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Civilizing the public participation practice in post-transition countries

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Civilizing the public participation practice in post-transition countries

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Abstract. The phenomenon of public participation is not so new to both planning theory and practice. In fact, involving local community in the decision-making process regarding the local urban development directions is widely discussed and a number of various forms of these are being introduced. Some of the innovative initiatives associated with this were also promoted by ISOCARP (as i.e. the WikiCity initiative of the City of Amsterdam – 2008). Moreover, developing various forms of public participation in this matter has become a standard planning practice in many countries and communities. It takes different roles and – depending on the level of development of the public discourse on the development issues as well as on the specifics of local democratic control mechanisms – may be regarded as just an addition to the regular planning procedures or as some sort of substitute to them. In the case of so-called post-transition countries (which include post-socialist states as well as countries facing just economic transformation), the demand for public participation is extensively and rapidly growing. It has to be noted that just a few years ago involving the local community into the urban development decision-making process was regarded as a kind of novelty and rarely treated seriously. But along with the development of the democratic societies, understanding by the people that their opinion matters as well as with the growing mistrust to the local planning and municipal management elites completely changed the situation. The local communities started not only to verify the development and planning decisions but also to demand more participation in this process. In many cases, this has led to the situation that no planning or development decision could be made without a public consent, which – in realities of diversified opinions and interests represented by different groups of stakeholders – had led towards stopping any development and not making any decisions at all. This means that the development of the civil society – in realities of the lack of political and democratic culture – led to the paralysis of the decision-making process, which especially relates to the most disputable projects and plans. Of course, this issue has not been left unnoticed by both central governments and by the local municipalities. Also, various groups of local activists have understood that negation of any plans and decisions made (especially) by local governments is not a solution and can lead towards stagnation. Therefore, various programs and initiatives leading towards making the public participation part of the “civilized” planning and the development of decision-making process were introduced. One can mention here a number of different forms and initiatives of different magnitude, which are currently changing the decision-making procedures. Within the paper, special attention will be given to the Polish case, which is one of the most interesting due to the diversity of forms of public participation introduced, an array of practices tried and tested, and – finally – due to making this a part of the formal urban regeneration planning process. Therefore, the results discussed and presented



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shall allow discussion of the possible inclusion of the Polish experience in the planning practice of other countries and regions, with a special focus on countries in transition.

1. Introduction

Public participation is nowadays commonly understood as the key issue in contemporary planning theory and practice. This relates especially to the well-developed planning systems and democratic cultures of the so-called Western World. But with the political, social and economic changes of the 1990-ties, this practice has become a part of the global planning agenda. And also the societies of the so-called post-transition countries started to ask for including this into their planning systems.

Although, it can be noted that the local communities in post-transition countries are much more demanding in this respect that societies that were enjoying this practice for decades. In result, new tools and approaches regarding the organization of public participation had to be developed. This was due to the rapid increase in social demand for organizing massive participation processes and also in relation to the change of the opinion of the politicians regarding the phenomenon itself. In short, from the position of the denial, the local politicians have switched to the position of appreciation and promotion of such practices. Same relates to the central governments, which started to consider the public participation processes a regular and obligatory part of the urban planning and development processes.

The main aim of this paper is to discuss the emerging every-day practice of public participation in the so-called post-transition countries and to present current models of its organization and execution. Since the Author of this paper has extensive experience in leading the participation processes, most of the conclusions presented within the paper (including the case studies) are based on His own experience and real-life cases.

2. The phenomenon of public participation

The phenomenon of public participation is not so new to both planning theory and practice. In fact, involving the local community in the decision-making process regarding local urban development directions is widely discussed and a number of various forms of these are being introduced. Some of the innovative initiatives associated with this were also promoted by ISOCARP (as i.e. the WikiCity initiative of the City of Amsterdam – 2008). Moreover, developing various forms of public participation in this matter has become a standard planning practice in many countries and communities.

But it has to be noted that public participation may play different roles and – depending on the level of development of the public discourse on development issues as well as on the specifics of local democratic control mechanisms – may be regarded as just an addition to the regular planning procedures or as a some sort of substitute to them [1].

3. Traditional vs. modern approaches to city planning

Although public participation is not a novelty and is widely used in urban management, in the urban planning processes it is still to be grounded. In fact, in many cases, we can still observe the presence of the “traditional approach”, based on the so-called “command-and-control system”, associated with allocating the decision power in the hands of the government. In this scenario, all planning activities are performed by highly-skilled professionals, in many cases in coordination and discussion of city officials. Due to this fact, this is also named the “technocratic approach” since the planning debate is performed only within the relatively closed circle of urban development technocrats. Of course, in this case, there is no public involvement in the discussion on the principles and directions of local urban development, and the general public is usually informed about the solutions only after the decision is made.

