Complaint Choir

A Complaint Choir is a participatory format in which people collect complaints, frustrations, and everyday annoyances from their daily lives. These are then transformed into song lyrics and performed publicly by a choir.
The method does not aim to solve complaints directly. Instead, it makes personal experiences visible, reveals shared concerns, and encourages public discussion of social issues through creativity and humour. By presenting complaints artistically, the format offers an accessible way to address topics that can be difficult to discuss in more traditional participation processes.

Participation Depth	Inform
Goals	Understanding & Gathering Perspectives
Format	Analogue
Duration	1 - 3 Hours, 1 Day
Target Group	Directly Affected, Interested Public, Hard-to-Reach Groups, Organised Actors
Group Size	Small Group up to 15, Medium Group up to 30
Characteristics	Playful, Creative

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The Complaint Choir makes everyday experiences, problems, and frustrations visible while creating a shared space for dialogue and reflection. By transforming individual complaints into a collective musical performance, personal experiences become a shared expression that attracts attention and stimulates discussion.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Define the Theme and Framework

Decide whether complaints will be collected openly or focus on a specific topic.

Possible themes include:

- mobility
- public space
- housing and neighbourhoods
- schools
- public administration
- climate adaptation

An open approach often results in a wider range of topics.

2. Recruit Participants
A Complaint Choir benefits from a diversity of perspectives. Invitations should therefore reach a broad audience.

Suitable participants include:

- neighbourhood groups
- youth groups
- community organisations
- senior groups
- local initiatives
- interested individuals

No musical experience is required.

3. Organise the Venue and Working Sessions
Choose a location where participants can work together comfortably.

Allow sufficient time for:

- collecting ideas
- writing lyrics
- rehearsals
- the public performance

Execution

1. Collect Complaints
Begin by gathering participants' complaints and frustrations.

Possible guiding questions include:

- What frustrates you in everyday life?
- What does not work well in your neighbourhood?
- Which problems occur repeatedly?
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What should urgently be improved?

All contributions should be documented visibly, for example on sticky notes or flipcharts.

At this stage, contributions should not be discussed or evaluated.

2. Cluster and Select Topics
Group similar complaints together.

This often reveals recurring themes and shared experiences.

The group then decides collectively which complaints will become part of the choir's performance.

3. Develop the Lyrics
Create a shared song based on the collected statements.

Original quotations may be used directly or adapted for rhythm and flow.

The goal is not to produce a perfect song but to create an authentic and recognisable expression of the group's experiences.

Humour, exaggeration, and irony are welcome.

4. Prepare the Music and Performance
Transform the lyrics into a musical performance.

Professional musicians can support the process, but they are not essential.

The group rehearses together, including:

- rhythm
- melody
- performance sequence
- stage presentation

5. Public Performance
The performance is the central element of the method.

Suitable locations include:

- public squares

- neighbourhood festivals
- cultural events
- participation events
- public institutions

The performance brings the collected concerns into the public sphere and encourages conversations with visitors.

6. Encourage Dialogue
After the performance, create opportunities for discussion.

Helpful questions include:

- Which topics resonated most strongly?
- What common experiences became visible?
- Which issues should be explored further?

Evaluation

1. Document the Process
Record the collected complaints, song lyrics, and key discussions.

Possible formats include:

- photo documentation
- video recordings
- brochures
- websites
- exhibitions

2. Analyse the Themes
Review the collected complaints to identify:

- recurring patterns
- frequently mentioned problems
- key concerns

3. Share the Results
Present the findings to relevant stakeholders, for example:

- public administration
- local politicians
- neighbourhood management
- project teams

This helps ensure that the issues highlighted through the performance contribute to future planning and participation processes.

4. Provide Feedback to Participants
Keep choir members informed about how their concerns are being addressed.

Regular updates on progress demonstrate that participants have been heard and strengthen trust and willingness to participate in future projects.

Source: Bujdosó, A. (Ed.) (2019): *Social Design Cookbook: Recipes for Social Cooperation*. Budapest: Kitchen Budapest.

WHEN USEFUL?

- public moods, concerns, or frustrations should be made visible.
- engaging people who rarely participate in traditional participation formats.
- a creative approach to a topic is desired.
- strengthening community and dialogue.
- collecting everyday experiences.
- raising awareness of a specific issue.

WHEN NOT USEFUL?

- concrete measures or solutions need to be developed.
- detailed technical information is required.
- only objective or factual feedback should be collected.
- there is little interest in creative or artistic formats.

TIPS

- Collect complaints without judging or evaluating them.
- Humour can make difficult topics easier to address.
- Musical quality is less important than authentic expression.
- Encourage a wide range of perspectives.
- A public performance increases the visibility of the collected issues.
- Explain early on how the results will be used after the event.
- Present the performance as a creative expression of shared experiences rather than simply a platform for complaints.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- concrete decisions or action plans need to be developed.
- strong personal conflicts exist between participants.
- confidential or sensitive topics are involved.
- representative participation is required.
- participants are unwilling to engage in creative or performative activities.

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