

Based on rational choice theory and sociological institutionalism (Goodin and Klingermann, 1996; Hall and Taylor, 1998; Ostrom, 1999), local institutions are understood as 'rules-in-use' which provide a structure of incentives and disincentives to political actors, and they also express norms of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. In thinking about local participation Vivien Lowndes and colleagues (2006a: 546) identify rules that are consciously designed and clearly specified (e.g. electoral arrangements, consultative forum, partnerships, constitutions), as well as the positive and negative rules that take the form of unwritten customs and codes (e.g. maximising access, response to decision-making, paternalism or social exclusion). The concept of rules-in-use captures both the formal and informal elements that shape behaviour.

To obtain empirical results, Lowndes and colleagues (2006a) designed a qualitative and quantitative case study investigation across eight localities in England. The research focused on identifying the institutional rules that shaped participation. The research identified rules in three domains: political parties and political leadership (incentives or cultural legacies that either open or restrict political participation); public management (relationship between frontline officers

and citizens); and civic infrastructure (how voluntary and community based organisations were able to construct relationships with each other and local authorities). The findings of the research conclude that citizens' predisposition towards participation is affected not only by their perceptions that they can make a difference to political outcomes, but also by their perceptions that the political system is responsive to their concerns (for more details see Lowndes et al., 2006a). The argument relating to the opportunities that local policymakers have for shaping the institutional rules of the participation game, in particular how they respond to citizens' concerns, is later reflected in the design of the CLEAR model, implemented in 23 European municipalities via a Council of Europe's 'road test'.

The CLEAR model discussed here '...seeks a deeper understanding of the causal factors driving or inhibiting citizen participation...it aims to provide a greater degree of support for policy makers and practitioners trying to make positive changes to their practice of citizen consultation and engagement' (Lowndes et al., 2006b: 285). The diagnostic tool has been designed in order for policymakers to identify how they can stimulate participation across the different domains in which rules-in-use are relevant (e.g. party politics, public management strategies, civic networks).

The tool focuses upon officially sponsored initiatives, in other words organic or spontaneous participation promoted by citizens and communities is not considered. Based on official initiatives, '...the tool places an emphasis in understanding participation from the citizens' perspective: what needs to be in place for citizens to participate' (Lowndes et al., 2006b: 286). This point reflects the importance given to the response that policymakers give to citizens, for example, by understanding what citizens think about existing participation initiatives and how they might be developed or improved (idem).

Table 1 summarises the factors that comprise the diagnostic tool (CLEAR), how they work and their policy targets (for further details see Lowndes et al, 2006b).

The column of theoretical factors indicates which explanatory dimensions are considered in each of the factors of the tool.

Table 1. Factors promoting participation: CLEAR

Key factor	How it works	Policy targets	Theoretical factors
Can do	The individual resources that people have to mobilise and organise (speaking, writing and technical skills, and the confidence to use them) make a difference	Capacity building, training and support of volunteers, mentoring, leadership development	SES
Like to	To commit to participation requires an identification with the public entity that is the focus of engagement	Civil renewal, citizenship, community development, neighbourhood governance, social capital	Social capital
Enabled to	The civic infrastructure of groups and umbrella organisations makes a difference because it creates or blocks an opportunity structure for participation	Investing in civic infrastructure and community networks, improving channels of communication via compacts	Social capital/ institutional rules
Asked to	Mobilising people into participation by asking for their input can make a big difference	Public participation schemes that are diverse and reflexive	Institutional rules
Responded to	When asked people say they will participate if they are listened to (not necessarily agreed with) and able to see a response	A public policy system that shows a capacity to respond – through specific outcomes, ongoing learning and feedback	Institutional rules

The implementation of the CLEAR tool

The implementation of the diagnostic tool was carried out in collaboration with the Council of Europe, specifically with the Steering Committee on Local and Regional Democracy (CDLR)*. The road test was carried out during the first four months of

2006. During the planning stage, the members of the committee volunteered to take part in the road test of the tool. The following countries participated in the process: Finland, Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia and Spain. All except Finland chose five municipalities in which the diagnostic tool would be implemented (see Table 2 for details). The municipalities participating in the process were selected by their central governments and local authority associations. The selection criteria were not based on a representative sample, but each government selected cases according to a comprehensive range of experiences: rural/urban, big/small, or long/short histories of participation.