Described above traditional approach is frequently contested due to an emerging array of possible issues and concepts associated with the traditional planning questions. Also, there is a growing amount of stakeholders interested in solving these in line with their interests and expectations. In addition, some representatives of the local communities – frequently named as “urban activists” – are also keen on taking floor within all these debates.

In result, one can state that the “technocratic approach” – based on expert-made decisions – is not valid anymore. Moreover, it is also possible to conclude that each of the planning problems and issues may be considered and solved in many ways, which means there is no single “correct” and “best” solution to it. This is also associated with a major paradigm shift – nowadays, the modernistic city planning paradigm (as expressed in the Athens’ Charter) is not the only one source of ideas about urban form and mode of development; on the contrary, many ideas regarding the future of cities compete and many urban development paradigms may be considered while talking about planning of the future city.

In these realities, the new planning approach shall be developed. It may be different in case of each of the cities, or even in case of each of the planning problem that has to be solved. Therefore, urban development stakeholders – instead of focusing on the predefined, “blue-print type” solutions – should adopt a flexible method allowing developing the most viable – in given realities – decision. Therefore, it should be based rather on **revised planning method** allowing defining local solutions to local problems, taking local community and local stakeholders’ opinions into account as well as allowing planners to deal individually with particular local problems. This approach asks for the new planning methodology. It should be based on:

- Safeguarding public participation in planning;
- Adopting the different approaches to different types of planning exercises;
- Understanding that planning goes far beyond just policy making and includes both design for high quality of space as well as implementation methods;
- Understanding the differences in methodologies used for developing the “structure”, “regulatory” and “action” plans.

As can be derived from the above-mentioned list, one of the key issues is safeguarding the “public participation in planning” which means including the local community in the planning process.

4. Public participation in action

As discussed in the previous parts of this paper, public participation may be part of both urban planning as well as of the decision making processes regarding particular urban development initiatives. At the same time, it may be used in the process of defining both the character of the large-scale urban development projects (also referred to as Large-Scale Urban Interventions – LSUI-s) and the new architecture of particular public spaces and sites. Also, it may be employed in the process of shaping the solutions for larger scale planning exercises, like i.e. urban centers and sub-centers, housing districts, regeneration sites etc.

What is important in these cases is that public participation can both mitigate problems which appear along with planning and development of the particular interventions (both large- and small-scale) and help to solve them BEFORE they actually appear. This last feature is especially important in case the proposed development or planning initiative is expected to generate a number of issues for the local community and stakeholders. What is also important is the fact that properly designed public participation process – which involves all possible stakeholders but does not allow “capturing the participation process” by the so-called “wanna-be stakeholders” – helps in building community and stimulating partnership between key actors on the stage [2].

As discussed above, the necessity of discussing the key decisions regarding spatial development with the local community is obvious and part of contemporary planning and management practice. But what has to be stressed is the fact that it may take very different forms, depending on the level of involving the community. And, according to the so-called “participation ladder”, these forms include:

- Informing – based on the simple presentation of the solution adopted; in fact, this form of participation does not allow the community to influence the decision;
- Consulting – based on presenting the possible solutions to the particular problem and selecting the best possible one (according to the stakeholders’ opinion); in fact, in many cases, the outcomes of this process may be in conflict with the opinion of local government or investor willing to implement the cheapest possible solution;
- Participation – based on the direct involvement of the local community in shaping the possible solution to the particular problem / issue; in this case, the stakeholders’ group is frequently confronted not with possible and pre-defined solutions but with the problem itself. In these cases, the planning group is asked to solve the problem in dialogue with other decision-makers, which allows both parties to understand each other and work out the joint proposals;
- Co-investing – based not only on the public dialogue regarding the particular problem or issue, but also on involving the stakeholders (and their resources) in the implementation process; in this case, particular stakeholders not only discuss and decide about the shape of the particular decision, but they are part of the implementation process.

As one can note, discussed above forms of participation can be used in different contexts and situations. In fact, not all of them can be employed to each case, and also not in each case it is possible to identify the proper group of stakeholders. This may create the situation that – instead of the real ones – the so-called “wanna-be stakeholders” take the floor.

