Public Participation Procedure in Integrated Transport and Green Infrastructure Planning

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Abstract. The dialogue among the decision makers and stakeholders is a crucial part of any decision-making processes, particularly in case of integrated transportation planning and planning of green infrastructure where a multitude of actors is present. Although the theory of public participation is well-developed after several decades of research, there is still a lack of practical guidelines due to the specificity of public participation challenges. The paper presents a model of public participation for integrated transport and green infrastructure planning for international project TRANSGREEN covering the area of five European countries – Slovakia, Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary and Romania. The challenge of the project is to coordinate the efforts of public actors and NGOs in international environment in oftentimes precarious projects of transport infrastructure building and developing of green infrastructure. The project aims at developing and environmentally-friendly and safe international transport network. The proposed public participation procedure consists of five main steps – spread of information (passive), collection of information (consultation), intermediate discussion, engagement and partnership (empowerment). The initial spread of information is a process of communicating with the stakeholders, informing and educating them and it is based on their willingness to be informed. The methods used in this stage are public displays, newsletters or press releases. The second step of consultation is based on transacting the opinions of stakeholders to the decision makers. Pools, surveys, public hearings or written responses are examples of the multitude of ways to achieve this objective and the main principle of openness of stakeholders. The third step is intermediate discussion where all sides of are invited to a dialogue using the tools such as public meetings, workshops or urban walks. The fourth step is an engagement based on humble negotiation, arbitration and mediation. The collaborative skill needed here is dealing with conflicts. The final step in the procedure is partnership and empowerment employing methods as multi-actor decision making, voting or referenda. The leading principle is cooperation. In this ultimate step, the stakeholders are becoming decision makers themselves and the success factor here is continuous evaluation.

1. Introduction
The paper is one of the outputs from TRANSGREEN project dealing with improving planning frameworks and developing concrete environmentally-friendly and safe road and rail transport solutions taking into account the elements of Green Infrastructure, in particular ecological corridors. One of the challenges of the project was setting up a model of public participation covering the whole range of stakeholders on both vertical and horizontal level. The scientific literature on public participation contains a massive load of knowledge after several decades of research, though in practice due to the variety of challenges it remains
a challenge for project partners to set up efficient and inclusive plans for public participation in project pilot areas covering five countries in the Danube region.

The paper is structured as follows. The first part is devoted to a brief literature review on public participation in planning of infrastructure projects, including the main challenges in theory and in practical settings. The second part is devoted to the procedure of public participation as utilized in TRANSGREEN project. In this section, the main phases of the procedure are explained through wide range of skills, behaviours and interactions with examples of tools available for successful implementation. The final part is discussing the challenges of public participation models and the measures to successfully overcome them based on the practical implementation of participation process under case study in the city of Trenčín in Slovakia.

2. Theoretical background of Public participation

Rowe and Frewer [1] provide a wide definition of public participation as a practice of consulting and involving members of the public in the agenda setting, decision making and policy making activities of actors responsible for policy development. Finka and Petrikova [2] define public participation in planning as a process in which the opinions and standpoints of all stakeholders (citizens, civic associations, NGOs, business units etc.) are integrated in the decision-making processes. Stakeholders in case of planning processes are people or organizations who have a real interest in particular issue being considered because they could be directly affected by the planning decision or because they had been created for the purpose of influencing these sort of decisions, e.g. lobby groups, [2]. Public participation is ongoing on the planning agenda since 1960s as a response to rational planning models favouring technical rationality in doing planning work. This participatory turn stems from an important change in the capacity of states to deliver basic services and restructuring the politics with this new reality [3]. This paradigm has been challenged by voices expressing the need for planning to be more open and include also other actors in the planning process. The pioneering work of Arnstein [4] on redistribution of power was one of the first papers which took wider audience and it dealt with several levels or stages of public involvement in planning projects, from manipulation through informing up to citizen control. This paper provoked a discussion on participation and put a seed for large amount of works to follow [5]. Another question that has arisen was how to include citizens in these processes, what methods to use, in what stages and up to what point it is necessary to incorporate the actors in decision making processes. John Friedmann [6] and Patsy Healey [7] put the groundwork for collaborative (communicative) planning in which the collaboration among formal authorities and other actors was the core of the planning process.

