

ENGAGING CITIZENS FOR SUSTAINABLE RESIDENTIAL AREAS

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Abstract

In Romania, public information and consultation are performed according to the legislation, during the process of elaboration or revision of urban plans. The local authorities are required to adopt local regulation for public involvement in the development or revision of urban plans. This regulation however, does not state how the public participation will take place in case of financing individual projects included in the urban development plans, or development strategies. The present paper aims to fill this gap, setting out the principles, the means and organizational phases, and also the steps for public consultation for projects developed within residential areas.

Keywords: consultation, public meetings, engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Participation of residents is essential for the success of rehabilitation, renovation or regeneration process of the residential areas, and also for the urban plans/strategies elaboration (Curry, 2012).

Meetings for public consultation on the projects included in the plans and strategies, including those developed within the residential areas, have different objectives, therefore the steps are ranging from simple to complex, including selection of participants and elaboration of the agenda. Main objectives are including:

- Addressing the project type and category;
- Making decisions about locations, funding sources and project beneficiaries involvement;
- Reporting and information disclosure of various aspects within the project deployment;
- Planning, phasing and responsibilities of project participants;
- Registration and evaluating the reactions of participants;
- Any combination of the above.

At the same time, during the programs deployment, the increased cohesion of the beneficiary communities has to be ensured. They have to organize themselves locally, in order to get strong information, to process them and establish a common decision which includes the local effort on the meeting topics or theme.

During the public consultation the following principles have to be applied:

- a) information dissemination: give information to the people, and they will think about problems, implications and will formulate strong views;
- b) request information: it proves previous experience of the community with the authorities, and may initiate constructive dialogue;
- c) coordination: the ability to lead effective public consultation depends on how the team members appreciate the benefits of consultation, how they understand their roles, and how they cooperate with each other;
- d) engaging the public in dialogue: public consultation implies engaging people in dialogue, in a bi-directional flow of information and ideas, between the local authority and the community participants, in order to express their views. Participation in the dialogue at an early stage of the process, would allow detection of any serious potential conflict and would help solve the problems before the conflict, reducing financial losses due to delays.

2. MEANS AND ORGANIZATIONAL PHASES

The information used in certain phases, may be:

I. Before the meeting:

- clarification of topics/objectives, determining the purpose of the meeting and its type;
- objectives, and time evolution of the topic, with time limitation, aiming to reach an essential opinion of the community;
- identification of the participants;
- providing information that may contribute to debates, meeting specific instructions, such as descriptions of project proposals;
- ensuring logistics, including location and equipment needed.

II. During the meeting:

- specifying the restrictions for maintaining a good work environment (e.g. eliminating disturbing elements such mobile phones, etc.);
- respecting agenda with the proposed order of topics;
- permanent monitoring of the proposed meeting time;
- acceptance, during the meeting, of issues related to the theme and encouraging communication for all the participants;
- drawing partial conclusions on topics and establishing the agenda for future meetings (specifying the date).

III. After the meeting:

- implementation of the meeting decisions (schedule for future work, tasks for participants, informing the population etc.).

A fruitful meeting, as specified above, may be obtained by information means, such as:

- letters, emails and/or text messages to individuals potentially affected by the project including landowners;
- letters, emails to stakeholders or other groups;
- advertisements in the local newspapers;
- conferences and press releases;
- hotline that will gather the population opinions on the project;
- permanent displays and information centres;
- dedicated day for community discussions in public places;
- interactive website.

3. PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONSULTATION PROCESS

a. public administration

Public meetings for promotion/developing projects in a residential area may be attended by local council or community representatives without local councillors, providers of public utilities (water supply and wastewater, energy, gas, telecommunications, railways, etc.), providers of local services (public transport, shopping centres managers), representatives of non-governmental organizations - NGOs, landowners, representatives of taxpayers involved, in creating an effective community. The advisory committee may include other people whose presence is considered as necessary.

b. Target groups

Policy makers need to take into account the common interest of the community groups to solve the problem or to reach the project objective (McComas, 2001). These stakeholders include:

- Advocacy groups – those positively or negatively affected by the solution or the project stages, with a specific interest in the project. They may be the community members and may use various forms of advocacy in order to influence public opinion.
- Competence groups - groups including the specialists with knowledge, who own solid information and technical expertise in the project.

- Support groups – relevant local stakeholders related to the chosen policy challenge the city wants to tackle (such as regeneration of a deprived area). These stakeholders are engaged in order to participate in the development and implementation of local urban development policies. (The Urbact II Local Support Group Toolkit, 2013)
- Decision groups - including specialists or decision people on project phases (administrative committees and representatives of the ministry).

Groups for transferring the information and communication – groups outside the communities, holding relevant information for solving the problems, who can support transmission of information (specialists like facilitators, designers, supervisors).

