



Public Participation and Civic Engagement in European Rural Areas Lifelong Learning in practice



The main aim of this article is to summarize and hand over our experience with specific approach of the adult education coming out from implementation of the project “Becoming a Change Agent for Rural Citizenship – A Qualification Programme for Rural Areas in Europe” (QuaPro).

The EU funded project is an initiative by eight organizations to develop a new educational approach towards tackling contemporary challenges in rural areas that are common in many European countries. It addresses active citizens of rural areas, public servants and local politicians, inviting them to jointly participate in an innovative training course on rural citizenship that is developed by the project partners and tested in different European settings (Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Germany).

The training course is intended for individuals who may act as multipliers in their respective spheres because they have acquired additional knowledge, clarity of their roles in community development and competencies in designing processes. As a result participants are enabled to play a more active role in society. The politicians are more competent in dealing with citizen participation and staff of public administration acquired skills in management, communication and process steering.

1. How did we create our specific educational curricula

In order to assess specific needs and perceptions on citizen participation and civic engagement and to get a more systematic overview of the country-specific situation, a needs analysis was conducted in Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Germany. We focused on representatives of the three target groups in every country.

The methodology consisted of desk research as well as interviews and focus group discussions with representatives of the target groups (political decision-makers, civil servants and citizens of rural areas). The task was to learn both about their perceptions and views as regards citizen participation and civic engagement. Representatives of the target groups were queried on chances and limitations as well as their opinions, needs and preferences concerning an educational offer on active rural citizenship.

The results of the need analysis fed into a [common course concept](#). The concept itself represents a “common umbrella” for the courses that were planned according to country-specific needs. Furthermore the common concept shall serve to support other educational institutions to understand the project partners’ approach. With the help of this document it shall be possible for training providers from other European rural areas to assess the usability of the three different approaches and curricula.



Based on the common course concept we developed [specific national curricula](#) for the three core countries. The curricula were tested in the rural areas of Broumov region (Czech Republic), Baden-Württemberg (Germany) and three specific mountain regions of Bulgaria.

Thanks to the [joint evaluation](#) of the education facilitated by independent evaluator, we were able to assess real education impact of our pilot testing and made necessary adaptations to the final course curricula and training materials.

2. Our approach to adult learning

Our common educational concept stated three main educational objectives for the course itself in order to enable to the participants gain deeper knowledge of relevant changes in society and the resulting challenges which small rural communities are set to face. In particular, the participants were supposed to:

- Learn more about modern role-models of local administration in civil society.
- Be more capable of managing complex tasks in multi-actor environments.
- Be more aware of each other's roles, responsibilities and expectations.

Besides the specific educational objectives the course concept also took specific approaches to adult education. In short we can describe these as:

- **No ready-made recipes** of how communities should proceed in order to involve its citizens in issues of public concern.
- **Adult learners have expertise**, wealth of own experience and skills on which they can draw.
- **Direct benefits for the solution of local issues** coming from learning "to be" (in a role/a position) and learning "to act" in a social and political environment rather than focus on theoretical learning "to know".
- **Mutual learning opportunities** for each target group – political decision-makers, members of public administration and citizens

3. How did we implement the common approach in country specific settings?

Every partner used slightly different methods in its specific national curriculum. The main difference reflects different educational needs but also different areas and specifics of the group of participants.

3.1. Course in Germany, Baden-Württemberg

Here the pilot test consisted of two and a half days of theoretic seminar and a day of practice and peer coaching. The participants were recruited from all around the country.

The frame of the course is based on a typical process of "cycle for local action", where are many specific concerns as an occasion for dialogue and ends to make decisions and to perpetuate processes.



Picture 1 - moment from the teaching session during the German course



The course begins by raising awareness of the variety of attitudes towards civic engagement and public participation and the opportunities and risks which they present from the perspective of members of the public, civil servants and politicians on such undertakings. Participants learn to assess the needs of the various stakeholders involved and reflect on the specific situations of small municipalities in the planning and implementation of participation processes.

The seminar continues with a focus on the typical sequence from the identification of a need and the project development process to the consolidation of a successful partnership. This phase covers a wide range of background information and includes examples, methods and the necessary skills-set needed to plan and conduct participative processes. The planning of actual projects and the application of a method drawn from peer coaching.

An integrated approach to civic engagement and public participation enables a focus on the synergies and inter-relationships inherent to both forms of action. The methods and practical examples are selected for their suitability to both fields. By working in groups, the stakeholders are challenged to experience a change of perspective; learning from other participants in a cooperative fashion.

3.2. Course in Broumov, Czech Republic

Agora Central Europe prepared the course as a "future village game". The main difference from the two pilot courses in Bulgaria and in Baden-Württemberg was in cooperation with the small Local action group Broumovsko+.