There is a variety of ways how public participation can take place. These differ according to the level of involvement of actors in what stage of decision making process they are participating. Sewell & Coppock [8] argue that the development of participation depends on factors such as development of civic society, public awareness and public disagreement or access to information and the need for involvement in public discussions. Fagence [9] characterizes participation as a double-edged sword where on the one hand the planners are supposed to be ready and trained to work and cooperate with the citizens and other actors while on the other hand the actors should be active and skilled in decision making including planning processes.

The objective of participation process should be to form a learning process which is beneficial for both sides of the process as it creates value by forming social dialogues [10] and fosters creation of social capital [11]. This is consequently invaluable as it helps the relations among the actor groups (public and private sector, NGOs, advocacy groups etc.), all of which are beneficial for forming effective participation system.

Processes of participation are closely linked to the basic ideas of democracy in which each citizen is permitted to voice their opinion and be heard. In democratic societies when discussing public decision making, it is vital to be open for discussion, to be tried and examined so that consensus is found, although the notion of consensus is often too abstract and normative. Some of the issues related to this include the problem of voice – the vocal minority vs silent majority or the NIMBY effect where people are interested only when they are directly confronted with the impact of the decision on themselves.
One of the greatest problems of participation models and tools is their normative nature, i.e. they work well mostly in idea settings such as full representation and ideal speech situation [3]. Another problem lays in the fact that high levels of participation do not always lead to a more socially oriented agreement (consensus) [12]. Then the question arises what is the ideal or required level of participation. There is no universal answer to this question, it is highly case-dependent, it depends on the issue in question, the sector, the available time, the country and its culture etc. Innes [13] states that the emergence of consensus building is a way of reformulation of comprehensive planning, to address complex and controversial issues in public discussions with multitude of interests. This complexity is additionally increased due to negotiation and mediation both within and between the spatial levels [14]. All this leads to a high number of participatory tools and approaches and it often renders practitioners using trial-and-error approach.

3. Procedure of public participation

The objective of the proposed procedure of public participation is to engage the stakeholders in the project. This needs to be done in gradual steps as it is a continuous process with its internal logics. All the steps need to be performed as one is related to another. The process needs to be efficient without unnecessary stages which can render the stakeholders uninterested after the initial stages.

The procedure has 5 main steps in which the decision makers are engaging with the stakeholders with one initial phase of stakeholder mapping which provides the essential early information about the stakeholders of the project. This part of the paper is devoted to description of the procedure including the recommended tools to be used to successfully achieve the successive phases and positively finish the participation procedure. Figure 1 describes the phases of the procedure and its internal logics and table 1 provides a sheet of main phases with brief explanation of each phase which is to be used by practitioners as a tool for running the procedure in the projects.

![Figure 1. Participation procedure](image)
3.1. Phase 0 – Stakeholder mapping

When developing a participatory process, it is important to understand who is or could be affected by the decisions and the actions taken, and who has the power to influence their outcome. Therefore, before the beginning of the actual process of participation it is crucial to identify who are the key stakeholders and those who are directly or indirectly affected by the project.

The objective of this introductory phase is to establish who are the key stakeholders in the territory who will be relevant for the project. Infrastructure planning itself is largely complex endeavor and it is important to understand that participation increases the complexity of the whole project. Therefore, it is important to find the most relevant stakeholders to render the participatory process efficient and effective.

This phase of the participatory procedure is taking place only within the team of decision makers and is not interactive as the rest of the phases. It maps out the stakeholders and sorts out their relevance to the project. It is important to identify various groups, such as the decision makers, key players, context setters, subjects and crowds.

Tools: expert opinions, focus groups, interviews, self-selection, public events, check-list of the likely stakeholder categories or any combination of these tools.

3.2. Phase 1 – Spread of Information

The objective of the initial phase is to provide the public with objective and balanced information and to assist their comprehension on the project and the participatory process, about the possible alternatives and challenges. It is important to find the fine line between adequate amount of information and overwhelming the stakeholders with facts and resulting confusion and lack of interest.

Collaborative behaviour: The collaborative behaviour in the first phase is willingness on which the phase is built on. Willingness to participate is objective of this phase meaning that the provided information is aimed at catching attention and kindling interest of stakeholders to take part in the project.