4. TOPICS PRESENTED AT PUBLIC MEETINGS

In Romania the object of the public meeting is information or consultation. The topics presented at the public meetings will be developed based on the objectives proposed in the general/ zonal urban plan or local development strategy/integrated urban development plan approved for each locality or area. The selection of projects proposed for discussion will take into account the eligibility criteria included in the Applicant's Guide.

In organizing public consultation meetings whose results are expected to be efficient, the flow of information must comply the required cycle, highlighted in the figure below:

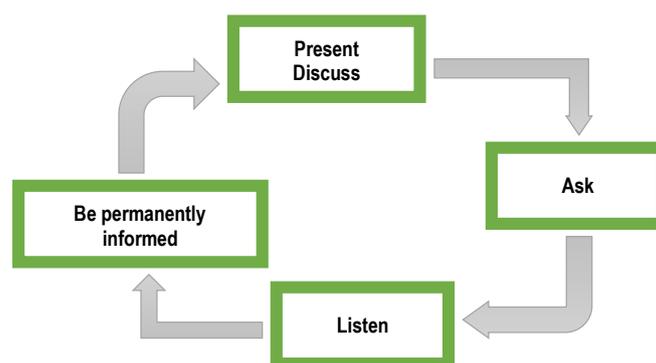


FIGURE 1 - FLOW OF INFORMATION IN A PUBLIC MEETING

Data that can be presented in a public meeting can refer to:

- Projects included in the General Urban Plans; vision, strategic objectives and projects comprised in the Integrated Urban Development Strategies for the cities, Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans, Sustainable Energy Action Plans.
- Socio-economic information such as population density, unemployment rate, education level, minorities.
- Information about transport and parking: motorisation rate, the percentage of public/private / paid parking, public transportation.
- Information about buildings: the year of construction, surfaces, energy consumption etc.

- Residential areas information: housing buildings, commercial spaces, parks, public transport accessibility etc. (Luca, 2009)
- Energy consumption for public lighting etc.
- Area and condition of green infrastructure (Luca, 2015).
- Public spaces condition.
- State of urban infrastructure (water supply and waste water networks, power supply etc.)
- Systems for collection and disposal of municipal waste (Iacoboaia, 2013)
- Precarity level of the area (Luca, 2016)

Description of the area contains one or more maps of the situation presented (Innovation in administration, 2015).

Eligible projects are subject to public discussion, and the City Council, as a direct beneficiary of the proposed works, will inform and consult the residents about its intention to accomplish such a project.

The meeting aims to be effective (short duration with relevant conclusions). This requires the participants to be clearly informed about the project (location, value, efficiency, means of participation of the community, social effect), participants responses to be selected (those that are consistent with the proposed objective), and explanations to be detailed according to participants questions. For the information that cannot be communicated it must be set a future meeting for further explanation.

Attending a comfortable, convenient, and satisfying public meeting will increase participant trust in the local authority (Halvorsen 2003). At the same time, good experiences positively influenced officials' expectations of the public and willingness to work with them in the future (Yang, 2005).

5. MODERATORS, RESULTS OF MEETINGS AND DOCUMENTS CONCLUDED

The procedural approach, the leadership skills of participants in public meetings, and the qualities of the moderator are the minimum conditions required for obtaining favorable results related to the promotion of project proposals. The moderator must respect the flow of information, he must know in detail the project proposal under discussion, the performances to be achieved and the effectiveness of implementing the project within the community. The moderator must possess leadership qualities, communication abilities with heterogeneous groups of people, and certain qualities that proves genuine authority. He must effectively express himself, he will not speak except when exposing substantiated problems, will adopt a positive attitude, focused on dialogue, always maintaining contact with participants, persuasive speaking without exaggeration, with a calm attitude, no matter what happens. Therefore he/she will have the participants respect, imposing discipline in conducting the meeting. His/her nomination at public meetings should be made by local authorities representatives interested in the project (Kelshaw, 2008). The dialogue should follow the next steps:

- Specifying the issue to be discussed. He will always have in mind the purpose to be achieved.

- The participants will be allowed to freely express themselves, encouraged to express their concerns. The discussion will be led and controlled through specific and additional questions.
- Direct contradictions and disputes will be avoided, especially the violent ones, requesting extra arguments.
- Questions asked from the audience will be given clear and precise answers, to avoid any misunderstandings.
- At the end of the meeting there will be briefly presented the common points reached; the agreement of the participants will be requested.
- Amicable breakup and a meeting for discussing issues on which no consensus was reached, will be established.

