

Improving local democracy through ELoGE: Time's good governance journey in Norway

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Organisation: Time, Norway

Country: Norway

Level of government: Local government

Sector: General public services

Type: Methods, Public Service

Launched in: 2008

Overall development time: 1 year(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

So what is the state of local democracy in Norway? At first sight, an average national voter turnout of 60% at the last local government elections in 2011 seems to suggest that Norwegian municipalities are still doing well, at least compared to most other OECD countries (and certainly compared to the UK). However, for the municipality Time (18,000 inhabitants) in the beautiful Stavanger Region on the South-West coast of Norway, a local voter turnout of 67.4% was not seen as good enough. Therefore, the local council decided to pilot the European Label of Governance Excellence (ELoGE) of the Council of Europe to get a full picture of the state of local democracy in the municipality.

Why the innovation was developed

- ELoGE stands for the European Label of Governance Excellence, an initiative of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg to promote the 'Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance'.
 - The tool was launched in 2008 to provide the 48 Member States of the Council of Europe with an assessment framework to promote good governance in local government. ELoGE is based on a common vision of good governance which is expressed in 12 good governance principles agreed by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.
 - These principles are: Fair conduct of elections, representation and participation, Responsiveness, Efficiency and effectiveness, Openness and transparency, Rule of law, Ethical conduct, Competence and capacity, Innovation and openness to change, Sustainability and long-term orientation, Sound financial management, Human rights, cultural diversity and social cohesion, Accountability.
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Objectives

Develop staff capacity, Enhance public trust, Enhance transparency, Improve user satisfaction, Increase citizen engagement

- Based on these 12 principles, the Centre for Local Democracy of the Council of Europe developed three sets of questionnaires to assess the state of good governance from the perspective of three stakeholders, including:
 - Local officers; Citizens; Local councillors; Local authorities wishing to obtain ELoGE certification have a site visit by external evaluators to verify the results provided by a self-assessment done by the local authority. If the scoring of the external assessment meets a predefined minimum standard for each of the 12 good governance principles, the ELoGE certificate is awarded.
 - For Time municipality the key objective of piloting ELoGE was to gain new insights from working with such a comprehensive tool. At the same time, gaining the external certification was seen as important in motivating everybody involved to invest time, resources and commitment in delivering the resulting improvement action plans.
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Main beneficiaries

Civil Society, General population, Government bodies, Government staff

- Residents of the Time municipality in Norway

Results

User satisfaction

- Two key questions in the 2010 and 2014 citizen survey reveal the progress made since the first action plan:
- Please indicate to which extent you agree with the statement: "Time Municipality provides me with good opportunities to have influence on local decisions." Survey 2010 - good (3-4 points): 47.6%, bad (1-2 points): 44.7%, don't know: 7.7%. Survey 2014 - good (3-4 points): 52.7%, bad (1-2 points): 36.7%, don't know: 10.7%.
- Please indicate to which extent you agree with this statement: "I am well informed by Time municipality about the issues that are discussed in local politics." Survey 2010 - good (3-4 points): 63.6%, bad (1-2 points): 31.3, don't know: 5%, Survey 2014 - good (3-4): 70%, bad (1-2 points): 26.7%, don't know: 3.3%.

Development

Design

The involvement of Time municipality with the Good Governance Strategy of the Council of Europe was triggered by a national pilot project. Having a strong reputation as an innovative local authority, Time was invited to participate in the first Norwegian Local Democracy Survey in 2010, designed by the Norwegian Local Government Association based on the 12 ELoGE principles, with the aim of providing Norwegian local authorities with a tool to assess the quality of local democracy. Interestingly, the tool included a survey targeted at citizens and a slightly adapted survey targeted at elected members of the municipal council.

Implementation

Tools used:

- The surveys included questions on perceptions of the state of representative and participatory democracy and how respondents saw the possibilities of influencing political issues and administrative decisions.
- For example, one key question was: “Are you satisfied with the opportunities to affect municipal decisions that are important to you?” Other questions focused on issues of accountability, transparency and efficiency of public services.

Resources used:

- Given that the Norwegian Local Government Association designed and carried out the citizen surveys in 2010 and 2014, Time municipality had no direct costs deriving from ELoGE.
 - Of course, the assessment process involved the co-ordination of meetings and report writing by a local officer but this did not exceed more than four days in each assessment. Obviously, ELoGE also requires elected members of the local council to engage in additional meetings. In Time this involved, in addition, a meeting with citizens after the first survey. However, our councillors would say that this was time well spent.
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Diffusion

- Following an invitation from the Council of Europe, Time council also presented its action plan at an international conference in Strasbourg in June 2013.
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Challenges and solutions

- The analysis revealed many strengths in local governance – for example, most respondents agreed with the statement “In Time municipality, elected members of the local council take the views of local residents into account”. However, the citizen survey also showed the need to strengthen communication between the municipality and citizens and to improve social cohesion in the local area.
- The mayor of Time wished to respond to this challenge and therefore welcomed the invitation of the Norwegian Local Government Association to pilot the European Label of Governance Excellence in 2011, supported by the Norwegian Local Government Association.
- Given that the ELoGE pilot had to be carried out within a short time period, the assessment had to be organised in a lean approach. Time council set up an assessment team led by the mayor, which included two officers and two local councillors. The team members were provided with evidence by local officers to assess each of 12 good governance principles of ELoGE thoroughly. The assessment team also considered the results of the recent citizen survey. For each of the 12 ELoGE themes, roundtable discussions were organized in the team, to discuss the assessments and agree on improvement actions.

Lessons Learned

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- First of all, using ELoGE as a tool has engaged all key stakeholders in Time municipality – staff, local councillors and citizens – in new conversations. Given that this was an area where improvement was needed in Time municipality, ELoGE has already helped.
- The tool has also helped to put local democracy and ‘soft’ governance issues on the agenda of senior managers, front-line staff and local councillors and made public officers and local councillors agree on an action plan, which is also positive.
- Very importantly, ELoGE made Time Municipality aware of key strengths and achievements and the external certification has shown to staff that they have reason to be proud of Time municipality. At the same time, the action plan has generated expectations inside and outside the municipality to become even better. Democracy never stands still – and this also applies to Time municipality.
- As the Mayor of the local authority of Time, Reinert Kverneland, perceives the benefits of ELoGE: “This tool has helped us to define an action plan for improving local governance and to increase transparency and public participation in Time.

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