Purpose of the phase: The purpose of this first phase is to inform the stakeholders about the project, its objective and its vision and how the project will continue. In this phase, the stakeholders obtain appropriate amount of information which will familiarize them with the project and their role in the project. It is an initial stage which creates the basic groundwork for further steps.

Collaborative skills: The most important collaborative skill in the first phase is effective speaking and the ability to provide the right amount of information to catch the attention and to inform, but not exceedingly much to discourage the stakeholders. The information needs to be provided in a sensible way, sufficiently ahead of time and it needs to be delivered to the right stakeholders (which is the objective of the previous phase – stakeholder mapping.).

Tools: Using of newsletters, both via regular mail or emails, advertising in newspapers and on project websites, using fact sheets and other means of information delivery to stakeholders can be used.

Communication channels: More conventional channels such as leaflets or ads in newspapers can be used, together with press releases, fact sheets or newsletters, increasingly more effective and widely used is using the social media such as Facebook or Twitter.

3.3. Phase 2 – Collection of Information

The second phase is dedicated to collecting the responses and information from the stakeholders. It is an opposite process that the previous stage where the decision makers were the ones addressing the stakeholders. The stakeholders have obtained the introductory information and provide the first feedback stating their interest and willingness to collaborate.

Collaborative behaviour: The collaborative behaviour required from the stakeholders is openness, i.e. to be open about their ideas and opinions and express them to the decision makers to enable them to capture those
and respond to them, incorporate them into the project and help to clarify potential confusion and prevent conflicts.

Purpose of the phase: The purpose of the second phase is to inform and educate the decision makers about the ideas, opinions and concerns from the stakeholders. It is one of the introductory phases which aims at establishing the initial cooperation and gain trust on which the successive phases are building on.

Collaborative skills: The collaborative skills necessary is the ability to listen effectively and openly. The first round of information collection captures a variety of feedback including not relevant feedback and it needs to be understood why it is so and help clarify potential misunderstandings for the future.

Tools: The available tools for collection of information include for example pools, surveys, community profiles, briefs, written responses and online tools such as Public Participation Geoinformation Systems (PPGIS) and other similar platforms enabling stakeholders to post their ideas using for them convenient ways.

Communication channels: Public events, regular mail, social networks (Facebook, Twitter etc.).

3.4. Phase 3 – Intermediate discussion

The intermediate discussion presents a significant change in the communication between the decision makers and the stakeholders. It turns one-way communication into two-way communication, i.e. a discussion and it increases the level of engagement of both sides in the participatory process. Collaborative behaviour: The collaborative behaviour of the third phase is validation and parties are attempting to justify their ideas and opinions on the project and are clarifying their views.

Purpose of the phase: The purpose of the intermediate discussion is to create a dialogue and foster transaction of opinions, i.e. facilitate the discussions under the rules of effective, open and inclusive conversation. The participants should feel appreciated and heard and this way they are starting to become relevant and genuine partners in the project.

Collaborative skills: The necessary collaborative skills include mostly media relations and the ability to facilitate the discussions.

Tools: The available tools include public meetings, workshops, urban walks, open houses and any other formats of discussion which enables decision makers to debate with the stakeholders.

Communication channels: Public events, any interactive form of discussions.

3.5. Phase 4 – Engagement

The fourth phase of participatory procedure is engagement of stakeholders with the decision makers. It is a process of closer involvement and direct work with stakeholders throughout the participatory process. The objective is to ensure the proper understanding and consideration of concerns and aspirations. The decision makers are supposed to work towards reflecting all relevant ideas and opinions in the project. Collaborative behaviour: The engagement phase is based on humility and respect as the main guiding principles of the participatory process in this phase.

Purpose of the phase: The purpose of this phase is to ensure partnership through continuous dialogue in form of discussions while respecting the views and concerns of stakeholders and this way to prevent potential conflicts which could hinder the participatory process.

Tools: The tools to facilitate this phase include negotiations, arbitration and mediation to assist the dialogue and help to reach a consensus favourable for all parties.
Communication channels: direct face-to-face meetings mostly, including virtual channels such as teleconferences, Skype-meetings etc. for cases where physical presence of stakeholders and decision makers is not possible.

