



Public Participation in Urban Planning and Strategies

Lessons from medium sized cities in the Baltic Sea Region

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Socio-Economic
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Region at a Glance

Front cover photo

Residents meeting. Planning the Viitannummi housing area. Salo (City of Salo)



People at Chojnice city centre (Samuli Lehtonen).

• Human capital

There has been much discussion about the communicative turn in spatial planning. This turn reflects the changes of local economies and society towards open, globally reaching relationships, and increasing concerns for local environments.

The human and social capital of city inhabitants is an important *potential for revitalisation* especially in restructuring situations. Moreover, increasing participation is an efficient *tool for avoiding social exclusion*, which is often related to restructuring local economies and unemployment. *New innovative arenas and processes* are needed to realise the potential for urban planning, as well as for public policy processes. These innovations are necessary especially for the *silent groups* (children, youth, elderly people, people of different ethnic origins, etc.).

Participatory processes need resources: time, organisational efforts, communication and clear commitment. For the city, it entails increasing criticism and increasing need for argumentation. At a project or strategic level, participation can also be understood as collaboration between economic actors, NGOs and the city, in addition to the public. This shows how the city reflects the needs of other actors in its strategy and policy making.

The case study

A variety of interviews was conducted for this case study. People involved in city strategy-

making and land-use planning were asked, for example, to identify the important actors they are working with. The interviews were analysed with respect to actor-relations or participatory settings relevant to strategy-making and land-use planning. The issue of participation was not raised explicitly in every interview. Covering a broad range of actors, the interviews were conducted by different researchers. This brochure is based mainly on a study of the written interview reports.

Even though the participatory settings and institutional arrangements are different in the MECIBS cities around the Baltic, the topics reflect similar participation-related problems, experiences and projects. National legal frameworks vary, but in the case of issues related to land-use planning, participatory processes are normally subject to steering by law (such as basic public hearings on land use plans). On the strategy-making level, however, legal steering is missing and hence the action is more or less voluntary for the city administration.

Democracy

Participatory processes provide opportunities for directly influencing decision-making. Traditional representative democracy (resident-vote) and the more direct participatory democracy where residents directly communicate with decision makers or planners offer different opportunities. A common practice in smaller municipalities is direct commenting. These different and perhaps new channels of

co-operation between a city and its residents contrast with the current situation, where administration takes place between the city council, representing the older representative democracy, and direct feedback from residents.

• What is the communicative turn?

In the 1970s, the communicative aspects of planning began gaining in importance as the recognition of differences in the identity and knowledge base of people became a central issue. This change has been called a communicative turn in planning. The recognition that all forms of knowledge are socially constructed, that individuals and institutions have different interests and power relations; all these are relevant to communicative planning theory. The turn towards communicative planning was a reaction to earlier comprehensive, rationalistic and technocratic planning theories, predominant in the 1950s and 1960s, which drew on reason and scientifically constructed empirical knowledge. The change was from all-knowing systematised planning to mediating planners.

Theory and practice

It has been argued that this turn has been theoretical rather than real-life and that planning still follows the old paths. In addition, perceptions of the role of the urban planner or city administration in general have changed. Earlier, planning was seen as a non-political

activity, but today, planning activities are considered political and involving power. Currently, the differing interests and power relations of NGOs and businesses, for example, are self-evident in most processes.

Pro et contra

Communicative planning has also been criticised. Some critics say that it is not possible to have a communicative planning process in land-use or strategy merely by increasing communication between stakeholders or promoting public participation. For example, people define a good living environment in differing ways: some prefer an urban, others a more rural setting, to be very simplistic. It can be a catalyst for communication, but can it produce better decisions? The current trend is to increase the opportunities for participation almost everywhere. Planners believe that a participatory process lessens future problems and complaints as the civil society is more involved in formulating decisions.

• Participation and collaboration in the MECIBS cities

Cities have made city administration more public (planning issues, for example, the Internet, leaflets). Administration sees increasing openness and transparency as a way to educate the public and create discussion.

Environment

Environmental initiatives have been a popular tool for bringing new ideas into city administration. Such environmental initiatives include projects targeting local children, for example. Nyköping, Kuldiga and Kokkola, for example, have used education and/or publicity campaigns to activate participation in environmental and sustainability related issues in land-use planning. For instance, Kuldiga has an environmental school for children and the city promotes adult education on environmental

planning issues.

Even though educational campaigns can be effective in the long run, it has been difficult in Kuldiga to implement the issues in planning. Kokkola has been active in promoting participation in topics related to land-use planning and strategy-making (e.g. residents have received questionnaires on a variety of topics from the small scale to strategic level). In the sphere of land-use planning, private developers in Randers are currently between the planner and the future residents, since it is in their interests to know the preferences of future flat owners to ensure good sales. Norrtälje has in place planning co-operation between the planning department, residents and private developers, since developers are responsible for preparing the detailed local plans. In such a situation, it is important that city planners still function as mediators and evaluators in the process.