The results of public meetings shall be recorded in the reports, usually containing the meeting date, topic of the meeting, number of participants and the name of moderator, discussions on the information, signature of participants. If the public meeting is for information, the reports are attached by the Secretary to the Local Council Decision. If the meeting is for consultation purposes, the report will include the conclusions of the meeting, subsequent steps, significant proposals that can influence the decision, and responsibilities related to the decision-making process (County/Local Council, national companies etc.).

6. STEPS FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION

According to the legislation, the organizer of public meetings is the mayor. For this purpose, the mayor, together with his staff (secretary and other officials of City Hall) is preparing the materials that are object of information/consultation.

Public meetings for information are regarding the existence of external funds that can be used and the financing conditions, or the dissemination of successful projects financed from such funds. The public can be informed about existence of NGOs, local groups interested in projects and also about tasks and duties of local government. Therefore information, knowledge, skills and attitudes are transferred from local leaders or community members in order to fulfill the proposed objective. This type of public meeting is performed also when a project is launched and/or intermediate phases of the project are finalised. The progress and monitoring from the local authority, by persons appointed by Council Decisions are mandatory.

When preparing themes for public meetings for consultation, the following steps have to be taken into account:

1. Establish the reasons for consultation.
2. Establish consultation topics.
3. Establish the list of participants.
4. How the participants will answer to the topic.
5. Date of the public meeting.

6. Establishing the moderator.
7. How to use the conclusions of the meeting (report to obtain funds).
8. Methods of public involvement in establishing an objective conclusion, or organizational support structure from the community.
9. Evaluation of project costs (eligible and non-eligible), and feasible financial resources (money, in kind, donations, sponsorships, participation in voluntary work).

In Romania the only types of public meetings in the legislation are for information and consultation but, community involvement is also seen in self help and partnership, whose features are set in the matrix participation below (Table 1).

7. THE CHOICE OF LOCATION AND PARTICIPANTS

The location is determined by the organizers, based on the number of people who may participate. In selecting participants, the organizer must consider their professionalism, the level of knowledge about the topic, the decision power and also the extent to which they are interested in positive solving of the subjects. Meetings will be held in the most spacious hall inside the institution. Meetings showing greater interest can be streamed live via local radio and TV stations.

In preparing public meetings, the organizer sets the roles, respectively the moderator, secretary etc. Participants should include the regional representatives, representatives from the county advisory commission, and potential partners involved in the debating the topics, whose opinion is important for taking decisions, respecting their influence in the completion and implementation phases of the project.

TABLE 1 - PARTICIPATION MATRIX

Participation matrix		Project stages			
		Initiate→	Plan→	Implement →	Maintain
Level of community involvement	Self Help Community control	Community initiates action alone	Community plans alone	Community implements alone	Community maintains alone
	Partnership Shared working and decision-making	Authorities & community jointly initiate action	Authorities & community jointly plan and design	Authorities & community jointly implement	Authorities & community jointly maintain
	Consultation Authorities ask community for opinions	Authorities initiate action after consulting community	Authorities plan after consulting community	Authorities implement with community consultation	Authorities maintain with community consultation
	Information One way flow of information Public relations	Authorities initiate action	Authorities plan and design alone	Authorities Implement alone	Authorities maintain alone

Source: N. Wates, The Community Planning Handbook

Deliberative public meeting processes allow for discussion among participants and between participants and local authorities (Parkins, 2005; Webler, 2000).

The document concluded after each public meeting includes the vote of each member on the issues discussed, unless the vote was declared secret. The report will be published at the public authority premises and on its website.

8. INFORMATION MATERIALS FOR THE PARTICIPANTS

The meeting organizer distributes the materials to each participant who is the representative of an interest group, whose influence in the decision making is important. In the meeting room there are displayed informative boards containing details on the meeting topics, charts, whose form and content can help in decision-making, models etc. Questionnaires can be distributed to participants, in order to find their views, to be collected and processed after the meeting.

9. DOCUMENTS SIGNED AND DISTRIBUTED

The discussions and the outcome of the public meeting are recorded in the reports. In the conclusions presented in the reports can be found, after the debates, elements related to:

- cost estimates;- financial resources and sponsors;
- responsibility for initiating and / or development of the project;- intermediate stage in the project development;- completion of the project;- maintenance and operation;- suggestions and proposals regarding projects discussed.

Materials resulting from the meeting are sent to the higher level decision makers and also to the other groups that have, or may have, responsibilities in the project. A set of documents are sent to the local authority for further consultation in order to implement the project.

10. CONCLUSIONS

Respecting the logical flow of information is fundamental for changing population's opinion on public meetings. Population must participate in a coherent dialogue, in order to resolve its problems, without fear of expressing the opinions.

Existing legal framework in the organization of public meetings, together with the explanation of procedures for public meetings, will allow the citizen, member of the community, the dialogue partner of the local government, to become the most important participant in decisions on urban and territorial planning, environment and, finally, on urban living.

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