Table 2. Municipalities implementing CLEAR⁴

Country	Municipality	Country	Municipality
Finland	Tampere Hameenlinna Imatra	Slovakia	Bratislava Kezmarok Vel'ke Kepusany Nesvady Zavazna Poruba
Netherlands	Utrecht Arnhem Zoetermeer Deurne Dantumadeel	Spain	Madrid Barcelona Málaga Cordoba San Sebastián-Donostia
Norway	Askim Herøy Kristiansand Vadsø Øvre-Eiker	Total 23 municipalities	

The academic team (Lowndes, Pratchett, Stoker and Guarneros), designed the tool in a form of a questionnaire which contained open and closed questions to be answered by different types of local stakeholders: politicians, public officers, voluntary organisations and citizens. However, the extent and quality of the answers depended very much on the municipal context in which it was implemented.

The five factors in the model are neither hierarchical nor sequential. The presence of one factor is not a precondition for others and effective participation does not necessarily depend on all of the components being present although, in an ideal

world, they would be. The methods for collecting information and evidence are deliberately underspecified in the CLEAR tool. The information that municipalities have access to varies both between and within countries, as do the resources that municipalities have to commit to the diagnosis. Similarly, the amount and nature of cooperation with other organisations and citizen groups in the municipality will be locally specific, requiring different approaches to meet those needs (Lowndes et al., 2006c).

The academic team also attended the preparation meetings in each of the participant countries. In these meetings, the tool's objectives were explained as well as its contents. Each country had a coordinating agency (represented by the central government department in charge of regional and municipal affairs) which was responsible for translating the tool and keeping track of its implementation in each of the participating municipalities. The Council of Europe gathered all the translated reports which were later sent to the academic team for analysis.

Findings from the self-diagnostic tool

The team expected to receive the municipalities' reports with comments about their experience and challenges in implementing the tool in terms of:

- Redefinition of the tool's questions addressed in a particular setting;
- Commitment to a multi-perspective assessment of the state of citizen participation in the municipality; and
- Self-reflection that the municipalities developed throughout their diagnosis.

The reports sent by the municipalities which implemented the tool comprised a statement summarising their experience during the implementation stage as well as their responses to the questions contained in the tool. The analysis of the reports focused upon three issues: redefinition of the tool's questions, commitment to a multi-perspective assessment of participation, and self-reflection. The municipalities considered in this section were the most complete cases for illustrating the three issues.

In designing the tool the academic team foresaw some of the obstacles that municipalities might have encountered during the implementation stage, such as: the nature of some of the questions which were stated in general and open ended terms; the non-specification of the sources and methods to be used to collect the information to answer the questions; and the probability that municipalities would not find databases disaggregated by local authority area, in particular in relation to those questions referring to trust (the 'like to' factor of the tool). Although these obstacles were foreseen, the findings showed the extent to which each municipality encountered them.

Redefinition of the tool's questions addressed in a particular setting:

With regards to the design and format of the questions, the majority of the municipalities commented that the tool followed a complex design. The majority of the municipalities were hesitant in moulding the tool in accordance with their local characteristics; a few were more creative and innovative in overcoming the challenge (mainly from Finland and Slovakia). Utrecht reported that the ways in which the questions were stated did not encourage respondents to give a detailed answer. This municipality suggested that additional sub-questions should be included in the tool in order to ask for further details. Across the five countries many of the answers were scant (e.g. yes-no answers), others were answered based on individual perceptions, wishful thinking or what 'should be done'; whilst others were answered partially by focusing on just one aspect encompassed by the question (Box 1 exemplifies this point):

Box 1. Imatra's answer to 'Can do' question

<p>Q: Which skills are in short supply? A: 'More computer skills are needed'</p>
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The previous example refers to the skills that citizens need in order to participate in political life, such as writing letters, speaking in public, organising meetings, or

computer skills. However, Imatra only reported computer skills as those in short supply, when other skills could have been included as well, such as in the cases of Barcelona and San Sebastian, which reported that skills in short supply were more related to oral skills and understanding of consensus.

The limited information of the answers obtained in the reports could be explained by various factors; however, four have been identified as part of the problem. The first one refers to the design of the questionnaire, which emphasised, for example, the use of the Internet in questions preceding that in Box 1. The second reason is related to the additional effort that the respondent had to do in order to provide more accurate information. This effort implied more time and probably resources (e.g. access to surveys, design methods to collect data) that the municipalities did not have access to. It is important to underline that the participating municipalities were subject to the schedule proposed by the Council of Europe, encountering as a consequence a limited time to implement the tool according to their interests. Also the non-specification of the methods or sources to be used allowed municipalities to report answers in a less systematic way.

