SUPPORTING LOCAL PARTICIPATION: LESSONS FROM THE POLOK PROJECT

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Abstract: The paper is based on the project PoLok – support for local initiatives, initiated and lead by the Institute for spatial policies. The project brought together initiatives and people actively participating in the creation of resident-friendly neighborhoods. The objective was to empower local initiatives in order for them to become involved in planning the area in which they live, through participating in decision-making processes. The main tools of the project were: workshops - dealing with local initiatives, usually focused on particular urban issues; seminars - addressing broader issues relevant also at the national level. Due to decades of low trust, inappropriate ways of planning, dysfunctional legislation and un-proportionally emphasized role of the investors in spatial planning, the gap between local initiatives and institutions has been increasing. Lately this has been imposing quite an obstacle in several urban regenerations and new projects as well. Therefore new methods of including local residents in spatial planning are clearly needed – on the local and national level, otherwise more conflicts in the field of urban planning could be expected, which would eventually negatively affect all the related stakeholders. Long-term collaboration of all participants in a spatial planning process – including residents, local and national administration, investors, and professionals – provides the most efficient means of improving the quality of life and meeting the expectations of all parties involved. Through the implementation of the project it became evident, that an intermediary body, which would stand in between the local residents, administration, investors and professionals, is needed. This was also the role that was attributed to the partners carrying out the project by various participants in spatial planning processes.

Key words: spatial planning, local initiatives, institutions, local participation, PoLok project

PODPORA LOKALNIM POBUDAM: IZKUŠNJE PROJEKTA POLOK

Povzetek: Prispevek temelji na projektu PoLok – podpora lokalnim pobudam, katerega prijavitelj in vodilni partner je Inštitut za politike prostora. Projekt PoLok povezuje pobude in ljudi, ki dejavno sodelujejo pri ustvarjanju prijaznih sosesk. Namen projekta je opolnomočiti lokalne pobude za soodločanje pri urejanju njihovega življenjskega prostora s pomočjo vključevanja v procese odločanja na lokalni ravni. Glavne dejavnosti projekta so seminarji, delavnice in spletna stran. Delavnice so bile namenjene konkretnim lokalnim pobudam, seminarji naslavljajo širšo tematiko, relevantno na nacionalni ravni. Posledica desetletij trajajočega nizkega zaupanja, neprimernih načinov načrtovanja, disfunkcionalne zakonodaje in pretirano poudarjene vloge investitorjev v prostorskem načrtovanju je tudi povečujoča se vrzel med lokalnimi pobudami in institucijami. Prišlo je celo do tega, da je slabo sodelovanje med institucijami in lokalnimi pobudami oziroma prebivalci resna ovira v implementaciji raznih projektov prenove. Očitno se kaže potreba po novih mehanizmih vključevanja lokalnih prebivalcev v prostorsko načrtovanje, na lokalnem in nacionalni ravni, sicer lahko na tem področju pričakujemo še več konfliktov. Ti namreč prizadenejo vse deležnike, prebivalce, institucije in konec koncev tudi investitorje. Dolgoročno sodelovanje vseh vpletenih v prostorsko načrtovanje (lokalnih prebivalcev, uprave, investitorjev in profesionalcev) predstavlja najboljši način izboljšanja kvalitete življenja na lokalni ravni in izpolnjevanja pričakovanj vseh vpletenih. V projektu se je izkazalo, da obstaja očitna potreba po vmesnem organu, ki bi povezoval prebivalce, upravo, investitorje in profesionalce. To je bila tudi vloga, ki so jo udeleženci v projektu največkrat pričakovali od partnerjev, ki so projekt vodili.

Ključne besede: Prostorsko načrtovanje, lokalne pobude, institucije, participacija na lokalni ravni, projekt PoLok

Introduction

Local participation in spatial planning is a necessity. Participation is an intrinsic part of democracy, which requires engagement of citizen in the decision-making process on the regular basis, not only at the polls every our years. To foster and implement participation, *the balance between authority and participation may lean more to participation at the local than is the case at the national level* (van Beckhoven 2006:66).

