Web-based Support for Social Participation and Education in Planning Procedures

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Abstract. *The paper is intended to present the methodological structure of web-based mechanisms related to planning procedures, with particular focus on social participation. The tools provide a link between planners and local community members, allow the acquisition of different sets of data, provide detailed information on the environment and planned transformations, serve as a source of detailed information on the procedure, and last but not least play an educational role, which contributes greatly to the understanding of sustainability, cultural sensitivity, environmental issues, planning concerns on a wider scale. Web-related technology provides many opportunities to reach for a wider social participation and simultaneously to receive more representative feedback from the local community. The article will discuss in detail some results of the implementation of the Citizen project – a web-based platform supporting the social participation.*
Keywords: *Spatial planning; social participation; web-based tools; web-based participation; Citizen project.*

Introduction

Social participation in the planning procedures in Poland does not go back to a distant past – it was introduced by the Act on Spatial planning in 1994. However, the mechanisms implemented in these legal regulations proved to be inefficient and have resulted in the process of limiting the social participation to protesting land owners. The term 'social participation' started to become associated, at least as a keyword, with complications in the planning activities especially in the late stages of the planning process, when urban planners presented advanced concepts and solutions. The new act of 2003 extended the provisions concerning the participation, but they are still unsatisfactory and very limited.

The unquestionable importance of the social participation as a source of information, as an opportunity to sample common expectations and concerns, as a communication platform and a factor providing many other applications is marginalized to three elements – capability to submit an application

or plea, public presentation of the final concept of the spatial solution and assuring the ability to comment on this final solution, and eventually the possibility to raise an objection. This limited perception of social participation is a result of a non-systemic and too literary approach to the regulations of law (namely assuming that the procedure is composed only of the elements, that are designated in the Act on spatial planning; I will not discuss this issue any further, but this problem is often referred to as the overregulation of the spatial planning basis).

Town planners and spatial planners may either comply strictly with the legal rules or go beyond them, but then often without any organized support from authorities. The second option is found too promising and too valuable to abandon the effort, thus in 2005, the Citizen project was launched in order to support the P.R.S. method of spatial planning and to equip the team of planners with tools for communicating with members of local societies (Barelkowski and Barelkowska, 2003). To summarize the principles of the theme it is important to mark the necessity to develop true participation that goes far beyond one-way communication (receiving voice of the community), and to avoid the mistakes common not only in Poland (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2002, p. 380)

CITIZEN – the Project and the Feedback

The Citizen project was elaborated and developed especially for the purpose of a large scale master plan for a small municipal community of Kostrzyn, located in the vicinity of the metropolitan area of Poznan. Due to its size (almost 1 km^2) and complexity it was agreed that the ordinary approach would be inadequate and that various elements of the planning procedure must be extended in order for the planning procedure to succeed.

While the planning procedure depends on the ability to process all applications and submittals and at the same time on the ability to settle conflicts, it is crucial to understand not only the nature of spatial
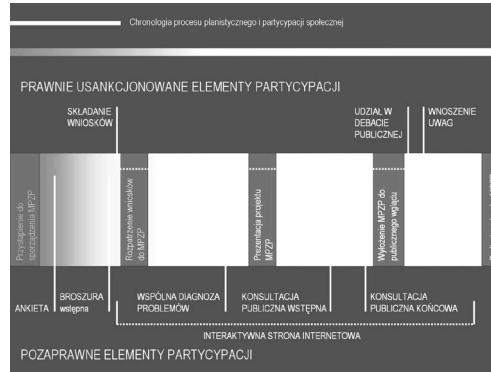
problems, but the diverse patterns of social perception as well. One of the key elements of extending the planning procedures was to implement a wide variety of social participation tools and to establish, hopefully with success, a permanent platform for informing, discussing and educating on the issues concerning the master plan in Kostrzyn.

The Citizen project forms one of the most important contents of this system by providing an internet-based source of information for all participants of the planning procedure including administration, institutions, investors and developers, and last but not least common people. The most important structural contents, including the tools and possibilities of the system, have been presented in the article focusing on the structure of the Citizen project (Barelkowski, 2005). Therefore the material presented herein is focused on the results and effects of as well as conclusions from the implementation, even if the project itself has not been completely closed yet.