The level of involvement of private developers, for example, highlights minor differences in local/national systems regarding the arrangement of land-use planning. New housing and development projects should be carefully managed to meet the needs of future residents.

Land-use planning

In land-use planning, one of the basic methods for gathering opinions from the public is to have large hearings in the city hall. But also questionnaires and direct planner-resident contacts were considered effective in preparing two master plans in Kokkola: »Only the brave or otherwise loud people speak up in large meetings« a Kokkola city planner commented. In both Kuldiga and Sillamäe, there were examples of some public interest in administrative actions, but it was usually contradictory (and reactive) to administrative decisions. In Sillamäe, planners considered residents quite active, whereas in Kuldiga, for example, the residents' passivity was interpreted as a

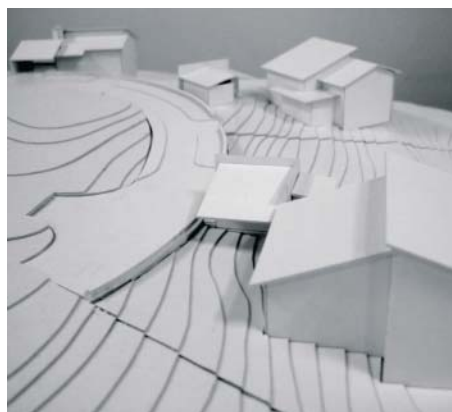
leftover from the Soviet era. In general, city employees in the MECIBS cities understood the potential of involving the public more closely in decision-making.

Local Agenda 21

During the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, it was suggested that municipalities produce their own sustainable development programmes, called Local Agenda 21s. Most municipalities, especially in the Nordic countries, have produced some kind of Local Agenda 21s during the 1990s. In many cities, the Local Agenda 21 has catalysed wide public participation. Thus, the Local Agenda 21 has been an effective tool in mobilising the public to participate in a wide range of issues, from small-scale ecological decisions to strategic questions.

Besides administrative activity, the Local Agenda 21 can function as a driving force for voluntary actions. For example, Randers, Nakskov, Nyköping and the Finnish cities (mainly Salo and Kokkola) have done this.

As the Local Agenda 21 often covers issues of both land-use and strategic planning, it offers a good opportunity to use participatory feedback. In Salo, for example, while a participatory process is in place to contribute to the environmental strategy of the Salo region (consisting of 11 municipalities), it still does not influence general Salo city strategy. The Vyborg sustainable development programme mobilised residents and others to take part, but was unable to affect the "real" planning and development topics of the city. In cities where the Local Agenda 21 was produced by the business sector and politicians or city administration, no attempt was made to mobilise a larger base of stakeholders. In Kuldiga, for example, politicians wanted to rewrite the Local Agenda 21 documents, which they had prepared jointly with the business sector.



Small scale model of the Viitannummi resident planning area, Salo, and the plan of the resident participation area. (City of Salo)





The first house built at the Viitannummi area, Salo. (Samuli Lehtonen)

Whilst Local Agenda 21s have produced best practices on the wider utilisation of participation, it is difficult to use these in the MECIBS cities. However, as city planners have now realised the potential of Local Agenda 21 (or similar projects involving residents) for strategy-making or sectoral topics, such as land-use planning, feedback will certainly be utilised more effectively in future. The restart of Lappeenranta Local Agenda 21 as co-operation with the environmental and planning departments is one such example.

Collaborating with NGO's in Russia

Even though the general public in the Russian MECIBS cities is not as motivated to participate as their Nordic counterparts, the cities have shown strong interest in incorporating NGO's in the planning processes. A coordinating council consisting of the most important local NGO's, functions as an important element in Kronstadt and Pskov. As independent councils they inform the city administration on issues of importance and comment the ongoing decision making processes.

• Innovative practices: an example

The planned Viitannummi housing area is located approximately 3 km from Salo city centre, on 80 hectares of city-owned land near the sea. This new housing area is Salo's first step to exploit the sea which has been an un-

used land use asset in the city, hitherto. A participatory process, where the future residents were able to influence the decisions on their future living environment, was organised by the city planning department in 2004.

The Viitannummi project uses an experimental participation method where eight families are influencing the planning and construction from the very beginning. The future residents help produce building guidelines, which usually come »from above«. Each family reserved a lot by paying a few hundred euros, and had an opportunity to have a say in the construction and other matters as the housing area was built.

The families held 13 meetings, which was a mutual learning process for all participants. The meetings were led by a project coordinator, who served as a link between the future residents and the city. The first meeting identified the possible problems in the participatory process. The families were also briefed on group dynamics. Later, the group reached decisions by consensus, assisted by the coordinator. The decisions were later adopted by the city.