3.6. Phase 5 – Partnership, empowerment

The last phase of the proposed participatory scheme is partnership and reaching the stage of empowerment of stakeholders in the participatory process. It is the higher level of cooperation where the line between decision makers and stakeholders is being erased and all are becoming equal partners in every aspect of the participatory process.

Collaborative behaviour: The collaborative behaviour for partnership phase is mutuality and support of participatory process acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the decision makers and stakeholders and working towards the common objectives as equal partners.

Purpose of the phase: The purpose of this phase is to foster cooperation in the project via partnership and empowerment.

Collaborative skills: The necessary skill in this phase is the ability to negotiate conflicts arising in the course of phase number 5 and continuous evaluation of the process collecting and using the feedback from all the participants in the procedure to keep the actors involved and active.

Tools: The tools in the fifth phase include multi-actor decision making, voting or referenda.

Communication channels: direct face-to-face meetings mostly, including virtual channels such as teleconferences, Skype-meetings etc. for cases where physical presence of stakeholders and decision makers is not possible.

4. Problems and challenges

One of the crucial factors of success of any participatory efforts is deliberation of risks and threats to participatory procedures and taking measures to eliminate them in the early stage. Ondrejicka & Ondrejickova [15] on their case study of city of Trencin in Slovakia and the project “Trencin Si Ty” argued for main problems as inadequate capacities of decision makers in participatory process preparation, problem of high-tide of public interest, trust of the public, language issues or finding the right leader of participatory initiative. The concluding section deals with these issues in a little more detail.

4.1. High-tide wave of public interest

The practice shows that frequently when the participation process begins there is relatively a high interest from the stakeholders in case the previous steps (stakeholder mapping and informing) had been performed correctly. Nevertheless, the practice also shows that the interest of stakeholders decreases quickly, too, similar to the rising tide, it is large at first and then gradually decreases. As the process continues, only several individuals and organizations remain interested and participating. This happens often when municipality is leading participatory processes and catches the attention of its citizens who are attracted and then their attentiveness rapidly falls. This is caused by absenting experience of stakeholders, low trust in the process, perhaps too high expectations. Another issue is that stakeholders in general gather more quickly and more passionately against something (e.g. NYMBY effect) that in favour of some project.

There is no one way how to deal with this challenge and the recommended tools depend on the nature of the project, same as any participatory tool. Generally speaking, it is recommended to initially choose methods asking the stakeholders to approach the decision maker, such as public discussions, urban walk method etc. This can also be against something, but the participation process leader needs to change the motive into something positive to keep the momentum and keep the stakeholders interested, to strive for finding a solution and consensus about the core issue. As the topic might ‘get old’ and make stakeholders less and less interested, it is possible to change the method to keep the attention of stakeholders through
interesting form of participation, e.g. focus groups or event activities. The stakeholders often do not feel interested in direct participation in form of vocalizing their opinion, therefore tools such as pin-wall with flashcards where stakeholders can write and pin their ideas might be a beneficial idea, too. Last but not least, it is crucial to keep an eye on fostering the trust between the decision makers and stakeholders, to make stakeholders feel heard and appreciated in practice, not only in theory.

4.2. Trust, apathy and scepticism of the public

Low level of trust of citizens and other stakeholders is a common problem in Central and Eastern Europe countries. This is obvious from any previous participatory processes where stakeholders entered these processes already with apathy and mistrust in the process, often thinking that it was just a formal process and the decision had already been done. Working on increasing the level of trust therefore becomes a key issue to be focused on to produce solutions inspired by citizens reflecting their needs and expectations.

The whole process of participation is in a way a process of trust building between the decision maker and the stakeholders, inherently a two-way process. Keeping this in mind it is important also for the decision makers to trust the process and be genuinely interested in the participatory processes. There are three recommendations to ensure the authenticity of the participation. Firstly, it is the openness and constant flow of information among decision makers and stakeholders, enabling their participation in each phase of the process using adequate tools and methods, focus on both professional stakeholders and groups with wider interests and fewer knowledge about the issue in question. Secondly, there should be a clear declaration of interest from decision makers and subsequently a clear demonstration of significance the decision makers are putting on the participatory process. This can be done in several ways, for example using legal urban planning tools to reserve the land designated for a particular project or any other way where the key decision maker exhibits its determination and openness for the project and its participatory component. Lastly, it is important to establish cooperation with the institution or the individuals who are respected by the community (local leaders) who could give help gaining trust of the stakeholders in the process.