Planners may know particular areas within the cities well, but not as well as the local residents. It is the residents who know their needs, preferences, ideas, and emotions, and who wish to live in a pleasant environment (Diers 2006). It is therefore impossible or at least irresponsible to plan a particular urban or rural area without cooperating with the locals.

At present, the development processes in urban areas are typically initiated by the private sector. In these circumstances interests of local residents, who instead of aiming for profit aim for quality of life can present an important balance to the interests of private capital. Participation of local residents is therefore crucial for sustainable and balanced spatial development and provides local administration with legitimate alternatives for particular development initiatives.

It should be noted that local participation can sometimes turn away from fruitful engagement in the spatial planning process. It sometimes is reduced to a so-called nimby-ism, a process in which local residents oppose particular projects just because they are planned in their local areas and are in conflict with particular interests of a limited number of residents. In such cases, local participation is often not particularly helpful for local decision makers, but such open expressions of particular interests should still be taken into consideration. After all, an appropriate response and the need for convincing arguments from the officials can still help in the development of the project and positively affect the acceptance of the project among the rest of the population and thus raise the level of trust in the institutions.

1. Rationale for the approach used

1.1 History

When discussing local participation specifics in the case of Slovenia, its historical perspective should certainly be analysed as well. During the 1970s and 1980s the so-called self-management socialism was developed in Slovenia, which involved an extensive amount of top-down involvement of citizens with very limited effect on actual decisions. Many socially active people were obliged to participate in very long formal discussions about plans and policies that were too detached from them to be really considered by them as important. Often the result of such participation was planned in advance. Such participation was often even planned with an intention to exclude people from decision-making process (Ploštajner, Černič – Mali, Sendi, 2004: 21). In effect, the decades of self-management socialism had negatively affected the interest of citizens for participating in the formal decision-making process at all levels.

Participation in Slovenian large housing estates was also analysed according to Arnstein's concept – a ladder of citizen participation. It was claimed that participation is on the level of *tokenism*, according to Filipovič and Dekker, "*the objective here is to give residents a voice and to ensure that this voice is heard; however, policy-makers are still not obliged to actually comply with their requests*".

The estimation was based on comparison of the neighborhood participation in large housing estates in Slovenia and Netherlands.

1.2 Trust

After the collapse of the self-management socialist experiment, the liberal democracy was established in the beginning of the 1990s. Even though the expectations about the new social system were set high, many of the 'old system' problems still remained. This applies also to participation in spatial planning, which remained more or less dysfunctional. Nevertheless, the roles of the actors in the spatial planning processes changed thoroughly. After the political and social transition, property of the land became the dominant determinant in all planning and private investors became a decisive agent in the planning processes. Consequently, local communities became very limited when trying to plan their local development according to the common interests of the local community. Instead, the interests of investors often prevailed with respect to the interests of local communities. Due to the newly gained power of the capital owners, the dominance of the investor's side in the planning processes became tolerated by the institutions and after a while even taken for granted. Eventually, this has severely diminished the trust in local institutions.

It should be noted here that trust in local administration or city government is crucial for functional cooperation between the decision-makers and local residents (Stanič 2005: 2). Otherwise participation is perceived as pointless, because of the perception '*there is nothing an individual or a group of individuals could change in this city*'. Grounds for constructive participation are most severely affected by the lack of trust. Consequently interest for participation among the individuals is very low, unless there is a particular threat, meaning that a local community is mobilised by a plan or project that local residents perceive as severely threatening the quality of (daily) life at the local level.

To conclude, the level of participation in spatial planning is at present quite low, which can partly be explained through the historical perspective, and which is to a certain point shared also with several other east European states as well.

1.3 Reduced participation

In the case of Slovenia it could be argued, that the level of participation is often reduced to the so-called nimbysm (NIMBY = Not In My Back Yard) or plain opposition (Križnik, 2008: 77). That is participation in which no alternatives are presented - just plain negation of the planned projects. This kind of opposition can also

be quite militant, which limits the possibilities for negotiations and cooperation between local communities and local or national institutions.

