

## Urban spaces – enhancing the attractiveness and quality of the urban environment



### **WP3 Joint Strategy**

#### **Activity 3.2 Criteria and Principles**

## **Sub-activity 3.2.2 Public participation criteria**

Elaborated by:

**PP03 Nadace Partnerství, Czech Republic**

**PP02 Nadácia Ekopolis, Slovakia**





## Authors:

Martin Nawrath, Nadace Partnerství

Magdalena Hledíková, Nadace Partnerství

Petra Šilberská, Nadace Partnerství

Helena Lenda, Nadace Partnerství, external expert

Martina Paulíková, Nadácia Ekopolis

Lucia Skokanová, Nadácia Ekopolis



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## Content:

1. Introduction	4
2. Theoretical section dealing with the issues covered by the subject of the working paper	5
3. Project case studies illustrating the application of the theoretical issues in a practical context of specific projects	8
4. Possible relationships/interface between the subject matter of the working paper and the topics of the other five working papers	9
5. Conclusion: Implications of the subject matter of the working paper for good design of urban spaces - this might form the basis for part of the joint strategy	11
6. Literature and picture credits, acknowledgements, etc.	15



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## 1. Introduction

Public participation in decision making processes – participation of residents – has taken on a new dimension as the concept of sustainable development has evolved. In one of the very first international documents on sustainable development principles, **Agenda 21**, strong emphasis was placed on the role of the local community in fulfilling the sustainability concept. If we accept the general definition that sustainable development consists of balanced economic, environmental and social development of an area, then securing a sufficient amount of information about the condition of a specific town or city is a prerequisite for finding conditions for sustainability. Public participation is an essential part of gathering information and providing feedback about the development character of a given place. It is generally maintained that a balanced extent of public involvement in joint decision making about town development strengthens citizens' ties to the town and secures long-term support of implemented policies or investments (private or public) or proposed concepts (land use plan, etc.). Even the greatest political or financial support of a project, policy or concept is ineffective without broad public support and can turn against the investor or town leadership.

In the international context, the fundamental document covering this area is the **Aarhus Convention**. It is a general summary of rules for public participation in decision making. Development planning is discussed in Article 7 of the Aarhus Convention, which expressly states that the public should be involved in preparation of plans, programmes and concepts that concern the environment to a greater or lesser degree. Certain key responsibilities for effective public participation in decision making stem from this document. They include public access to information, active information provision, direct consultation with citizens and public participation in planning and evaluation of planning processes from the perspective of public participation.

Strong emphasis on public involvement, local and regional authorities in shaping plans and implementation of projects of landscape planning and the procedure for their environment puts the **European Landscape Convention**.

Public spaces are practically ideal projects for participatory processes. They are relatively clearly delineated, citizens use them almost daily and they bring together a number of topics relating to environmental protection, safety, leisure time, etc. that make them an attractive topic for residents.



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## 2. Theoretical section dealing with the issues covered by the subject of the working paper

Public participation in public space improvement projects is based on general principles of working with the public. A number of specific techniques have already been developed in this field and are used with success. On a general level, these techniques may be divided into two basic areas:

### 1. Informing the public

### 2. Active public participation in planning and review/comment processes

These areas usually overlap and informing the public takes place in parallel to project planning and review/comment processes. The techniques are also combined owing to the need to use different methods to address various target groups affected by the project.

Commonly used techniques in planning of public space improvements include:

- **Internet applications**

The Internet portals of towns, cities and sometimes other entities may be used for a wide array of information provision and planning methods. Citizens may receive basic information in written and graphic forms, vote for proposed variations, write comments or even join in a public discussion of a given project through a website. When employing these techniques, it is important to realise that only a certain share of residents participates, which means that the opinions obtained do not comprise a representative sample of public opinion (opinions of seniors and people with lower levels of education are usually absent). But in many cases Internet applications are a very fast way of obtaining comments; however, they do need to be supplemented by other techniques.

- **Printed materials – articles in local media, flyers, etc.**

Articles in local newsletters are usually the easiest and a relatively inexpensive way to inform the public. Use of media must be based on the assumption that the given periodical has an appropriate readership level and distribution method. In the case of more complicated projects, stand-alone printed materials devoted solely to the project may be used (flyer, brochure, invitation to a planning event, etc.).