5. Including the local community into the planning process

Involving local community and stakeholders in the public participation process – and in this case, by participation, I mean real involvement of the stakeholders in the decision-making process – may take different forms. Of course, it can be used only in selected cases, but in case it is decided to employ public participation into the planning process the following key steps should be included in its preparation:

- starting the planning process with the group of local leaders, constituting the planning group;
- carefully drafting the plan of the participation process, including various forms of possible community involvement (workshops, site visits, public discussions etc., which allow stimulating the discussion on key components of the project) as well as a number of sociological surveys (which allow gathering the opinion of the wider scope of stakeholders – including the so-called “silent” ones);
- involving local mass media and asking them to convey information about the process;
- making outcomes of the process available for the local community via different forms of publication and announcements.

In case the planning process is undertaken directly by the representatives of the local community, it has to be supported professionally. Therefore, it must be coordinated and supported by the competent expert group – responsible for the final success of this undertaking. Otherwise, the process may not bring the results as expected and even finish in a not expected way.

6. Post-transition countries

In the case of so-called post-transition countries (which include post-socialist states as well as countries facing just economic transformation without the political change) the demand for public participation is extensively and rapidly growing. It has to be noted that just a few years ago involving local community into the urban development decision-making process was regarded as a kind of novelty and rarely treated seriously [3].

But along with the development of the democratic societies, understanding by the people that their opinion matters as well as growing mistrust to the local planning and municipal management elites completely changed the situation. Local communities started not only to question the development and planning decisions but also to demand more participation in the decision making process. In many cases, this has led to the situation that no planning or development decision could be made without a public consent, which – in realities of diversified opinions and interests represented by different groups of stakeholders – had led towards stopping any development and not making any decisions at all. This means that development of the civil society – in realities of the lack of political and democratic culture – led to the paralysis of the decision-making process, which especially relates to the most disputable projects and plans. And one has to note that in many cases, the lack of the democratic tradition led to the situation within which anyone whose ideas were not included in the final solution / decision was contesting it and protesting loudly. Also, planning professionals and local government officials started to be accused of lack of professionalism as well as – in some cases – of being corrupted by developers or particular groups of stakeholders [4].

Of course, this issue has not been left unnoticed by both central governments and by local municipalities. Also, various groups of local activists have understood that negation of any plans and decisions made (especially) by local governments is not a solution and can lead towards stagnation. Therefore, various programs and initiatives leading towards making public participation part of the “civilized” planning and development decision-making process were introduced. One can mention here a number of different forms and initiatives of different magnitude, which are currently changing the decision-making procedures. This relates especially to the issues associated with urban and spatial development as this is the key area of potential conflict [5]

One of the most interesting is the Polish case, which is due to rapidly increasing demand for participation (rise of the so-called “city movements” – groups of urban activists representing various ideas and concepts regarding local urban development processes), diversity of forms of public participation introduced, an array of practices tried and tested, and – finally – due to making this a part of the formal urban regeneration planning process [6].

7. Public participation methods in post-transition countries

In case of the post-transition countries, and having in mind the specifics of the public participation processes in these, it was necessary to search for the method allowing – on one hand – full participation of the local community in the planning process and – on the other – getting the process completed in a predictable time. Therefore, the strategic planning methodology was chosen. This method, developed for business management, later on, was adapted for the purposes of managing the socio-economic development of the municipalities. It is associated with three basic steps, responding to key questions:

- Where are we now? – meaning, in what situation the particular project / area is right now;
- Where we want to get? – meaning, what is the vision of the future state of the site / project that we want to achieve;
- How to make it? – meaning, how can we implement the conceptualized solution in the given realities.

This method may be implemented in various ways. Having in mind the specifics of public participation in planning / urban development process it seems that the best work methodology is associated with crafting the design workshops – “charrette style” – which allows fulfillment of the following objectives:

- Defining of the basic assumptions and concepts regarding proposed planning solution / project development BEFORE the design is ready;
- Defining – on this basis – a number of possible solutions / scenarios, as well as various priorities;
- Selecting the most appreciated solutions of the ones discussed;
- Developing the final concept – accepted by the local community – to be furtherly elaborated.

In this case, a number of techniques had to be employed, including public discussions, group works, general presentations as well as voting.

8. Exemplary Planning Workshops structure

Following the adopted methodology, also the experience gained during the process of developing the strategic plans for Polish municipalities was used. In result, it was concluded that the planning process should be structured in the form of a sequence of carefully planned workshops, during which the particular elements of the program / plan / strategy are defined. Such a program may also be supplemented by a set of necessary sociological surveys – which, as discussed in preceding chapters – may help to provide the opinion of the “silent” stakeholders.

