Participatory local strategic planning: experience sharing based on a Portuguese case study

Eduarda Fernandes
Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão, Centro de Investigação em Gestão para a Sustentabilidade, Instituto Politécnico de Leiria

Ana Sargento
Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão, Centro de Investigação em Gestão para a Sustentabilidade, Instituto Politécnico de Leiria

Ana Sofia Lopes
Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão, Centro de Investigação em Gestão para a Sustentabilidade, Instituto Politécnico de Leiria

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Motivation and research purposes

Current national and international context has triggered a fast dissemination of participatory governance initiatives:

- The new wave of structural funds that has been prepared to be allocated to regions and municipalities has created a momentum for local government actors to consider new and more effective mechanisms of local governance, especially in what concerns to local strategic planning for the period 2014–2020.
- In fact, stakeholders’ engagement in planning is a mandatory requirement in order to apply to the majority of funds.

The authors of this research have been invited to participate as facilitators of the work being developed since June 2014, by a group of local stakeholders of Ansião, called “Agenda Ansião 2020”. This board was created to build, in a participatory way, the county’s Strategic Plan for 2014–2020.
This research has **two main aims**

- To provide some insights on the experience that is being carried out in this county, highlighting some specific methods that have been put in practice to ensure stakeholders’ engagement;
- To make a preliminary evaluation of the methods used, envisioned to support future improvements, also in similar initiatives being applied by others
By **participatory local governance** we mean any mechanism (more or less formal) that promotes the involvement of individual citizens and/or civic organizations (representative of the key local stakeholders) in the public policy decision-making process (Andersson & Van Laerhoven, 2007).

PG mechanisms can be applied at different phases of the policy cycle:

- Participatory planning and implementation
- Participatory monitoring
- Participatory evaluation
## Participatory local governance models

### Benefits

(Ackerman, 2004; Ansell & Gash, 2007; Landry & Angeles, 2011; Callanan, 2005)

- Increasing local government responsiveness and accountability
- Agency problem can be partially solved by decreasing information asymmetry: it improves both policy makers’ information about citizens’ preferences and citizens’ knowledge about government actors’ decisions and actions
- Giving voice to citizens in between elections
- Acknowledging citizens’ expertise on different local matters
- Creating a greater sense of compromise and engagement on citizens

### Risks

(Landry & Angeles, 2011; Bland, 2011)

- Prolonged decision-making process
- Overstated stakeholders’ expectations
- Danger of privileging some specific groups of civil society – with better means, better capacity or privileged information, making the supposedly open process to become a channel for uneven influence over local policy decisions
- Danger of becoming merely a tool for increasing promoter’s popularity
The case of Ansião
The group

Agenda Ansião 2020

- 27 members from different areas that have in common the deep knowledge of the problems of the county, as well as a significant experience and an important role in civic participation
The case of Ansião
The role of the external team

In spite of the high level of experience in the field, this stakeholders’ group lacked the technical expertise to the strategy development and to coordinate the decision-making process.

In this sense, our main contribution is to provide a framework designed to encourage and manage the participation of all members, ensuring equitable influence in the process, promoting the sharing of knowledge and the construction of new ideas.

Additionally, it is also a challenge to build consensus, departing from the diverse opinions, into a unique view for the Ansião development strategy.
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Characterization of participatory format used

6 work sessions, from June 2014 until October 2015 (final report)
Average duration of workshops: 2 hours
Frequency of meetings: quarterly
Number of participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>Fifth</td>
<td>19</td>
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The case of Ansião
Practices applied for stakeholders’ engagement

1. Diagnostic
   • presentation of quantitative indicators and receiving participants’ concerns

2. Construction of the vision for the county (and strategic goals)
   • group dynamics

3. Identification of the specific goals and main challenges
   • problem tree analysis

4. Identification of activities to achieve the specific goals
   • rotating idea building

5. Indicators, targets and promoters for the proposed activities
   • presentation, discussion and validation
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Construction of the vision for the county (and strategic goals): Session 2

Participants were divided in 3 thematic groups (each with seven, on average), according to the sector/areas they represented and stated concerns (session 1);

Written individual contributions were asked (for vision and two strategic goals) and then posted in the wall for visualisation by all members

3 proposals were selected through voting; posterior discussion, facilitated by IPL team member, allowed building consensus about the vision for the county.