The third reason is related to the translation of reports into English. Through this process it is highly possible that many details in the answers were lost. Finally, some of the questions in the tool included a Likert scale which required a choice from the scale, without encouraging further explanation. The Slovak reports and a few comments from Finland and the Netherlands stated the limitations of the tool for comparative purposes or national generalisations. After analysing the reports, the academic team made it clearer (in the next version) that the tool did not seek to provide standardised objective data that could be used to compare localities and reach some ranking or classification of different municipalities (Lowndes et al, 2006c). The tool's aim is not to generate directly comparable information on participation that can be used by third parties to contrast or evaluate areas.

Although the quality of the answers encountered limitations including the factors noted above, the answers also reflected how questions were redefined according to the municipality's context. This was particularly the case with the terms in the 'Like to' section: community spirit, community identity, trust between citizens, people's values, or helpfulness between citizens. The answers to these questions seemed to be very challenging for the municipalities; there were many cases in which the questions were not answered (they were left in blank or with a statement saying that this factor 'was not known'). But in other cases, respondents were more creative or innovative in finding sources that could help them answer these questions. Box 2 states some of the questions found in the 'Like to' section and Box 3 describes briefly some of the solutions given.

The design of the tool could not provide the specific and narrow questions that some of the municipalities suggested, because this tool was intended for use by municipalities with different contexts. Being aware of this situation, the design of the tool allowed the academic team to interpret the approach that the municipalities took when responding, either with a hesitant or creative attitude. The great majority found response difficult and challenging, but in the end they seemed to have found a way to complete the questionnaire according to their resources. However, the limited time that municipalities had and the lack of guidance for using specific methods and sources of information created unsystematic and unstandardised reports, which proved difficult at times to compare.

Box 2: Questions within the 'Like to' section

1. Is the community a stable one with a strong sense of history and tradition?
2. How much do citizens trust the municipality to make decisions that are in the interest of the community as whole?
3. Is there a community spirit that supports community action?

Box 3: Creative ways of using existing data or carrying out methods to collect data

1. Utrecht – By understanding community as neighbourhood, the sense of history and tradition was obtained by the number of years that people have been living in a specific neighbourhood.
2. Arnhem – based on a local survey (Quality of Life and Safety Monitoring, 2005) it was reflected if people trusted the municipality by asking inhabitants if:
 - The municipality paid a lot of attention to the neighbourhood's problems
 - The municipality took effective measures to improve the quality of life and safety in the neighbourhoodPercentages were obtained from a scale that ranged from 'agree completely' to 'disagree completely'.
3. Barcelona – based on local survey (Quarterly Municipal Barometer, March 2006), 'community spirit' was associated by the percentage of people that replied to the question if in the future the city was going to improve or worsen; 66.8% answered that it will improve.

Commitment to a multi-perspective assessment of the state of citizen participation in the municipality:

The municipalities were prompted to use several strategies and methods with different stakeholders to obtain information for completing the tool. The importance of this multi-perspective data collection is based upon the argument that rules-in-use could be found throughout the combination of formal and informal institutions that influences participation in the locality through shaping the behaviour of politicians, public managers, community leaders and citizens.

In some instances, the tool was used primarily by municipalities to collect information within their own organisation, helping them to understand better how different parts of the organisation perceived public engagement and developed participation. Interviews or focus groups with municipal employees and politicians were most commonly used in these instances. More often, however, municipalities used the tool to reach out to a wider range of citizen groups using an array of

different methods. Some adapted the tool into a survey instrument and used this to consult citizens. Others preferred to use it as a prompting device within a more discursive environment with different groups of citizens. Yet others used it as a means of approaching different non-governmental organisations in either survey or focus group form. One interesting way of completing the questionnaire, adopted by several municipalities across the five countries, was to focus different questions on different groups, thus building a more detailed picture of the locality. However, the majority of municipalities drew upon detailed information collected through existing surveys sponsored by local authorities or by national information centres (Guarneros et al., 2006).