The interest for participation is usually very low until some new local plans are presented. That might sound quite normal, but what we would like to emphasise is that there is an obvious lack of proactive participation. Very rarely communities contact local administrations with ideas how to regenerate a degraded ground within their neighbourhood, for instance. Cases have been noted in which no one cared about a particular plot of land within the city, which had been severely degraded for years, and when a plan to build on that land was presented, a local initiative was formed. Local residents opposed the plan, even though they have previously not shown any kind of interest for the mentioned plot of land. However, the opposition directed at the new plan was severe and in some of the cases even legal charges were filed against the city administration.

In general the level of Slovenian participation could be estimated as concerning, mainly because there are almost no signs from which we could conclude that the share and quality of participation is increasing. Still, we can note that the number of local initiatives is increasing, but this could at least partly be explained by the fact that the amount of new development projects had increased, especially before the economic crisis. Another part of the explanation could be dysfunctional legislation at the national level – inclusion or participation of the community or public organizations is envisaged after the plan has already been almost finalised, which strongly limits for the possibility of plans to be changed because of the opinions of the local residents.

To sum up, the participation has been labelled as dysfunctional for all the involved parties:

- Investors think it prolongs the preparation of the projects. Projects with opposition from the local residents are often implemented with a delay or the implementation fails permanently.
- Residents feel unable to address or even influence development projects, therefore opposition is the main response towards spatial planning.
- City administration and city government fail to realize and defend public interests or at least fail to give an impression they defend public interests, the result of which is lack of trust towards the local and national institutions.

2 The approach in the PoLok project

In order to address the described problems of dysfunctional participation in Slovenia the PoLok[1] project was conceived and implemented. The aim of the project was to empower local initiatives in order for them to become actively involved in planning the area in which they live, through participating in decision-making processes at the local level. The project rests on the belief that long-term collaboration of all participants in a spatial planning process – including residents, local and national administration, investors, and professionals – provides the best and most efficient means of improving the quality of life and meeting the expectations of all parties involved.

The project was supported by a grant through the EEA Financial Mechanism (supported by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism. It was also supported by the Government Office for Development and European Affairs. Trajekt[2] and CBNRM Net[3] were partners in the project.

The project brought forward two main tools for improved participative practices. The first one was the model of local partnership, in which local residents, institutions, and private actors would work together towards improving the quality of life in a specific area. Key features of such a model were set and partially tested within the project. The second tool was improved networking of local initiatives between themselves, with local and national institutions and with expert organisations. A web platform was established to support networking, but the main activities to facilitate improved networking within the project were seminars and workshops. Seminars offered a wider perspective on the issue of local participation. This involved promotion of the benefits of local participation to a wider audience as well as dissemination of the information and knowledge regarding public participation to local initiatives, professionals, public administration and institutions dealing with spatial planning. On the practical level, various workshops were organised. The purpose of workshops was to include the local initiatives into spatial planning processes at the local level, and to establish a link between the local initiatives and the city administration, in order to improve the cooperation between them.

2.1 Seminars

The main purpose of the seminars was to promote the benefits of local participation and to disseminate knowledge and information regarding local participation in spatial planning.

Focus of the first seminar was set on the local initiatives and the general public interested in local participation. The attendance of the seminar was well above our expectations. After the presentations, clearing some theoretical issues about participation, and presenting recent experiences of local initiatives, a very lively

[1] The acronym PoLok comes from the Slovenian words »podpora«, meaning support, and »lokalnim«, meaning local.
[2] http://www.trajekt.org/
[3] http://www.cbnrm.net/

debate took place, which eventually had to be interrupted due to limited available time. As it turned out, local participation was a very relevant topic. Many questions were raised, however. Participants were mostly interested in how to get involved in the planning processes at the local level and especially how to participate in it fruitfully. Lessons provided from the examples of recent good practice in Slovenia were not all encouraging.