- **Local television and radio**

Cities and towns may also promote a project through two very popular and frequented media – local or regional television and radio – as local opportunities allow.

- **Happenings**

These cultural-social events may draw attention in a suitable way to problems that need to be addressed, attract public interest and also offer an untraditional view of a given site, its use, etc.

- **Questionnaires and surveys for various groups of citizens**

Surveys and questionnaires are an ingrained method of opinion gathering. In regard to planning public space improvements, their use is based on the assumption that the public is already informed about the project; this activity is not a suitable way to initially address the public. A questionnaire should be clearly and precisely formulated (without manipulative questions) and include space for respondents to give comments and opinions in their own words. Questionnaires are used not only to obtain responses to questions or to enable critiquing, but also for e.g. drawing places, elements, etc. on aerial photographs or site photographs. Key players in the community may be used in distribution of blank questionnaires and return of completed questionnaires; publicly accessible collection points or postage-paid return envelopes are less effective.

Questionnaires are also an information provision technique in that they also serve to inform citizens that a given project is being prepared.

- **Interactive exhibits**

Exhibits of photographs depicting changes to a city or specific public space, older designs and plans (either implemented or unimplemented) or children's drawings of their ideal city and similar topics are fitting opportunities for initiating community discussion about planning the future of a specific public space or future development of a city/town. They are also a suitable way of attracting the public to review and comment on a new land use plan. The event must be well promoted; it is probably easier to promote an exhibit than review and comment of a land use plan. An exhibit may be supplemented by morning events for children and youth or seniors, while in the afternoons planning meetings or meetings with key players may take place. It is important to remember to leave space for comments and ideas.

- **Mapping public spaces**

During their regular walks around town, volunteers (preferably of various ages, neighbourhoods, lifestyles, etc.) record on a prepared form (or just on paper) elements such as dangerous intersections, very narrow sidewalks, sections without bike paths where cyclists have to share the road with cars or sidewalks with pedestrians, poorly located fences and railings that cross frequented sidewalks and pedestrian routes, slippery surfaces, etc. They send their results to a predetermined entity for processing. The output is a database of problems that may be addressed ad hoc in public space improvement projects or comprehensively in land use plan development.

- **Citizens' map**

Creating a map of public spaces that residents consider important and valuable and which they hope will be preserved in future. Or on the other hand, a map of problematic or dangerous places. The map is best created at frequented and easily accessible places – such as directly on a street or square, in the entry of the town hall or other public office or in a cafe or shopping centre. On a large map of the city/town passersby may identify sites that they would like to show their descendents in 25 years and/or that they consider

important or characteristic for their town, etc. with a coloured pin, marker or post-it note with a comment. Another variation is to pose questions to create a map of negatively perceived places. There should be enough volunteers on hand at the map to explain to passersby the purpose of the event and to invite them to stop by. It is also appropriate to have a place for recording more extensive opinions and ideas. The result is spatially highly visible collections of flags or marks in certain parts of the city. The results may serve as background material for further activities (e.g. interpretation of town heritage, tourist development strategy, safety strategy, etc.).

- **Public meetings and consultations with key players**

When obtaining public opinions (comments) on planned interventions to public spaces, it is sometimes fitting to work with representatives of important groups of the public. In every city there are formal and informal associations of people ranging from parents' associations to sports clubs all the way to seniors' clubs and civic associations and initiatives. These represent a certain segment of the community and if they are willing and capable of collecting opinions from their group, a meeting can be held with their representatives. This method assumes initiative on the part of the local government and its willingness to accept these comments as suggestions from a broader and more relevant group of city residents.

- **Managed visioning of the city's future**

It is very difficult for some groups of the public to understand the process of developing a public space improvement or land use plan. Such people may include e.g. children or youth, who, although they will carry the consequences of today's decisions, do not have any opportunity to influence these decisions. The managed visioning method can be used essentially with anyone. It is a meeting during which participants are "transferred" into the future of their ideal city/town by the reading of a prepared text. In the second part of the meeting, participants work in groups to draw this ideal place and discuss what it should or should not include and how this image differs from the present. Volunteers record the discussion. The results may be used in land use plan development.

