

Citizens evaluating local services and facilities in Southern Italy

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Organisation: Department for Public Administration and Innovation, Government of Italy

Country: Italy

Level of government: Regional/State government

Sector: General public services

Type: Partnerships, Public Service

Launched in: 2009

Overall development time: 1 year(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

This innovative project is the result of partnership working between the Department for Public Administration and Innovation and the nonprofit organisation Cittadinanzattiva which promotes citizen and consumer rights in Italy. In 2006 both organisations signed a protocol to promote new citizen participation initiatives related to service quality.

This partnership gave rise to a pilot project which gives citizens the opportunity to take an active role in the evaluation of public service quality – not just through citizen surveys but as civic evaluators who provide information about the state of public services and infrastructure to local councils and contribute to prioritising improvements.

Why the innovation was developed

- Cittadinanzattiva has been gathering experiences with civic evaluations in hospitals since 2001. The first pilot project between the Department for Public Administration and Cittadinanzattiva in 2008 built on these experiences, focusing on schools and front offices of local services.
 - A new pilot launched in November 2009 included a much wider range of public services and a more comprehensive assessment methodology.
 - In particular, it focused on issues of the maintenance of green space and roads, street lighting, public transport, garbage collection, cultural and social events.
 - This project has been also influenced by recent national legislation guaranteeing citizens and civic associations an active role in the monitoring of public services through collaborative dialogue.
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Objectives

Enhance public trust, Enhance transparency, Improve effectiveness, Improve service quality, Improve user satisfaction, Increase citizen engagement

- The objective of this initiative is to improve the quality of public services and citizen engagement by involving citizens and associations in the evaluation of service quality, using the citizen's point of view as a starting point for the prioritisation of service improvements.
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Main beneficiaries

Civil Society, General population, Government bodies

- Citizens
- Public administration

Results

Effectiveness

- With regard to the general effectiveness of the initiative, the local authorities, although underlining the shortage of time and resources for managing such activities, declared their continued interest in the project and their willingness to give feedback to citizens and to implement concrete service improvements arising from the monitoring exercises.
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Service quality

Responsiveness:

- Both citizens and local authorities considered the contribution of civic associations as helpful to the management of the local activities during the experimentation.
 - The public managers appreciated the participation of citizens not only as an opportunity of learning new way of managing public services but, moreover, as a way of developing social capital and a feeling of civic belonging.
 - Citizens also viewed positively the involvement of local authorities, particularly their provision of data already at their disposal, as well as their help in resolving some critical problems during the experiment.
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Other improvements

- Citizens, too, saw the need to move from the evaluation phase to the implementation of improvements. They expected feed-back once the local report had been presented to the local authority.
- They also recognised that the participation in this project had increased their “civic sense” and their awareness of being able to make a concrete contribution to the improvement of their urban space.
- They also suggested that the project had generated a general positive effect on other citizens who, even though they hadn't directly taken part in it, had known about it. Their interest in and curiosity about the project, supported by local media, were seen as providing a good opportunity for the further development of the initiative and for helping more citizens to become “active citizens”.

Development

Design

The project was coordinated by the Department for Public Administration and Innovation which chaired the working group consisting of representatives of the local municipalities, citizens and civic association Cittadinanzattiva and the Foundation Fondaca which specializes in research on public participation.

Testing

- In the first phase of the project, started in November 2009, a focus group at national level discussed the elements, dimensions and indicators of urban quality.
 - The focus group consisted of public managers, citizens, members of citizen associations and technical and professional experts who were considered to be "issue experts".
 - As a next step, on the basis of the focus group outputs, the working group defined one or several quality dimensions for each of these issues (for example, for the issue public safety the dimensions are: physical safety of people and safety of public infrastructure). Last but not least, the quality indicators were defined in order to operationalise the quality dimensions.
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Implementation

Tools used:

- The working group then worked with representatives of Cittadinanzattiva to prepare the tools for the civic evaluation, including an operational manual and monitoring grids. Finally, in January 2010 the civic evaluation started with a kick-off seminar in Rome. The participants included public managers from 14 local authorities of the four southern regions of Italy who volunteered for the project, as well as local citizen representatives of Cittadinanzattiva.
- Now the challenge was to get citizens engaged. The local authorities and the local representatives of Cittadinanzattiva marketed the project through a declaration of intent which was widely promoted through all of their communication channels.
- In each of the four regions interested citizens were then invited to a joint one-day seminar with representatives of the Department, the local council and Cittadinanzattiva.
- After the training, the citizens involved, together with the local representatives of Cittadinanzattiva, decided collectively that those zones should be monitored, which were seen as particularly significant for the city (for example because they contained important public buildings, a train station and so on).
- The citizen monitoring then started, either involving the observation of specific aspects of public services or infrastructure or simply requesting public agencies to provide data which they already collected, e.g. on tangible aspects of quality.
- Once the participating citizens had filled out the monitoring grid (which had to be done within two months), they met together to agree their overall assessment of the quality of the public services and infrastructure and to prioritise improvement actions - this was all included in a report shared with the local administration.
- Of course, feeding back the results from the citizen evaluators is particularly important through websites and internet portals, social media, and public presentations.

Resources used:

- The costs of this pilot project mainly consists of costs of staff in the working group and the travel payments to participants in the training seminars at national and regional levels. The members of the national focus group which defined the quality dimensions and indicators received no fee, nor the citizens and representatives of the civic associations participating in the monitoring at local level.
- The local authorities which took part in the project did not receive any funding for the project. The time which volunteers invested in the project have been estimated as:
- 2,5 days in total for training, including the seminar at national level, the training at regional level and a half-day meeting at local level to organise the team work and to divide up the geographic area for the monitoring;
- The collection of data was undertaken by means 4 "public walks" of a duration of 2-3 hours each;
- The analysis of data required another meeting of about two hours to agree on scores and 2-3 half-days to complete the codebook and the drafting of the report; the presentation of results typically involved a press conference or a public meeting with the involved citizens.

Lessons Learned

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- With the current financial crisis, the local authorities have not been able to deal with all the weaknesses identified by the citizen evaluators – they can't "repair all the potholes" as one citizen demanded.
 - One way forward could be to agree from the outset a charter between the local authority and the citizen evaluators, specifying the obligations of both parties. Most importantly, the citizens involved expect feedback from the local authority on what kind of actions will be taken as a result of the evaluation.
 - For the local authorities involved, an important issue is how to increase the number of citizens who involved in such evaluations. At the evaluation seminar it was suggested that a greater diversity of communication channels, including the internet, could be one way forward.
 - Small incentives such as vouchers were also discussed, to get more disadvantaged citizens on board, or the use of a small grant scheme to incentivise citizens to make suggestions for improvements and to commit to helping the local council to implement the suggestions by contributing some of their time, expertise and other resources.
 - Another learning point was how to make the results of the evaluation sustainable and effective. In particular, representatives of local councils thought that it would be valuable to incorporate the evaluation in the strategic planning process of the local council, so that the citizens' evaluation could help the council to determine strategic priorities.
 - Last but not least, all stakeholders agreed that the methodology could be used to evaluate other public services at neighbourhood level, provided that the right dimensions and indicators of quality are jointly defined.
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Other information

More information can be found at: <http://qualitapa.gov.it/customer-satisfaction-management/ascolto-e-partecipazione-dellutenza/il-metodo-della-valutazione-civica/>.

*The program described in this innovation case study has been a pilot and is no longer in operation.