

Spurring the community involvement in planning - lessons from post-socialist cities

Piotr Lorens*, Dorota Kamrowska-Zaluska*

*Gdansk University of Technology, Poland

Community involvement in planning in the case of post-socialist cities was until recently almost non-existent. But in recent years the development of demand more public participation is dramatically increasing. This phenomenon creates a need for new types of planning tools, as well as an introduction of innovative techniques of conducting the community dialogue.

"Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody." - Jane Jacobs

Introduction

Public participation and community involvement in planning processes is – in general – not a new topic for contemporary planners. But in many parts of the world – including the post-socialist countries– we can still face the lack of understanding of importance of proper community involvement in planning and development processes. The situation in these countries is significantly different from both the highly-developed countries (where we can observe many forms of participation and the need for this is in principle commonly accepted by all stakeholders) and the developing ones (where the key issues are frequently associated with providing basic infrastructure or upgrading the very unprivileged areas).

Post-socialist countries

The post-socialist countries are frequently regarded as relatively well developed and can be characterized as “rich” from the perspective of many others, but in fact they are still on the fast track on the way towards redevelopment of their urban structures. This is accompanied by rapid and frequently disordered urbanization, which is happening in the realities of “liberal model” of spatial development.

In the last few years Poland has gone a long way from centrally planned economy to decentralized governance, where the planning power stays within communities. This is also the case of public participation, in the 80-ies the process was nearly non-existent. It is the law of 1994 on Spatial Planning, which gave residents not only an opportunity to articulate their legitimate interests, but also a number of legal institutions to claim settlement and solve conflicts caused by different interest of the stakeholders. It was an important step towards legal sanction in the field of planning and land use planning typical of a developing democracy. It also gave the basis for the participation of citizens in making public decisions (Siemiński 2007).

In 2004, with the new Law on Spatial Planning, real development of participation procedures begun in Poland. The participation process requirements accelerated due to adaption to the

requirements of European Union, starting with environmental procedures such as environmental impact assessments and then spreading into other aspects of urban development e.g. urban regeneration.

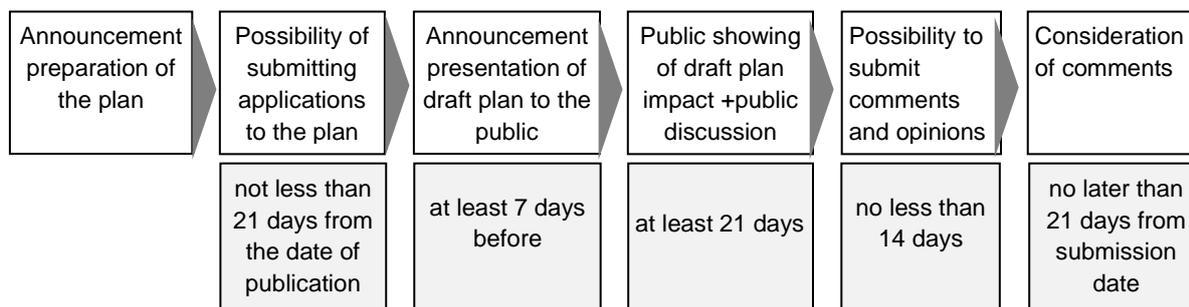


Fig. 1 Phases of participation in preparation of local development plan in Poland

Public participation in the planning procedure is one of the key elements of planning and public consultation, which could effectively support the process of making the right decisions. According to the Polish Law on Spatial Planning and Development the main purpose of public participation in the planning procedure is: to inform about the preparation of the new development plans or the revision of existing ones, to receive proposals or comments from all the actors of the process, to take them into account or to reject them. This process, if conducted properly, should also prevent conflicts and protests. The main steps of this process are:

- submission of proposals for a masterplan and a local development plan (two main tools of spatial planning in Poland)
- public hearing and discussion on the solutions adopted by the draft masterplan or development plan;
- possibility to submit comments and opinions to the draft masterplan or development plan;

This process, though a big step forward, does not always work. Possibility of public intervention happens too late. All the actors of the development process can submit their comments and opinions only after the plan is already approved by all administrative bodies, such as environmental and health departments, as well as heritage conservation office on both local and regional level. As this process is lengthy (takes at least 3 month) it's not surprising that authors of the plan are not willing to incorporate changes proposed by the public and go through the approval procedure again. At the beginning of the process participation possibility is limited only to the submission of proposals, which could be taken into account or not without any explanation, while it would be much more useful to introduce the public discussion at the stage of programming and setting project objectives. This tool was introduced for example in France, by new Law in year 2000. At the stage of setting project objectives for planning documents such as *schéma de cohérence territoriale* and *plan local d'urbanisme* there is a whole process of public consultation, which often includes workshops, public hearing surveys etc.

Beyond the statutory process of participation in Poland

At the same time the local communities are becoming interested in the development process and are looking forward to being accepted as equal or even key partners by other stakeholders. This does not advance the ability of discussing the problems and dilemmas of

spatial development - and this is both the problem of local municipalities, interested in local communities and other stakeholders –i.e. developers and investors. Therefore, we have to face the situation in which the partners are not ready to discuss the development and planning issues, which partly stems from the present liberal paradigm and partly from the lack of conducting the public discourse in general.

In this case planners have to take the leading role in the process and come forth with the innovative – at least in post-soviet realities – planning tools and techniques, allowing the introduction of public participation process in a way acceptable for all key stakeholders. One of these tools are the “planning workshops”, similar to known in the highly developed countries “charrettes”, which allow for the discussion of the PROBLEM and which prevents jumping directly to the discussion of pros and cons of some proposed solutions (which usually are unacceptable for some of the partners/stakeholders) and – in result – prevent unnecessary miscommunication and sometimes even public quarrels.