The residents

The positive experiences from the residents' perspective were:

- 1) getting to understand the project,
- 2) getting to know the future neighbours and
- 3) being able to influence decisions affecting their future living environment.

The first point illustrates how the future residents were unfamiliar with the wide range of aspects related to the planning of a new housing area. Learning was a central aspect of the process.

The second positive experience contributes to future problem-solving, creating a feeling of safety and a good general atmosphere.

The third point, empowerment, was the most concrete of the three positive experiences. The participants felt they actually got more than they had paid for, because they were able to influence many of the visual and functional aspects of their future neighbourhood. The participants also identified a negative aspect in the process. The final decisions were often based on ideas presented by the coordinator, sometimes without options,

Resident meeting. Planning the Viitannummi housing area, Salo. (City of Salo)



which led to the perception that the coordinator had too strong a position within the group.

City officials

City officials had almost nothing negative to say. They recognised two positive outcomes:

- 1) strengthening the sense of community in the area, and
- 2) transferring the workload from planners to future residents.

The first point was important for the residents' feeling of safety and stronger commitment to the area. The second point illustrates the participation by residents in defining the construction of the area. Moreover, the group had their own coordinator and so less explanation was needed. Some of the council members thought it was too expensive, and perhaps too time consuming (too many meetings).

Although experiences were positive among the planners and city council, it was a pilot project and will likely not be used again on such a scale. However, smaller-scale resident participation should be implemented to improve the quality of the living environments (e.g. planning of recreational areas, green structures) in areas already built.

• Criticism of participatory planning processes

In Finland, the Land Use and Construction Act from 2000, making participatory processes obligatory in a range of planning activities, has been criticised from the land use planners' point of view. As these critical points are common among the Baltic Sea states, a review of criticism by Finnish planners is also valuable outside Finland.

Although the criticism may largely be based on recent changes in the planning profession, planners in the MECIBS cities seem somewhat puzzled by this new legal obligation.



Hidden agenda?

According to the Finnish interviewees, the new Act offers good opportunities for residents and other stakeholders to appeal against plans. However, appeals are not necessarily direct and honest, but have a hidden agenda. Now, environmental issues can serve as potentially useful arguments that have strong backing and acceptance from the EU. The hidden agenda behind the apparent environmental argument might be solely economic, protecting only private objectives. The Finnish interviewees in the MECIBS project observed that the Finnish law might provide a tool for unjustifiably slowing down the processes. It is also suspected that it might be difficult to get people interested in planning and plans. Fears of potential negative effects of planning will often trigger responses (appeals) to plans. This reactive way of responding is not a constructive mode of participation.

How to increase participation?

It is possible that residents regard participation as political action, or at least political in terms of its substance, which may lessen their enthusiasm. Residents seem reluctant to participate until they have a problem or a personal interest arising from land ownership, for example. In addition, the weakest residents do not generally take part in participatory processes, yet planning should somehow incorporate their point of view.

Herein lays a very important question: how to get residents to participate? How to make residents see that it is to their advantage to participate, even though their personal (economic) interest might not be strong?

Another question is, is it necessary to attract more participation? Where participatory processes are truly needed, where can they only make the process more difficult? One interviewee saw a connection between the lack of trust in the political system and the lack of

interest in participation.

Many interviewees emphasised the need to find ways to promote constructive participation. However, residents cannot always be constructive in their participation, because plans or alternatives are presented that are more or less decided beforehand. When residents are not provided with ways to be constructive from the outset, responses tend to be reactions to already decided alternatives. A reactive response pattern seems to be more »natural«, because they are not used to civic responsibility.

Experiences like the Viitannummi case show that, provided with the right tools, a constructive participatory process can be created. An alternative suggested by one interviewee would be people chosen by city representatives meeting with representatives of a local residents' organisation.

Large mass meetings were considered good at the beginning of a clear (planning, development) project, but subsequently the participation should be more organised according to some interviewees. As opposed to a broad field of residents, an organised residents' association would help city officials to attract actors.

Representative action by way of associations has not been very popular historically at least in Kokkola and Salo. According to the interviewees, everyone just wants to represent themselves. Distrust of decision makers and city officials is widespread. The interviewees seemed in general to regard the problem of creating wider collaboration and participation as a task for the future. They also thought it was one potential way to gather useful ideas to make better decisions.

Strategy-making

Criticism towards collaboration in strategy-making has usually been caused by a kind of »abstraction gap« between the concrete interests of local residents and the sometimes abstract (as perceived by residents) objectives of various strategy papers. There is a perceived difficulty in attracting interest in ideas at the strategic level. The operationalisation of strategy objectives would be one way of rendering strategy-making more concrete for residents.