Kostrzyn has 9860 inhabitants (according to the 2004 census). Demographics determine the group of possible users of the website that is accessible from the official website of the Kostrzyn community (http://www.kostrzyn.wlkp.pl/) and from alternative website addresses (http://www.mpzp-kostrzyn.armageddon.com.pl/.php, which is an official copy or the most updated working copy http://www.mitu.com.pl/projekty/mpzp/), and the factor of the

internet accessibility in the county (21%) as well as in the town (28%) defines how efficient any web-based information and participation can actually be. Prognoses indicated that it is possible to receive 5% to 12% of respondents of the total population, and between 1.5% to 6.5% of respondents using digital platform. These low estimates can be explained with almost total absence of web-based mechanisms related to the spatial planning in Poland and with the fact that most users of the space are unaccustomed to that platform of the information exchange and to the uniqueness of the implementation outside larger cities.

Form of S.P.	Status	Analog				Digital			
		2005	2006	2007 till now	total	2005	2006	2007 till now	total
Inquiry (filled, valid forms, anonymous)	A-ID	292	21	0	313	14	38	95	147
Brochures (downloads)	P	207	48	5	260	33	153	476	662
Motions	A-ID (L)	158	21	43	222	1	3	19	23
Opinions (filled, valid forms, anonymous)	A-ID	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	11	26	58	95
Web-site (entries – all)	A-ID	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1088	3524	5879	10491
Selected uses (web-site excluded)	n/a	-	-	-	795	-	-	-	917

numbers provided in the table should not be taken as direct.

Petitions and requests were submitted in an analog form mostly – it was due to the legal requirements, as these documents must be legally confirmed and registered, being delivered to the seat of local administration in Kostrzyn and there is no technical possibility to do that in digital. In the remaining patterns of the information exchange a common tendency was observed: analog documents were received easily and quickly after their introduction, giving the highest number of responses. The data submitted digitally was gathered slowly, especially in the beginning, cumulatively becoming comparable or much more efficient in giving orientation both in perception and evaluation of spatial solutions proposed in the master plan.

Significance of web-based support for social participation

The Citizen project has been operational for three years now, providing constant information for all parties involved in the process. All pieces of information gathered by means of Citizen have a tremendous impact on how the procedure has been handled, and, despite the substantial delay, how current solutions have been established and maintained, in the same time remaining up to date. Due to the fact that both areas of social participation – the one proceeded

When the master planning procedure started, the response to extended, web-based sources of information were far better than the internet. But with time the internet access, being permanent and independent of the working hours of the local department or other constraints, proved to become a more stable and effortlessly developing source of data provided by the internet users.

It is not possible to fully analyze the statistic structure of the feedback received due to the variety of sources and largely anonymous group of people participating in the selected forms, but a number of important tendencies can be described objectively. The majority of forms of communication are active, indirect (A-ID), except for the brochures (P for passive). It is also hard to detect whether one user was able to use certain options several times, so the
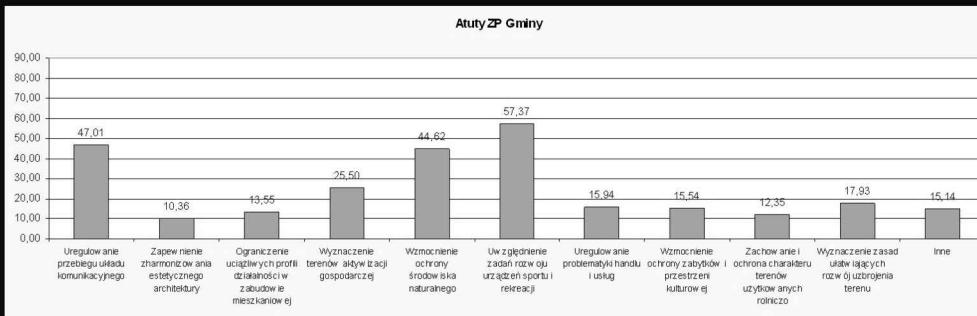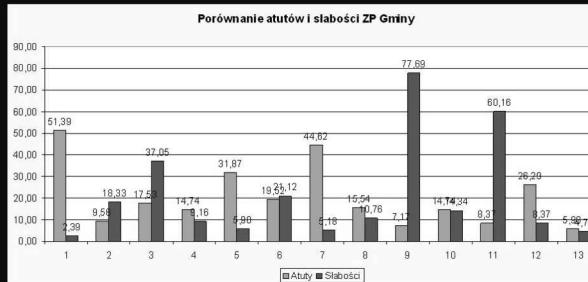
with traditional mechanisms and the web-based one – are used, the immediate comparison between the two indicated tendencies of use as well as efficiency of the analog and digital domains.