- **Planning meeting with an organised walk around a specific site**

Holding a meeting with discussion and an organised walk around a site does not require significant resources but local residents must be thoroughly informed of the event (e.g. placing posters on every building/entrance or invitations into mailboxes). Such meetings should be held near the site and at a suitable time of day, such as early evening. It is important to remember to secure the attendance of local authorities (official decision makers). Any existing older or more recent improvement designs for the site should be available along with old photographs, maps of technical infrastructure networks, etc. Part of the meeting is dedicated to the walk itself. Under the guidance of a facilitator, groups of participants take a walk together around the site. Using blind maps, people stop at specified places on the site, where they discuss the condition of the given place and enter problems, ideas and their findings onto the maps. After returning to the meeting room the participants discuss their findings and after processing they are shared.

- **Observing use of a public space and structured interviews with people**

This method is appropriate for public spaces where implementation of an improvement is planned but the public's preferences are unknown or there are doubts about public reaction. At times when the site is frequented by greater amounts of people, volunteers with maps record people's movements and behaviour and if possible, interview people using a set of prepared questions (what people like/dislike about the site, what the site would have to have for them to meet friends there, etc.). An appropriate tie-in activity can be an afternoon discussion together with an organised walk around the site.

Use of different techniques or their combination primarily depends on the size and type of site, how much time is available and the extent of financial, human and material resources at the disposal of the project implementator. It is not simple to prepare, lead and use a participation process and it is suitable to implement or consult it with an experienced organisation. As indicated earlier, it is a time-consuming process that typically places greater requirements on site analysis and on the organisation as well as the design professional (architect/landscape architect/urban designer). It also requires a strong local partner (a non-profit organisation or other organisation working with the public).

Planning with the public is also more demanding in terms of aids, materials, refreshments and the extent of volunteer work in the evenings and on weekends. Last but not least, this approach requires a certain degree of openness in the thinking of all those involved. But participation clearly contributes to the quality of the resultant project, uses local knowledge, develops residents' social, communication and professional skills, strengthens their ties to the community and to each other and increases their interest in local affairs. Participatory projects usually strengthen natural vandalism controls, reduce protests against a project aim and strengthen community volunteerism.

### **3. Project case studies illustrating the application of the theoretical issues in a practical context of specific projects**

We sought positive and negative examples of public space projects in regard to public participation in the process during the summer of 2009. They mostly included projects supported by the Ekopolis Foundation and Environmental Partnership Foundation through their grant programmes in the past. We looked to these projects primarily because of our familiarity with the planning processes that took place at these sites in the past. We were able to evaluate these processes in relation to how the improved sites are used today and whether they are successful.

Our first step was to create an evaluation questionnaire that we used as a tool for evaluation of the success of the selected public spaces. The evaluation took place through personal visits to public spaces in Slovakia (13) and the Czech Republic (8). Experiences

from other projects also entered into the evaluation. The sites are diverse in terms of type, size and functions. They are located in towns and cities of varying sizes that are as far apart as the westernmost corner of the CR and the easternmost city in the SR. The project initiators were various entities (citizens, local government and private entities).

In particular we evaluated the public participation process during the creation of the given public space in the past, and how the site functions in the present. On the basis of the information obtained, we created a set of criteria on participation that significantly impact the success of a created space. These criteria were discussed at a workshop on 8 September, 2009 in Prague attended by experts and practitioners. The resulting participation criteria are listed in Item 5.

#### **4. Possible relationships/interface between the subject matter of the working paper and the topics of the other five working papers**

The participation criteria relate to the public space planning process above all, and also to the implementation process. Some of the steps and circumstances that appeared in the public space planning process overlap with other topics.

They are primarily the following potential overlaps:

##### ***Environmental aspect***

- *Use of city resources in site improvements. (Criterion no. 7)*

This means human resources (local experts, design professionals, artisans, etc.) and material resources (locally appropriate plants, wood, native architectural elements, etc.) and financial resources. This criterion is important for involving local residents in public space improvements because their ties to such places may be stronger and emotionally flavoured. The environmental aspect consists of conserving resources and energy (transportation of material, people), decreasing the risk of introducing invasive non-native species, etc.

##### ***Gender aspect***

- *All groups of the public must be involved in the planning process and no group should be excluded from the process. (Criteria no. 1, 3, 13 a 21)*

Addressing and working with various groups is an unavoidable assumption underlying success of a public space. Acceptable methods of communication for each group must be used, which secure a sufficient amount of ideas from different groups of the public to be used in design of the public space and to aid acceptance of the resulting design from the earliest stages of improvement implementation. On the other hand this does not lead to exclusion of any group of residents.