• Findings and recommendations

It is useful to make a distinction between the general activity level of the civil society and that related to specific issues. This paper discusses two specific and thematic participatory activities, strategy-making and land-use planning.

City official planning together with future residents, Viitannummi, Salo. (City of Salo)

Findings

1) Motivation

The motivation to participate is higher when the issue at stake is concrete and directly affects the living environment of the participants. Likewise, motivation is lower when the issue is more general or abstract, such as city strategies. Similarly, action concerning the local neighbourhood attracts more interest than regional projects. The more concrete the objectives are, the stronger the personal interest seems to be. However, a key question is how to incorporate concrete issues on the strategic level so as to bridge the gap between abstract strategy and concrete local plans.

2) Activity of the civil society

Civil society is more or less active everywhere. A major issue is how city administration can incorporate the ideas provided by an active civil society into administrative processes.

This can be done by acknowledging the past and present joint activities of the local administration and residents or NGOs. Local Agenda 21 processes are a good example of how to gather feedback from widely mobilised actors.

3) Major decisions and the participatory process

Collaboration and participation are not generally perceived as a central factor in the main activities of city administration, and civil society is not often brought up in connection with the major decisions and strategies of the city. The main actors in regard to the rene-

Organising participation – as compared to the assumed abstraction level of different planning processes.

	Abstraction high (long time period)	Abstraction medium (long time period)	Abstraction low (near future)
Groups chosen	Strategy-making		
Groups partly chosen		Master Plan / Local Agenda 21	
All welcome			Neighbourhood level physical plans

ration of the MECIBS project are usually development managers, major educational institutions and the business sector.

4) Proactive vs. reactive collaboration

Conflicts, especially those arising from land-use decisions, usually serve as a trigger to (re)activity.

Proactivity seldom arises in conditions where »everything is fine«. Proactivity can be promoted but requires a commitment by city administration. It is also important to identify any ongoing collaborative activities, because actors from outside the city and its business sector can provide valuable feedback for strategic and land-use planning. The attitudes of administrative staff are particularly important here, because they determine what is actually seen as important.

Recommendations

General examination and understanding of

the resources of public and civil society is useful in every city. Proactive collaboration can prevent reactive actions. City administration can promote proactivity.

Land-use planning:

- Future planning: engagement of future residents at an *early stage* in new planning processes
- Built areas: enabling residents to influence decisions having an impact on their living environments

Strategy making:

- Incorporate Local Agenda 21 (or similar) feedback into the general city strategy
- Civil society involvement in strategy making, e.g. engagement of NGO representatives in strategy making processes.
- Identifying past and present collaborative activities of the local administration and residents or NGOs. Increasing communication between city sectors.

MECIBS

This folder summarizes the findings of a case study carried out as part of the Interreg IIB project *Medium Sized Cities in Dialogue Around the Baltic Sea (MECIBS)*.

Financing: The partners and EU (Interreg IIB, Baltic Sea Programme). Supplementary funding obtained from the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Baltic Sea Facility) and the Danish Organisation for International Co-operation.

Aim: Within the overall objective to foster balanced spatial development by sustaining the development of medium sized cities the project aims at: (1) understanding urban restructuring based on comparative and concrete examples, (2) forming recommendations for the interplay between local and national strategies based upon a bottom up process, (3) forming recommendations within an integrated perspective on economic, environmental and social development and (4) forming a network of medium sized cities to facilitate exchange of experiences and mutual learning.

MECIBS partners: GERMANY: Leibniz-Institute for Regional Development and Structural Planning; DENMARK: Municipalities of Randers and Nakskov; Chamber of Commerce and Industry Herning-Ikast-Brande; Centre for Forest, Landscape and Planning, KVL (lead partner); Dep. of Marketing, Southern Denmark University; Dep. of Geography, University of Copenhagen; SWEDEN: Municipality of Nyköping; Dep. of Regional Planning, Royal Institute of Technology; FINLAND: Municipalities of Salo, Kokkola and Lappeenranta; Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, Helsinki University of Technology; NORDIC COUNTRIES: Nordic Centre for Spatial Development, Nordregio, Stockholm;

Associated partners: GERMANY: Municipality of Jüterbog; SWEDEN: Municipality of Norrtälje; RUSSIA: Municipality of Vyborg Region, Municipalities of Kronstadt and Pskov; Leontief Centre, Sct. Petersburg; ESTONIA: Municipality of Sillamäe; Public Science Academy; LATVIA: Municipalities of Valka, Kuldīga and Bauska; Department of Geography, University of Latvia, Riga; POLAND: Municipality of Chojnice; University of Gdansk.

More information: www.MECIBS.dk



Medium Sized Cities in Dialogue
around the Baltic Sea

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ISBN 87-7903-228-1



European Commission
Structural Funds