There are eight forms of social participation included in the process. Some of them are restricted to analog activities and due to some legal constraints cannot be performed with the use of digital means, yet. These forms of dialogue between planners, authorities and members of the local community can be classified as passive, active - indirect or active - direct. Passive – brochures and various alternative means of communication were used to present and explain the principles of the master plan. Active - indirect required by law – petitions submitted in the preliminary phase and questions in the final phase (not yet processed), are extended with other indirect implementations – inquiries and internet communication. Active - direct required by law – a public debate, it is extended with public diagnosis, consultation and final consultation process.

Even if figures mentioned in the table 1 seem to be small, it has to be emphasized that they represent often a part of the most active members of the local community. While the analog inquiries provided orientation what kind of directions the master plan is expected to take, the digital feedback enabled revisions and significant corrections, yet before the public debate started. The team of planners is given an enhanced precision of approaching various spatial

conflicts represented clearly by the discussion on the development of once agricultural areas in the northern and in the southern parts of Kostrzyn. The master plan concept assumed that a large quantity of plots with highly productive agricultural soil will be reconverted to its original use. The web-based opinions, however, and consultancy organized on the basis of multiple opinions submitted, provided a clear solution specifying which areas can remain as agricultural and which should be converted – in a result of compromise – into developmental zones.

It is worth mentioning that usually inquiries processed with analog tools are targeting local areas, narrowing the responses to those who live in the area. While this kind of approach is appropriate in case of dense urban areas, in peripheral, transformed or newly developed areas it is not possible to be successful in addressing the inquiries to end-users. However, the web-based tools turned out to be helpful in receiving and analyzing a significant number of opinions and viewpoints submitted by people who plan to move to Kostrzyn, although they are members of other communities today (as can be seen in figure 2). This benefit cannot be underestimated.

Significance of web-based support for education on spatial planning

In the opinion of researcher and planners the educative aspect of the Citizen project implementation is equally important and powerful. The website facilitates observation of the evolution of spatial solutions – as it progresses. But it also explains numerous issues related to the spatial planning. In fact such tools as the already mentioned brochures give an ideological and legal background of how and why planning mechanisms work. Other pieces of information available on the website explain more detailed issues included in the master plan.

The detailed information on spatial parameters is also included. It provides the elementary factors: maximum built-up area, minimum greening area, functions allowed, height, developmental categories

and even color palettes characteristic for selected quarters or locations.

There are many culturally rooted and environmentally rooted data which are both explanatory and intended to become common knowledge in order to acquire the understanding and the acceptance of the community. The website introduces the concept of urban typologies and architectural typologies and it attempts to receive the social acknowledgement of many additional triggers related to the concept of the quality of space, as understood by the team of planners.

This kind of implementation is exemplified by the case of the exclusion list of housing typologies and color palettes applicable and allowed to introduce in selected areas. The debate, lasting for over one year, has led to limited simplification of planning restrictions related to the types of buildings and their features, but the majority of restrictions have been defended against the concept of liberal space regulations. This kind of liberal regulations has been defined in recent years as the most depreciating legal factor related to spatial development.

The educative significance enables creation of language which will be comprehended by all parties, because the language of spatial planning for a particular master plan grows and develops with all participants and their exchange of information. This was

the case of Kostrzyn as well, when newly introduced definitions have become now more or less common vocabulary of space (cf. Healey, 2003, p. 246-247).

Conclusions

The planning procedures play a crucial role in establishing sustainable spatial management. In Poland, these procedures involve multiple parties, institutions and individuals, to form legal regulations only, but the aim of the Citizen project as well as the aim of larger P.R.S. method was to extend ordinary procedures and to build systematically complex knowledge about the environment and its various layers and uses.

Undoubtedly, there is a question of how to assure social participation, protect the rights of an individual and at the same time maintain efficiency in preparing developmental areas; a question of how to allow the growth of the community without harming the cultural landscape and with minimized impact on an environment. The issue of speed and efficiency can be gained through some web-based support, as indicated in the presented research.

These aspects of the internet support for master planning or other planning activities enable planners and architects to eliminate more efficiently any potential conflicts, to understand more profoundly the environment they intervene in, to explain their aims and present the arguments behind their assumptions and decisions.

It is, however, clear that the digital domain still only supplements the analog one, and that the latter is the dominant one, at least in Poland in reference to digital tools used for the purpose of social participation. Therefore, there is a necessity of integrating all available digital tools, especially web-based tools, in the most proper way. The appropriate implementation has definitely a great and positive effect on the planning process by assuring the acquisition of different sets of data, unavailable from other sources (at least not so easily available), by providing directly any detailed information on the environment and

planned transformations and in a simple 'layman' approach, by serving as a source of detailed information on the procedure. The Citizen project plays an educational role, too, and it is considered a significant benefit for the understanding of all key planning concerns on a wider scale.

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