The second seminar was targeted at the institutions and professionals dealing with spatial and urban matters. Representatives of institutions, such as local and national administrations, as well as planning practitioners were invited. The attendance was not as good as in the first seminar. It proved to be rather difficult to deal with the institutions and the response was less positive. The problems of competences arose, when the responsibility for participation was passed from one department to another. Hierarchical decision-making within the institutions also posed a problem. Although individual employees within administrations were aware of the problems and keen to cooperate with local initiatives, they were limited in their ability to make a change, because participation has a very low priority on the agendas of head officials and politicians.

That's why a high-profile public event was also held to further promote local participation to a wider audience. This was a round table in English language, chaired by Lars Soeftestad from CBNRM Net and Supras consult addressing the role of the civil society in urban planning, featuring distinguished guests, including the President of the National Assembly and the head of the Urban planning department of the City of Ljubljana. While the guests more or less unanimously stressed the important role of participation in planning processes, the comments from the public revealed the wide gap between the declared need for participation and the actual practices in urban planning.

2.2 Workshops

Workshops were organised in cooperation with specific local initiatives, addressing their direct problems and needs. In the first workshop the management of the local traffic situation in a particular neighborhood in Ljubljana was discussed. The workshop was attended also by the representatives of the district administration, local police station, traffic wardens, and city officials. The results were very satisfying, but the implementation of the results into practices at the level of the city administration is so far still lacking.

The second workshop was organized in the city of Maribor, and was dedicated to an initiative for setting up an inter-generational center in a degraded part of the city. The purpose of the workshop was to link the local civil society organization that expressed the initiative with national and local institutions dealing with inter-generational issues. The goal was partly accomplished, as collaboration between the local initiative and some relevant institutions working on the same topic was established further steps agreed, but on the other hand a few very important institutions were missing at the workshop.

In the next workshop the principles of a successful spatial plan for a village in the Karst region was discussed. The reason for the workshop was the growing gap between the different concepts of local development with municipality on the one hand and local initiatives on the other hand. The main outcome of the workshop was the commitment made by the municipality officials, that they would organize consultations with the local communities regarding the municipal spatial plan.

The last workshop was focused on a case of a local partnership for a cultural district in the eastern part of the Ljubljana city center. Even though the case was rather specific, it addressed a key issue. In the seminar the potentials of a local partnership involving local initiatives, city institutions, and potential developers were discussed in depth. As already mentioned, the concept of local partnership was one of the key tools for improved local participation developed and promoted within the PoLok project.

2.3 Final conference

The results of the project were summarised at the final conference. Apart from the short presentation of the main outcomes of the project a round table was also organised. Guests from different backgrounds expressed very interesting viewpoints about local participation and agreed among others on the conclusion

- That the national legislative framework does not adequately include participation in the spatial planning processes, but
- That this fact should not be an excuse for not practicing informal participative practices nor for the passive position of the civil society organisations when dealing with spatial planning.

3 Conclusions

As it was analysed in the article above, the level of participation in spatial planning processes in Slovenia is low, which should concern planners and professionals on the local and national level. Due to the low trust, bad experiences from the past, and non-transparent procedures, people lost faith in institutions, politics, and professionals dealing with spatial matters. The result is that people are no longer willing to participate in the spatial planning processes. unless there is an obvious threat. Therefore most of the Slovenian participation is focused on opposing particular projects, mostly at the local level.

The PoLok project addressed the phenomenon of local participation in Slovenia, theoretically and practically. The theoretical part was stressing the importance of the participation and analysing local participation in the spatial planning. On the practical level seminars and workshops were organised.

One conclusion was that there is a great need for more and earlier participation in spatial planning processes and more transparent procedures. Another conclusion was that the gap between institutions and local initiatives could be described as very wide and harmful for spatial planning in general. It would be naïve to expect that the situation can change fast - trust is regained on the long run, but even so, immediate actions are required, especially on the part of professionals, institutions and city officials at the local and national level.

Acknowledgements

Lars Soeftestad (CBNRM Net and Supras consult) was asked to comment the article, which he kindly did. We were only able to include his comments partly, due to time constraints.

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