

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND PUBLIC COMMUNICATION AS DEVELOPMENT FACTOR OF MUNICIPALITY



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INTRODUCTION

The role of local government as municipality development factor is an actuality in policy documents from local to European level. European Commission highlights capacity of local governments to act as coordinators or facilitators of the smart territory development (European Commission Report S3 Policy Brief Series No. 04/2014). The aim of research is to analyse local governments public communication in Skrunda municipality and to develop recommendations for improvements in communication.

METHODS

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been used: a questionnaire and interviews with municipality representatives. Survey covered 300 residents of the town of Skrunda, Skrunda district, Skrunda civil parish, Ranka parish, Nīkrāce parish and Rudbārži parish (There are 4 civil parishes and 1 town in Skrunda district; it is located 147 km from the capital city Rīga; total number of residents in 2014 was 5,582).

RESEARCH RESULTS

The study aimed to clarify whether respondents have enough information about the work of municipality. The majority of respondents (150) believe that there is enough information, but surprisingly high is the number of respondents that believe that there is lack of information (130).

Respondents' answers show that outer communication in municipalities is seen as essential since residents want to be informed about current issues, plans, goals of their municipality, and 36% of respondents believe that it is the main thing residents expect of their municipality; in addition to that, 33% of respondents expect help, 22% - financial support, but 5% of respondents do not expect anything.

Only 47% of respondents that have sought information are satisfied with the attitude of municipal workers; 20% are dissatisfied, but 33% of respondents have never sought any type of information.

The government of Skrunda district uses various channels of external communication to inform their residents, and all these channels successfully fulfil their role. Following channels are used: direct communication with municipal workers, their website www.skrundasnovads.lv, local TV station "TV Skrunda", "Skrunda district newsletter", regional newspaper "Kurzemnieks", 'word of mouth' from other residents etc. 37% of all respondents obtain information through district website, 22% - district newsletter, 16% - regional newspaper, 11% - local TV, 7% - from other residents and only 6% - directly from municipal officials and workers.

One of the most important questions of the survey was whether municipality provides sufficient information to its residents: 54% respondents believe the amount of information to be deficient, but 46% - sufficient. The study results indicate some municipal territories where respondents' dissatisfaction with amounts of information is greater (in the centre, respondents have access to more information comparing to outskirts). Study compiled detailed data of the areas which are more interesting to respondents. According to the answers, municipality does not provide enough information about its activities in general; this point was emphasized in 26% of answers (148 respondents). Deficit of information was stressed by respondents that do not live in the district centre

CONCLUSIONS

Skrunda district municipality uses various channels of external communication to inform its residents. Public relations specialist of Skrunda district municipality is responsible for external communications and a special visitor center specialist answers residents' questions. Until now Skrunda local government has never organized population survey to learn residents' opinion on the quality of communication between municipality and residents.

Data obtained during the survey indicates that:

1. Surveyed residents use all **external municipal communication channels** (most popular – website, least popular – direct communication). Respondents believe that they do not have enough information about overall functioning of municipality: municipality does not provide enough of this type of information. Residents have turned to the municipality with complaints in the area of communication.
2. **Direct communication** of Skrunda district municipality with residents is rated as unsatisfactory; receptiveness to invitations to different public consultations is therefore low.
3. On some issues opinion of Skrunda town residents differ from rural respondents. Respondents from Skrunda town are more satisfied with the amount of information; they are more responsive and willing to cooperate with municipality.

Recommendations:

1. Skrunda district municipality should improve their communication with residents, especially direct communication, organizing monthly meetings with residents.
2. Public relations specialist should improve and supplement information in the website about municipal activities, culture, sports and recreational events, as well as information about social assistance and services, emphasizing the importance of participation in public consultations.