4.3. Non-unified terminology

Spatial and economic development of the territory is a multidisciplinary field with wide range of issues being considered and it is a field of study for various disciplines. All this complexity makes it difficult for stakeholders on the one hand to understand the issue in question and on the other hand even to find a common language (also known as a problem “I don’t understand the language of your tribe”). For participatory methods, it might create a problem of not understanding the key terms, misunderstanding the projects or it contributes to the disinterest of stakeholders to participate in the project. Moreover, this is also a problem for professional stakeholders from various fields who are not familiar with the key terms or interpret them in different ways.

It is important to keep in mind the need to unify the terminology and explain the key terms to create a common baseline knowledge for stakeholders. When publishing materials in all phases of participatory process, the language of these materials needs to be fit for the recipients and including glossary of key terms which might cause misunderstandings. This way it is ensured that all the actors involved in the participatory process are on the same page language-wise and it is possible to considerably reconcile potential problems in the initial phases. During public events in the beginning it is beneficial to formulate the problem, objective or basic points of departure in simple and comprehensive language. Additionally, it is recommended to use a discussion facilitator/mediator familiar with the project and able to capture these misunderstandings in the language and explain it even repeatedly during the process.

4.4. Leadership definition – finding the right leader

After a closer look at the ongoing participatory initiatives and processes it is visible that many of these are coming from civic society and third sector. These initiatives have a limited impact due to them being bound on specific community and their outcome is spatially limited, e.g. within a community, street or settlement and it can be contradictory to municipality objectives. Similar threat of such participatory process is a
limited impact resulting from the process outcomes, i.e. limited competence of the third sector-led initiatives. Such outcomes can be then transferred to the municipality or other relevant decision maker; however, the effect can be hindered. Neither result is ideal and desired, therefore selecting the right leadership is a crucial part of a successful participatory process.

In the participatory processes within the development projects it is important to recognize the main decision makers with necessary competences. In planning processes, the municipality is often such actor and it needs to carry the responsibility of these processes. The stakeholders are of crucial importance as well and they are required to cooperate the main decision maker to be relevant partners. The key decision maker besides being aware of its leading role must be the carrier of the vision and be responsible for fulfilment of the project objectives. It also needs to recognize the hidden interests and attempts to unequally steer the process into undesired directions.

4.5. Long road to success

Planning projects often stretch over a longer period of time and, moreover, their impact shapes the territory for even longer. Therefore, there is always a risk that the launched initiatives do not meet its objectives, they are changed during the project lifetime and in the end, they do not turn into success. Frequently their unsuccessful delivery is coded in the initial stages. When the continuity of the project is not ensured and the project misses the necessary strategies and actual measures in accordance with the vision and objectives, the outcome might not meet the desired objectives.

The factor of success in projects often lays in resolute decision of the project leaders as the main decision makers to launch a long-lasting project including participatory process where the stakeholders are directly included during the whole period of the project. The precondition of successful project is a well-defined and accepted vision which is adhered to during the whole project. The vision can be already formed together with stakeholders and this way to be more welcomed and accepted. Additionally, the decision makers need to strive for continuous participatory process and stay in touch with stakeholders from the beginning to the very end to ensure the continuity of the project and their involvement.

4.6. Voice of the public

The age-old problem of democracy and its forms of voting and discussions is the problem of the voice. The voice of vocal minority vs the silent voice of majority. In other words, to recognize the seeming majority of stakeholders in favour of some particular solution, seeing behind the hidden interests and to identify the true majority of votes in the participatory processes.

To accomplish this, it is crucial to be very careful when summarizing the results from participatory events and to provide the means for more shy stakeholders to express their opinion, not to favour seemingly easier method of letting speak those who want to speak, but to moderate the discussions and balance out the opinions.

To conclude it is necessary to reiterate that any participatory effort is a long process which is ongoing from the very beginning of any project until the very end of the project period and it often continues after the project completion in monitoring and evaluation.

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