Usually – before the real participatory process starts – the so-called Stage „0” of the process is concluded. This usually includes the desk research allowing survey and analysis of the existing planning documents. It may also help in developing the expert analysis of the problems to be solved as well as a definition of the intervention area.

The second stage of the process is the cycle of workshops. The usual structure of those includes:

- I workshop
 - Group analysis of the problems of the given area
 - Development of the intervention goals
 - Development of the SWOT analysis
- I stage of the sociological survey
 - Getting the people’s opinion on the basic problems and issues that have to be solved
- II workshop
 - Selecting the priorities for intervention
 - Identification of the specific projects and other undertakings necessary for the implementation of the goals
 - The SWOT analysis for the particular projects
- III workshop
 - Creating the „logical matrix” for all projects
- II stage of the sociological survey
 - Defining the priorities according to the population of the area
- IV workshop
 - Developing the final set of priorities
 - Developing the schedule of implementation actions

- Developing the monitoring and implementation system
- Defining the financial plan
 - Defining the sources and level of necessary / available funding for projects implementation
- Summing up the works
 - Presenting the outcomes in the form of comprehensive document

After the workshops themselves are concluded, it is possible to finalize the process in the form of a written report including all conclusions. In case necessary, this report may become a basis for drafting the final policy / planning document, which can be adopted by municipal administration. In case of planning for urban regeneration, this is demanded by law in the Polish planning system.

9. Selected case studies

In order to illustrate how the public participation process may be part of discussing the various types of interventions, three case studies were presented. Within the following parts of the paper, only the selected aspects of these were presented. Also, due to the space limitations, no conclusions achieved or detailed workshop structures were discussed.

9.1. „Katowice workshop” Reshaping the Korfanty Avenue

In the case of Katowice, the public participation process was organized to discuss the publicly contested outcomes of the architectural competition for the new development concept of Katowice City Center. This plan, developed by one of the leading Polish architecture office (Konior Studio), was discussed as a problematic solution, especially in regard to the ideas of reshaping the main urban axis of the city – the Korfanty Avenue.

Within this plan, it was proposed to narrow down this modernistic street and make it more pedestrian-friendly. At the same time the plan allowed massive development of new urban quarters on nowadays vacant areas, which were considered as green spaces by the local community. In addition, during the workshop, local stakeholders showed their sympathy to the present layout of the street, which came from the feeling that its dimensions reflect the importance of the city. The workshop allowed discussing these issues and understanding the nature of the protests, as well as reshaping the plan and its detailed solutions.

9.2. Redevelopment of the public spaces in the city of Starogard Gdańsk

The second case study is associated with the process of redeveloping the public spaces of the small-size city (approx. 65 000 inhabitants) of Starogard Gdańsk in the Pomerania Region. Within this process, two key city spaces were subject to participation efforts: the Old Town Market Square and Wojska Polskiego Avenue. Although the latter case is still in the design process, the redevelopment of the Market Square has been completed. One has to mention that public participation helped to identify a set of possible solutions regarding this site as well as extensive discussion on the finally selected proposal.

9.3. Replanning the Gdańsk City Centre

Third of the case studies is associated with replanning the Gdańsk City Center. This project was coordinated not by the Gdańsk Development Office (an “official” planning agency for the city) but by the group of “urban activists” (associated within the NGO called FRAG – “Gdańsk Agglomeration Development Forum”). Development of this project was made possible due to a grant received from the Batory Foundation. Within it, a local stakeholders group was working in order to define the new planning principles for the area. The outcomes of this were later on used in the formal planning process for the area.

10. Conclusions

As it can be derived from this paper, the public participation is one of the possible tools used nowadays in order to discuss the possible planning solutions. It is associated with the direct involvement of the local community in the decision-making process. In case the “solid” results are needed as well as an array of stakeholders has to be involved, the participatory process should be based on the methodology of strategic planning. In these cases, good results can be achieved through the organization of the „planning / urban workshops”. This was especially important in case of the “post-transition” countries like Poland.

At the same time, the Polish experience in this matter proved that there is a need for so-called “strategic approach” in the public participation processes. Otherwise, there is a danger of wasting the efforts made and finishing with no substantial results – meaning no decisions and no points made. Results discussed and presented in this paper shall allow the discussion of the possible inclusion of the Polish experience in the planning practice of other countries and regions, with a special focus on the countries in transition.

Finally, the experiences analyzed also proved that both the scope of the participation process, the results expected as well as a group of stakeholders involved have to be defined locally, as there are no two similar situations. This means that also outlining the participation process should be crafted individually and that there are no “blueprints” that can be used.

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