Participation in praxis

This part of paper shows two examples of non-statutory participation process in Poland. The first one took place in 2008 and the second just finished last year. These two cases show evolution in the public participation in planning in Poland. The first was initiated by local authorities, though there was deep involvement of the majority of key actors of the process. The second is a bottom–up initiative led by local NGO, where public authorities were invited to take part in the process. Of course in both cases the situation is different and there are still such participation processes led by the public sector, but this kind of activity of urban movement is a new phenomenon in Poland. Local neighborhood associations were always present, but their organizational skills and capacities to conduct participatory planning process increased significantly in the last decade. It is partly caused by the development of further forms of grants for NGO financed by European Union or private foundations (like in a case of second project described below), which is new for post-soviet countries.

The first project is revitalization of the downtown of city of Starogard. In 2008 the Local Regeneration Program for Starogard for the years 2008-2013 was introduced. The aim of the Program was a comprehensive transformation of the historic center of Starogard. At the same time, the program define overarching objectives and specific actions to be undertaken for each of the analyzed areas. Even though this general document was very important, it was not the end of the planning process. Consequently, after the acceptance of the document the city decided to continue its planning efforts to prepare the first actions of the implementation phase. The most important part was comprehensive preparation of the revitalization of the main market square in downtown.

The work formula for this project was a mixture of expert and collaborative approach. This kind of approach was needed while end result of the project was a comprehensive design documentation, which could be presented to the regional authorities, as part of a revitalization grant documentation. Because of the nature of the task, most of the work was carried out by a design team. However, due to the large community of interest in the shape of system of public spaces and development of the main plaza, an extended part of this work was done during public workshop prepared and carried out by a team from the Department of Architecture of Gdansk University of Technology.

Finally, four workshop meetings were scheduled, followed by a final presentation of the development of the proposed solution for the Market Square. In September 2008, there was a first workshop on selection of variant of road communication, followed by a discussion about the system of public spaces. At the beginning of October 2008, the next workshop focused on discussion on system of public spaces and the functional structure of the Old Town. During that month, there was a third workshop, where a physical plan of public space was being discussed, as well as the formulation of proposals for the project. The last workshop meeting was focused on details of the revitalization of downtown of Starogard. A presentation of the final version of the study took place in December 2008. A study fully adopted the findings of the workshop meetings. A strong point of this study was the participatory method, with the direct engagement of local communities and most of key institutional partners. All decisions were made by consensus during the meetings, where nearly 60 representatives of different stakeholder were present.

The second project is Centrum Reaktywacja, defined by its authors as “an attempt to develop in participatory mode a coherent and comprehensive vision of the historic city center of Gdansk”. It was implemented in 2012 by the Gdansk Agglomeration Development Forum (local NGO) in collaboration with the Institute for Urban Culture, Gdansk University of Technology and the Society Polish Town Planners. Preparation and implementation of the project was supported by the Stefan Batory Foundation.



Fig. 2 A photography from one of the workshops of Centrum Reaktywacja project

The project aimed to develop common vision for the area, both for the local community and all other stakeholders, which would allow the achievement of social consensus for downtown developments in Gdansk. This project should help to minimize conflicts between the actors of development and to increase public participation in the planning process. The project team

also hopes that proposals developed during workshop meeting could be incorporated into local development plans and be used in the formulation of other urban policies for the area. Their wish is that the success of the project will encourage municipal authorities to open public discussion on directions development of other areas of Gdansk. The third goal is to develop know-how for local officials and local NGO to conduct similar projects in the future.

The project was implemented through building a platform for discussion of shaping present directions of city development. Invited inhabitants of the city formed a civil forum for dialogue. By taking part in a series of workshops with other stakeholder of development process as well as specialists in the field of urban planning, architecture, landscape architecture, social sciences, they developed the key elements of the final document - the study of the development of the district



Fig. 3 A photography from the final conference Centrum Reaktywacja

Using the method of "charrette" allows for a dialogue between different interest groups before creating the situation of conflict, thereby minimizing the risk of its occurrence at a later stage of the development processes. It was based on the preparation, carrying out and conclusions of a series of workshops. Each of them had a clearly defined goal, a method of conducting and expected results. All the work has been prepared so as to achieve the aforementioned objective (Lorens, Nowik 2013).

While the project was prepared, organizers expected between 50-70 participants, whereas in reality more than 140 people attended the workshops. In the case of high-frequency workshops, they were carried out in subgroups and then the results synthesized during plenary sessions. Due to the open nature of the meetings, there was a natural rotation of the

participants, especially during the meetings related to the various specific areas in downtown.

Conclusions

The changes in the relationship between rulers and ruled that the Polish society underwent (and other post soviet-countries – authors comment) are very rapid (Pawłowska 2012). With time a development of community involvement can be observed. In the last twenty years public participation evolved from individual avant-garde actions to becoming a part of statutory process of planning. Today's approach still has some weaknesses, such as involving the community into real discussion only at the end of the planning procedure. It is also not applicable for all the situations, as not all of the development is limited to drawing up a development plan. This is the case of both processes analyzed in this paper. Both of them also use the method of "planning workshops", similar to "charrettes", used in participation practice of many developed countries, a tool so far applied only to a small extent to the construction of urban development policy in Poland.

The abovementioned evolution of approach can also be seen as a stronger involvement of urban movements. Though public bodies, specially local authorities with their planning power, are still important actors of the development, there are more and more cases where public involvement process is led by third sector organizations. This situation is possible due to new ways of financing and increasing organizational capacity of local NGOs. Very often, the planning process is just the first step of using participatory methods, but with time they are applied to other forms of participatory democracy, such as participatory budgeting which is a rising concept in many post-socialistic cities.

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