Finally, the 3 groups were gathered in the same room and the 3 visions shared. Participants were given the opportunity to comment each other’s Vision / Strategic goals
The case of Ansião
Construction of the vision for the county (and strategic goals): Session 2

Group 1

Group 2

Group 3
The case of Ansião
Identification of the specific goals and main challenges: Session 3

3 groups carried on working on separated rooms

Brainstorming to identification of the problems / challenges most important for strategic vision’s achievement

Debate to choose 2 or 3 critical problems

Problem–Tree–Analysis (PTA), to identify main causes and consequences

Stakeholders engagement in problems identification (complementary to quantitative diagnostic) Establishment of cause–effects relationships
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Identification of the specific goals and main challenges: Session 3
The case of Ansião

Identification of activities to achieve the specific goals for the county: Session 4

Participants were asked to think about the possible activities to achieve the specific goals identified in the previous session using a methodology of “rotating” ideas building.

Firstly, each group received one of the nine worksheets with the specific goal, so that a set of activities could be suggested.

Afterwards, each worksheet was passed on to the remaining groups, in order to be commented.

The main advantage was allowing for all group members to contribute and validate each others’ ideas.
The group was always conducted by one or more IPL team member, that started giving a brief explanation of the goal and main concepts involved, in order to surpass one of the main difficulties: participants’ misunderstanding of concepts involved.

The division in smaller groups (in some sessions) allowed for higher engagement of all elements of the group and to overcome the difficulty in reaching consensus.

In between sessions, all contributions were analysed, summarized and organized by IPL team.

A summary report of each session was produced and sent to the initiative promoter to be forwarded to all the group members.
The case of ANSIÃO
Preliminary evaluation results

- Total of 26 questions
- Using a 5 points Likert scale (agreement with statements)
- 3 dimensions
  - Group characterization
  - Group operation
  - Results
The case of Ansião
Preliminary evaluation results

There were no “1” cases

The average given to each question was always higher than 3.5

Consensual answers (low standard deviation)

Those who participated in a higher number of sessions also gave a higher value concerning the “Results” dimension and are also those who state having a higher propensity for public engagement
The case of Ansião
Preliminary evaluation results

Most positive aspects (average > 4; standard deviation below its average value)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group characterization</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group composition (relationship with the remaining members, relevant skills of the other for civic participation, group representativeness); 3 questions; average 4,30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stated motivation: “My participation in the group was mainly driven by the contribution I can give to the development of Ansião” = average 4,22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self evaluation of skills: “Experience in previous civic intervention has been important for my contribution in the group” = average 4,11</td>
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### The case of Ansião
Preliminary evaluation results

<table>
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<th>Most positive aspects (average &gt;4; standard deviation below its average value)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Group operation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>External facilitator team</strong>: “The fact of the sessions monitoring being conducted by an external and independent team was positive” = average 4,39</td>
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<tr>
<td>• <strong>Methods</strong>: “The methods used allow for all group members participation” = average 4,22</td>
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<td>• <strong>Effort required</strong>: “The work that was asked me in each session was appropriate to the aims” = average 4,11</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Results</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>Replicability of this practice</strong> (availability to participate again; practice to be adopted in other municipalities): 2 questions; average 4,17</td>
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The case of Ansião
Preliminary conclusions and recommended improvements

Overall, it has been recognized as a positive initiative

• All stages of the Strategic Plan were accomplished, with the active participation of members
• The Activity Plan is well defined (activities, targets and promoters)
• Positive evaluation (questionnaires)

Recommended improvements

• Ensuring control over the communication flows with members established between meetings; not always in time, weakening feedback from participants
• At the beginning of the process, explain the importance of participants’ stability (the same person per institution in all sessions)
• More suggestions?...
Thank you for your attention!

eduarda.fernandes@ipleiria.pt, ana.sargento@ipleiria.pt, analopes@ipleiria.pt