Beside the "collaborative approach" described in our Common concept the Czech course combines different educational approaches. Overall we can call our concept as project based learning (see also group combined method) and problem teaching. Participants gain their knowledge, skills and experiences during preparation and implementation of their own projects focused on improving the living conditions in the given region.

The course is tailored primarily for the population of a specific region of one or more local action groups (LAG). The promotion and recruitment of participants has to be adjusted to create several workgroups, and representatives of all the hitherto mentioned groups will be found in each group. The optimum should give rise to 4-5 workgroups (max 5 people each), which will be divided according to affiliation to particular municipalities or will work on a particular topic meaningful for the whole region.

The course itself consisted of three parts. A two-day introduction part with theoretical lectures takes place in the very beginning. Besides the lectures also practical exercise of methods derived from community organizing methodology helped to the participants to plan their own participatory projects.

During the following "test phase" the participants further worked out their projects in their communities. They received advisory and mentoring from Agora trainers. Their task was to attract the broader community and test their ideas among the three target groups.



Picture 2 Gazebo in school garden as community center - one of the winning ideas in future village game - opening ceremony.



The third phase was the final closing seminar, in which participants presented their projects. The three best have been selected. To support its implementation the small project funding granting scheme. The resources came from of the region. Participants with the other projects beside the three supported got practical advices how to improve their proposals and where to raise funds for its implementation.

3.3.Course in Bulgaria

The total duration of the training course in Bulgaria was four days (32 hours), divided into two modules of two days each. The content mainly concerned civic participation, partnership and good governance at local level: theory, practice, exchange of experience, and case studies. Interactive teaching methods, practical tasks, and best practices were the main tools used. In addition to lectures and reflections through small group work, there were two key elements, which the Bulgarian pilot course differed from those of the other two partners.

First, the twelve principles of good governance formed the content frame. The principles were discussed in the first part of the seminar. In the time between the two modules the participants received "homework" to investigate its own municipality in terms of compliance with one of the principles. In the second part of the course participants reported back and formulated common recommendations towards authorities.



Picture 3 - Participants in the Bulgarian test course

Mixed "feed-back" teams were formed to assess group-work results. Their task was to give feedback about the presentations of the working groups to fellow participants. This methodological approach was enjoyed and praised by participants as it also contributed much to the reduction of prejudices among the three target groups, citizenship, politics and administration.

4. Did we reach our educational goals?

We wanted to measure the success of the learning process and to prove that mutual learning of the three actor groups yields benefits especially in rural areas. Therefore an integral part of the project was a common evaluation of the test courses, which were quite different and applied country-specific approaches.

One of the project aims is to develop a common European concept, therefore a common methodology for the evaluation of all three test courses, was used ensuring comparability of the results. This is a basis for propositions on the transferability of the course concept to different national contexts. The evaluation was undertaken by the partner ASI from Bulgaria.

The evaluation was conducted in two stages using questionnaires. The first one measured the expectations of participants prior the courses and the second evaluated the results and whether expectations were met after the courses. Positive impact of the courses was defined in terms of an increase in knowledge and a change in perspectives.



4.1. Level of interest and increase of the level of knowledge

In general in all three countries the level of interest was high starting with Germany, Bulgaria and then Czech Republic. After the course the level of knowledge increased most strongly in Bulgaria, then Germany and Czech Republic. In some cases in Germany and Czech Republic the level of knowledge gained was lower than the initial interest.

4.2. Skills and competences before and after the course

It was measured for example whether participants put forth their own knowledge and experience, or better understood the chances and risks of participation, the roles of others, or how to motivate citizens to take part in planning processes or engage in civic activities. In most cases participants in Germany and Bulgaria increased their skills and competences, while in Czech Republic the results were less positive. It is interesting to mention that in general the interests in increasing competences as well as the learning outcomes were higher compared to the interest in knowledge and the knowledge increase.

4.3. Applied teaching methods

This part was focused on the teaching methods, the quality of the content materials and the organization itself. Most of the participants were very positive about the mixture of participants, the role plays, the content, and the practical examples. In general participants would like even more practical examples and tasks than presentations, and a bit more time to enjoy meeting other participants outside the working sessions.

5. How to implement the course in your own environment?

We want to promote higher level of participation in the rural area and higher quality of education in this way. We believe it will contribute to the improving of living condition in rural areas and quality of life of the rural inhabitants. For possible adoption of our approach and specific curricula visit web page of the project www.quapro.eu. Here you can find detailed information on common concept as well as the description of the three specific curricula of the course. These materials are free to use.

Trainers of the organizations dealing with the topic and adult education may find good illustration for their own work in the materials presented. The curricula could be used with respect to local and/or national contexts.