Differences in implementation approach were also noticeable. Some municipalities implemented the process themselves, collecting information, conducting focus groups or surveying citizens through their own activities. Others used a third party to conduct some or all of the implementation on their behalf (Guarneros et al., 2006). The main cases that used a third party were the Spanish and Dutch municipalities, where consultancies and local universities were used not only to conduct the data collection aspects of the tool but also in a consultancy role, analysing and reflecting upon the implications of the findings .

Clearly, specific organisational norms and cultures place more emphasis upon the evidence from one type of data source than another, and decision makers feel more comfortable when they have access to data in a particular format. Moreover, such norms have undoubtedly encouraged the adoption of some types of instrument and discouraged others (e.g. quantitative data over qualitative data). However, one role that the CLEAR tool may play is encouraging municipalities to think more carefully about the mix of methods that they use and how they interpret the information from different methods (Guarneros et al., 2006).

The reports also revealed variations in how citizen groups were identified in each municipality; these groups were mainly NGOs, neighbourhood boards, immigrants,

and youth and elderly groups. Although NGOs' views were incorporated, few municipalities directly consulted them in completing the tool (2/5 Norwegian and 4/5 Spanish municipalities), the great majority of the cases reported with rough calculations the membership of each voluntary group. In several cases sport clubs were reported to have the most membership. Cases like San Sebastian and Barcelona reported their perceptions that the voluntary sector was quite segmented with no real increase in its membership. Others like Vadso and Askim reported that the voluntary sector was not representative of the different groups found in the municipality; however, the evidence for these statements was not specified. The perception of the majority of the municipalities about the operation of the voluntary sector reflects the weak assessment that local authorities have carried out in relation to this sector. However, this might not mean that their relationship is non-existent as 60% of the municipalities reported that they support the voluntary sector by providing financial resources, municipal facilities and access to decision makers.

A few municipalities, such as San Sebastian and Askim, were aware that projects taking into account a multi-perspective view or assessment required more time and effort in order to adapt the project to each citizen group's context. It was also reported by San Sebastian that the more inclusive the multi-perspective assessment of participation, the more likely it was that the municipality would include the participation of organic and spontaneous citizen groups, leading as a consequence to further challenges (e.g. what group should be first included). This latter point underlines one of the CLEAR tool's limitations, its focus on official schemes only.

Self-reflection that the municipalities developed throughout their diagnosis:

The parts of the reports in which the municipalities' self-reflection was found was in the 'Asked to ' and ' Responded to' sections. All the municipalities reported that they sought to engage citizens in decision-making processes and 65% did it at least in six different ways. The most common methods were: inviting citizens to make open comments on services, conducting surveys or opinion polls and

organising open meetings to the public. 47% of the municipalities also reported that these forms of engagement were not sufficient to reach all different groups in the community. The main problems were encountered with minority, migrant, youth and elderly groups. Ovre Eiker, Tampere and Barcelona were the only cases that responded that the forms of engagement were sufficient; they characterised themselves as innovative and in constant renewal, and argued that participation could never reach every citizen.

There were a few cases in which the municipality reported that all citizens had a legitimate voice (Netherlands and Spain); however, it was also identified that some groups had a stronger voice than others (Finland and Spain), especially when these citizen groups were affiliated to state sponsored forms of participation. In Spanish and Dutch reports it was observed that the municipalities were aware that people with high levels of education were not the only ones interested in participating, also low-income families in marginalised areas had a high motivation to participate. Barcelona explicitly reported that its low level of voting turn-out did not reflect the level of citizen participation in local policymaking.

The municipalities reported how citizen voices took place in the decision-making process but it was not clearly reported how they balanced the opinions of professional and elected members against citizen views. 26% reported that politicians and officials were the most important voices and thus they had the final say. Within this percentage Spanish and Dutch municipalities are included, this is important to underline as despite both countries having a participatory regulation, it does not seem to incorporate the criteria in which citizen views are taken into account nor the process of explaining the decisions taken to the citizens. Six cases (Netherlands, Finland and Slovakia) reported that the extent of the citizen views incorporated in decision-making was established before citizen intervention, thus having only a supportive role.

