

Falun on the road to becoming a 'Democracy City' in Sweden

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Organisation: Falun Electoral Commission and Democracy Council

Country:

Level of government: Local government

Sector: General public services

Type: Organisational Design, Public Service

Launched in: 2012

Overall development time: 3 year(s)

Link to the innovation's website

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Description

Unless you're interested in the history of mining or like winter sports, you may never have heard of Falun (about 56,000 inhabitants). It is situated in the heart of Sweden, around the "Stora Kopparberg", the "Big Copper Mountain" which once produced two-thirds of all the copper used in Europe and now is a UNESCO heritage site.

In 2015, Falun will host the 50th Nordic World Ski Championships. While upgrading facilities for this major event, the local council also started to modernise its 'infrastructure' for citizen participation and local democracy. The mayor of the city, Jonny Gahnshag, believes that in the "future we don't just need great transport, sport and leisure facilities but also active citizens and an open administration."

Supported by a huge majority of the local council, the Fullmäktige, Falun has launched an action plan to become a 'Democracy City' in which "every voice is heard" at all times.

Why the innovation was developed

- A successful bid to host the 2015 Nordic Ski Championship made local people aware of the democratic limitations of a purely party-based and business-controlled model of local politics. While people tended to be positive about hosting the global sports event, most Falun citizens have felt excluded from the decision-making process which leads up to the 50th World Championship in February 2015.
 - Another catalyst was the emergence of new participation opportunities at Swedish and European levels: The new Swedish constitution which came into force on 1 January 2011 provides Swedish citizens with the right to launch an initiative at local or provincial government level, provided that 10% of voters sign the citizen initiative. The proposal may refer to any issue which is within the area of responsibility of local or regional councils. If sufficient signatures are collected within six months, the council must arrange a popular vote on the specific proposal. Since the introduction of this new constitutional law, several dozen successful local and regional initiatives have been conducted, including issues like "congestion charging" in Gothenburg and reforms to the health care system in the province of Västerbotten.
 - The European Citizens' Initiative at the EU level, launched in April 2012, provides EU citizens with the right to submit a proposal to the EU Commission, which then has to respond. The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) has also opened up the possibility of collecting signatures electronically and transnationally. In the first year of its operation, the ECI has attracted a lot of interest and attention. In February 2013 the first of the more than 20 registered initiatives reached the "magic" threshold of one million supporters: The Right to Water initiative.
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Objectives

Enhance public trust, Enhance transparency, Improve access, Improve user satisfaction, Increase citizen engagement

- "Falun Democracy City" intends to reconnect with local people. As smaller communities were merged into bigger local authorities in the middle of last century the links between political decision-makers and citizens became weak in Sweden. Instead, local party politics took over. The "Democracy City" action plan aims at reviving local democracy by empowering citizens to make their voices heard.
 - There are several reasons why local councillors and officers are ready to pass more power and influence to local people: A majority of voters have cast their votes for councillor candidates who have put citizen participation high on their political agenda and who have been supportive of the 'Democracy City' project before the recent elections.
 - Staff surveys indicate that the majority of the almost 7000 staff in Falun Council were aware that citizens are not only customers of public services but also have an active role to play in local planning and the commissioning of public services.
 - A majority of the elected councillors accept that modern representative democracy also needs elements of direct democracy and participatory governance in order to ensure that their decisions represent the interests of all citizens. In brief, there is a consensus in Falun that representative, direct and participatory democracy goes hand in hand. In 'Falun Democracy City', citizen participation is considered as the 'software' which makes the 'hardware' (in the form of representative democracy) work.
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Main beneficiaries

Civil Society, General population, Government bodies, Government staff, Young people

- Residents of Falun

Results

Other improvements

- A recent poll in Falun schools has offered an interesting insight: A survey of 13 to 18-year old pupils in local schools revealed that 80% of the young people would like to become more involved in local decision-making but only 20% knew how to do this. The objective of 'Democracy City' is to double, if not triple, the percentage of those who can say that they know about the tools and processes for influencing local decisions and how to use them. At the same time, the traditional relatively high turnouts at local, regional, national and EU related elections should be maintained. At the end of the day, the key performance indicator will be whether the question "do you feel you can make a difference in your home town?" will be answered positively or negatively.

Development

Design

In order to make use of these new opportunities and to respond to the criticism around the World Championship application process, all nine political parties represented in the local council committed themselves after the elections in autumn 2010 to making Falun "the most participatory local council in Sweden". A very ambitious objective indeed!

On the basis of the council decision of June 2011, an action plan was developed to strengthen "active citizenship." A committee of five councillors (headed by Bruno Kaufmann, the author of this case study and Chairman of the Falun Electoral Commission) is responsible for the delivery of the 'Democracy Action Plan 2015.' The other four committee members are Carl-Erik Nyström (Center Party), Anna Fält (Social Democrats), Christina Haggren (Conservative Party) and Linnéa Risinger (Green Party). The work of the committee is organised around the key elements of the new citizen participation infrastructure.

Implementation

Tools used:

- One key element of 'Democracy City Falun' is the establishment of 'Democracy Centres' in the 16 public libraries in Falun.
- During 2013 and 2014 the first 'Democracy Navigators' will start to work in Falun and inform, support and assist interested citizens about participation opportunities and help them to prepare proposals and manage projects.
- "Young Democracy" aims at involving young people under the age of 18 who are not entitled to vote yet. This implies strengthening of civic education in local schools.
- While Falun is reluctant to use Twitter or Facebook as tools of participation, it intends to develop its own 'Democracy Web' which may also allow citizens to vote online in the future. The idea behind the Falun Democracy Web is to offer as much transparency as possible to guide citizens through local decision-making processes. This includes user manuals on the right to make proposals to the local council or launch initiatives for popular votes at local level.

Resources used:

- Clearly, citizen participation requires resources. However, the financial resources required for the development of a citizen participation infrastructure are relatively small – the local council has allocated an annual budget of EUR 75 000 for co-ordinating the action plan.
- In addition, EUR 100 000 euros will be invested in the two new Democracy Navigator posts. Other key elements will have to be financed within existing budgets (e.g. education).

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

- Falun's journey towards becoming a “Democracy City” has only started. Nevertheless, a number of lessons have already been learnt:
- A broad political majority is needed to launch such a reform and make it happen. If only a slim governing majority tries to change the democratic governance process, the risk of non-implementation and reversal after an electoral defeat is obvious.
- Participation cannot solely be introduced top-down and cannot be limited to consultations or non-binding petitions. It is important that everybody understands that participation only works if it is supported by a ‘democracy infrastructure’ and understood as an essential part of a modern representative democracy.
- Participation requires a lot of patience to convince all the relevant stakeholders to implement a more participatory approach to local politics. It is important not to try to make too much happen too quickly as this is likely to lead to negative reactions.
- In order to learn from and inspire other participatory local authorities Falun wishes to develop an international ‘Democracy Network’. The council already cooperates with other “Democracy Cities” such as Stuttgart in Baden-Württemberg, Vienna and Seoul. In autumn 2013, the first “Falun Democracy Week” will take place.

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