### ***Security and social cohesion aspect***

- *Criteria no. 17, 20, 22 – 25*

Involving various groups of the public in a public space improvement project from the very beginning with the opportunity to make decisions creates a feeling of ownership of the given space among the public. This significantly lowers the risk of vandalism and increases the sustainability of the public space (people maintain it, fix it and keep watch over it to make sure it is not damaged).

A favourite site naturally sees more frequent use by people, thus it is not abandoned and people have at least visual control of each other (safety).

Public spaces created in cooperation with the local community, whose members became better acquainted during planning and implementation, are spaces where social ties are formed or strengthened (places for gathering, opportunities to get to know one another during community workparties, etc.).

### ***Accessibility aspect***

- *All groups of the public must be involved in the planning process and no group should be excluded from the process. (Criterion 21)*

In creating public spaces, groups of the public that have specific demands on the public space and its use must not be excluded from the process (parents and children, seniors, the disabled or disadvantaged, etc.). Their ideas and opinions about the site must be collected through personal communication methods.

### ***Urban design/architecture aspect***

- *Criteria no. 4, 12 – 14*

The designed public space must be conceived for everyday life, usable in various types of weather and different seasons. It must offer a sufficient amount of activities for various groups of residents.

The design professional who designs the site does not work with just one client but respects a diverse and larger group of people. This ability to understand the needs of the local community is crucial to creating a quality public space. And the local community becomes educated in the field of design through this process.

## **5. Conclusion: Implications of the subject matter of the working paper for good design of urban spaces - this might form the basis for part of the joint strategy**

### **Methodology**

#### **1. All potential target groups were involved in the project.**

The project was not focused exclusively on a limited group of potential users.

#### **2. There was a clear, externally presented public participation plan with clear timeframes.**

There was sufficient time for participation in all phases of public participation. All potential interested parties should know about the project aims ahead of time, just as they should be informed about subsequent project steps and their timing.

#### **3. Various manners of addressing the public were used in communication, information dissemination and participation.**

Different target groups may be tuned into different types of communication channels. Some people are accustomed to reading the local municipal newsletter, others keep an eye on the notice board, still others respond to personal invitations and others work exclusively through e-mail and the Internet. Good communication is always a combination of these instruments with costs commensurate to the size of the project.

#### **4. The project leader (implementation team) was familiar with participation principles and methodology, understood them and accepted them.**

Public participation takes time, patience and sometimes increases project costs. As a result the implementation team must understand the benefits of participation as well as the work participation requires. Knowledge of planning and public participation methodology stemming from personal experience is an advantage, as transferred experiences do not usually suffice. For participation projects it is appropriate to select proven, communicative architects/designers willing to work with inhabitants' opinions. It is beneficial if the architect/designer has experience with participation projects, too.

#### **5. An external consultant with sufficient experience in public participation, communication and facilitation of public meetings was part of the participation process.**

An external consultant is not absolutely essential but is a very suitable way of securing knowledge of participation processes. Unbiased leadership of the process typically increases the quality of public discussion.

**6. Over the course of the project, citizens were able to find out how the project was developing and how their opinions were used.**

An emphasis on letting people know how their ideas and comments are being used is a crucial part of participation processes.

**7. Local sources were used in project preparation and implementation, particularly in terms of local citizens, important players in the area and local technologies, materials, etc.**

However this principle must be carefully considered in the case of involving experts, who can bring an unbiased and professional approach to the project (architect, facilitator, construction firm, construction supervision, etc.).

## Context

**8. The property owner unconditionally consented to the project aim and accepted responsibility for maintenance.**

The public's (and others') trust in the project is very sensitive to its real results. Without the property owner's agreement with the project aim and without clear delineation of responsibility for post-project maintenance of the site, it is not appropriate to begin a participation project.

**9. The project did not encompass hidden agendas/conflicts (within the team, relating to the project site, in relations with involved groups).**

It is not suitable to undertake participation projects where ulterior interests or potential conflicts are apparent ahead of time. The public participation process itself may not avoid conflicts and conflicts of interest, of course. But potential problems should be sufficiently recognized and assessed ahead of time.