All municipalities reported that there was still room for improvement in explaining to citizens the reason for the decisions and the ways in which citizen views were taken into account; the main problem reported were bad communication strategies. 21% of the municipalities commented that citizens understood and accepted the decisions taken by municipalities; however, 39% reported that citizens understood why decisions were taken but not necessarily accepted them (or vice versa). In none of the cases the municipalities reported the frequency nor the context in which citizen were given explanations. In the cases of the Slovak municipalities and Imatra, a positive relationship seemed to exist between citizens trusting municipalities and the extent to which decision makers understood citizen views.

The responses to the questions on how municipalities were listening, prioritising and giving feedback to citizen views reflect the potential that the tool has for identifying how policymakers can shape formal (e.g. regulations) and informal (e.g. balancing citizen views in the final stage of decision-making) institutional rules of participation. If policymakers are aiming to improve the inclusion of citizen views in the decision-making, then they will be able to identify what is going on in the listening, prioritising and feedback stages in order to understand why citizens participate (or not) in official schemes.

The extent to which the diagnosis of these questions will turn effective depends on the effort that the municipalities do in order to give a complete and clear answer. It is worth noting that 39% of the municipalities did not report how the municipality performed with regards to explaining to citizens how decisions were taken. The reasons that might explain this phenomenon can be associated with the factors explaining the quality of the answers (see page 11). Another reason could be the quality of training that politicians and officers receive about how to respond to participation. On this point, 69% of the municipalities responded that their politicians or officials had relevant training, but only Hameenlinna and Barcelona specified the subject. In the former case, training was on customer orientation rather than on participation in decision-making.

Conclusions

The CLEAR road test encountered several limitations, among them the context of the municipalities in which the tool was implemented. The quality of the answers depended very much on the time and other resources that the municipalities had access to at the moment in which the tool was implemented. The analysis of the municipalities' reports was also limited by the translation into English, as well as the lack of familiarity of the research team with the particularities of each of the municipalities. The implementation of the tool was a challenge for municipalities because of its unstandardised design, causing a challenge as well for the academic team when analysing the reports.

A few municipalities such as Vadso and Hameenlinna reported that they were not going to take into account the results of the road test at a very serious level, the main reason was because of its pilot nature. Another reason might have been because of the time pressure to which the municipalities were subject. This situation might have prompted unsystematic responses, which were not able to provide clarity or evidence.

Despite these comments the municipalities found innovative ways to fill in a questionnaire that required further research methods in order to gather information that reflected the municipalities' structure of participation. The majority of Spanish and Dutch municipalities relied on existing local and national data in order to answer a great part of the questionnaire; however, the majority of Slovak, Norwegian and Finnish municipalities were more motivated to carry out specific surveys and focus groups that could provide them with new information. This information was related to citizen views, their skills and their perception of their input into decision-making. Also, the views of certain marginalised groups were obtained, and although these views were not fully representative of migrants, voluntary groups or neighbourhood boards, the municipalities realised some of the gaps or obstacles that existed in order for citizens to participate. The purpose of

the tool in generating new data collection by the municipalities was not to create an unnecessary flurry of information, but rather to encourage a degree of introspection around participation strategies and policies that national or regional data has not been able to gather.

The main methodological contribution of the tool is the provision of an initial self-reflection with regards to listening to, and balancing, citizen views throughout decision-making, the feedback that citizen groups can have about the ways decisions were taken, and the improvement in the relations that can be built between local authorities and civil associations or citizens. By achieving an internal assessment of how the municipality is asking for and responding to citizen views, a space of action can be created for policymakers to shape formal and informal local institutional rules to enhance participation.

The tool had limitations in terms of developing a comparative analysis, and also raised questions about the inclusion of organic or spontaneous forms of citizen participation. These limitations underline the importance of framing this diagnostic tool alongside other models of external assessment, such as an indicator system, which can standardise results related to politicians' reasons for decisions taken and levels of citizens' satisfaction. Within a broader repertoire of assessment approaches, local self-diagnostic tools can contribute detailed information about participatory democratic processes that national evaluations of democracy would tend to overlook.

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Notes

¹ This paper has been a reflective exercise of the different stages through which the self-diagnostic model CLEAR has passed. Although the author was not involved in the tool's design, she became familiarised with the project during the implementation stage. The author thanks Vivien Lowndes for her comments on this paper.

² Political participative culture includes: level of achievement of decisions taken by politicians and citizens, politicians giving reasons of why (why not) decisions were taken and achieved, and participants being satisfied with the process as a whole.

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⁴ The population size of the municipalities ranges from 1,250 to over 3,167,000 inhabitants.