**10. The project implementor puts its own funding/labour/material into project development or implementation.**

The project result should not be dependent exclusively or predominantly on external resources. Project co-financing from local sources guarantees that the project is taken seriously and confirms the community's need for the project.

**11. Monitoring of mistakes and problems served to glean lessons for subsequent events and local community development.**

No project is completely free of mistakes. A monitoring procedure should be part of the implementation process, which will help avoid repeating of mistakes.

## Site

- 12. The project site was locally significant, frequented, accessible and naturally invited use. There was long-term high demand for a change to the site.**

Places that work as informal contact centres attract public interest. Sites where revitalization was perceived as a long-term need work better from a long-term perspective.

- 13. The proposed site design fulfilled the needs of multiple target groups (it did not offer only one function).**

A space that is alive and used works in various times of day and seasons and is thus used by groups of different ages and interests.

- 14. The project design was conceived for everyday life and for various times of day and seasons of the year.**

The design should include ideas for fast, short-term changes as well as mid-term changes and long-term visions.

## Community

- 15. The initial initiative came from the bottom up, not from the top down.**

The project was supported or initiated by the local community.

- 16. The local community was already active prior to project implementation.**

Organisational skills related to involving the public are not a common matter of course. Experience with organising some type of community event can significantly increase the capability to involve the public effectively and to involve citizens who are already active.

- 17. The goal was not simply creation of a place, but creation/strengthening of a functioning team that will endure even after the project is over.**

If the public space revitalisation project is to be participatory/community in character, the implementation team and its consultant should not focus only on the project itself but also on developing the team's skills and on the team sustaining in some form even after project completion.

- 18. The administrative process was well connected, flexible and active.**

Particularly in larger towns and cities it is important for different phases of the project, which are handled by different parts of the municipal authority, to be transferred responsibly and to connect to one another. Their results should be monitored, evaluated and updated.

**19. There was a project initiator in the community, best of all a group that has a natural leader with natural authority in the community.**

Aside from the local government, participation of informal groups and their leaders is important in participatory projects. Such groups may be organised non-governmental organisations or informal associations familiar to local inhabitants, whose representatives are acknowledged by the community.

**20. The initiating group was diverse.**

The implementation team should reflect the diversity of potential project target groups such that minority interests or needs are not neglected in preparation of or during implementation.

**21. There was good cooperation between the initiating group, (e.g.) non-governmental organisation, and municipal leadership.**

In public space projects it is practically impossible to avoid the local government's natural responsibility for public spaces. The municipality is often the owner of the project site and often secures maintenance of the site. Formal processes under the supervision of the municipal administration authority must go hand in hand with the community activity initiating revitalisation of the site.

**22. Citizens took part in project implementation.**

Participation in project implementation, understanding the difficulty of the improvements made and the experience of working on site revitalisation increases inhabitants' relationship to the project, to property, to the constructed public space.

**23. Citizens enjoyed the project.**

The success of participatory planning depends on people not feeling like they are just meeting and carrying out difficult, unpleasant work. Events should be a kind of celebration, i.e. pleasant shared experiences, and the participants should feel pleased with the project results.

## Activities

**24. There were many activities in the community before, during and after site revitalisation.**

A sure sign of community need for site revitalisation is that the site at least partially initiates small activities and there is some type of use even before the improvements are undertaken. A plan of future events and their securing is part of the planning process.



## 25. The project indirectly led to further activity.

The success of participation may be best evaluated by the fact that there are indirect benefits for the municipality (community) after project completion. It may be inhabitants' increased interest in community events, further involvement of local leaders in community life or use of grant proposal writing skills for further applications for financial aid. It may also be indirect mapping of community resources hitherto unused (enthusiastic cooks, informal leaders of children's groups, skilled artisans, informal local artists, etc.).

## 6. Literature and picture credits, acknowledgements, etc.

- **How to Turn a Place Around.** A Handbook for Creating Successful Public Spaces, Project for Public Spaces, 2000.
- **The Community Planning Handbook.** *Nick Wates, Earthscan Publications Limited, 2000.*
- **Action Planning.** *How to use planning weekends and urban design action teams to improve your environment. Compiled by Nick Wates.*
- **Life between Buildings.** *Jan Gehl.*

*October/2010*



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