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Belfast, September 22, 2011

Citizen Participation in Urban Planning: Looking for the “E” Dimension in the EU National Systems and Policies

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INTRODUCTION

Empowering citizens through ICT for an increased access to public information and stronger involvement in the policy process is one of the four political priorities of the Malmö Declaration on e-Government [2009] and the resulting Action Plan [European Commission, 2010].

The **Action Plan** focuses on the capacity of people to have their voice heard and make decisive suggestions for policy actions as connatural to a new, extended concept of “**digital citizenship**” in modern Knowledge and Information Society.

The spatial planning domain has been one of the earliest where the concept itself of public participation [Arnstein, 1969] was rooted. Thus, it would be quite normal to find fertile ground here for ICT driven participation as well.

But the European scenario does not support optimism:

we record a plethora of **one-off experiments** mostly unrelated to the underlying normative process and possibly unaware of each other's achievements

the majority of these experiences **does not seem to grasp the full potential of ICT** for improved transparency and better community engagement in any particular way.

FACTS IN EUROPE

Historical antecedents

The **European Regional Spatial Planning Charter** (1983) adopted by the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Regional Planning identified among key objectives and activities, the promotion of public participation.

*“Any regional/spatial planning policy, at whatever level, must be based on **active citizen participation**. It is essential that **the citizen be informed clearly and in a comprehensive way** at all stages of the planning process and in the framework of institutional structures and procedures”.*

The **Agenda 21** action plan, adopted by 178 Governments in 1992, devotes a whole chapter (#10) to the planning and management of land resources.

“Governments ... should establish innovative procedures, programmes, projects and services that facilitate and encourage the active participation of those affected in the decision-making and implementation process, especially of groups that have, hitherto, often been excluded, such as women, youth, indigenous people and their communities and other local communities”.

A number of participatory approaches at local level have actually been implemented to define the specific contents of the Agenda.

The role of EU directives

The **SEA Directive** (2001/42/EC) requires certain development Plans and Programmes to undergo an environmental impact assessment before they are adopted via public consultations of the citizens and environmental authorities.

By 2009, all EU Member States had transposed the SEA Directive:

Without specifications about the procedures for public consultation, a wide range of methods are used: public announcements, publication in official journals or the press, public meetings, internet surveys and questionnaires.

In terms of the duration of the public consultation, only a few Member States have set fixed time frames. Most Member States allow for consultation periods of at least one month, while others decide on a case-by-case basis.

Few States transposed the SEA directive as a **reformulation** of the **planning process**.

The **Aarhus Directive** (2003/35/EC) caters for public participation in respect to the preparation, modification and review of the P&P relating to the environment.

Article 2 of the Directive firmly establishes the right of the public to participate in the decision making process on P&P.

The new principle is introduced that the public must be informed, “*whether by public notices or other appropriate means such as electronic media where available*”, about any proposals for such P&P.

By 2009, all Member States (except Ireland for some parts) had transposed this Directive.

The impact of the ESDP

The **European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP)** is a document approved in 1999 by the Informal Council of Ministers of Spatial Planning of the European Union.

It is a (legally non-binding) policy framework presenting action items for all tiers of administration with a planning responsibility.

Its strategic aim is to achieve a balanced and sustainable spatial development strategy across the EU, via a “**Europeanization of state, regional, and urban planning**”.

Increased public participation is seen as an integral part of a well co-ordinated spatial development policy across the various administrative levels of a Member State, and of European decision-making as a whole.

The policy debate on how to best ensure the ESDP implementation has continued over the years, leading to the formulation of a **Territorial Agenda for the European Union**, approved by the Informal Council of Ministers of Spatial Planning and Development in May 2007

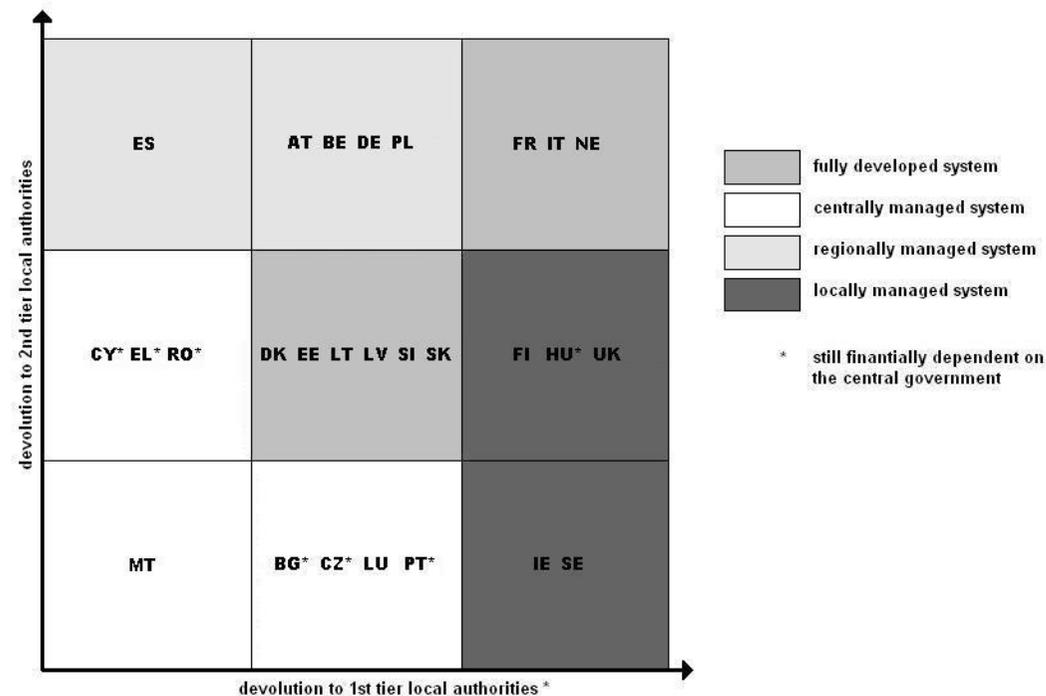
The document outlines the need for **social dialogue** and **cooperation** between stakeholders to reach the integration of the territorial dimension into national and EU policies.

No specific reference is made to ICT take-up in support of public participation.

The Hungarian EU Presidency evaluated and reviewed the Territorial Agenda in a document published in May 2011.

PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING PRACTICES

Recent reports on participation in Europe showed that the most of public participation takes place at local and regional level: **these are also the tiers of public administration holding most of the legal competences to act in the spatial planning domain**



However:

Participation is not integrated into planning practices

The growing relevance of 3rd tier public administration due to parallel reform processes is likely to enhance this integration in the future

Participation is rather considered a process producing some inputs to be integrated into spatial plans

The ways in which participation outputs are integrated into the plan texts are varying, in dependence of:

1. The **stage of the planning process** where participation is activated;
2. The real **commitment of politicians** and the related political mandate to public officials (“cosmetic” approach);
3. How the resulting **knowledge is managed** and translated into action plans / guidelines;
4. The ability of participation managers to **enable public capacity** to negotiate their interests within a public discussion
5. **The way participation is considered and regulated in the spatial planning normative environment.**

As a result, key **barriers to participation** in spatial planning are at the moment:

- 1) lack of access from citizens and stakeholder groups to spatial planning settings;
- 2) inadequate capacity building of citizens and public sector officials;
- 3) scarce, unsure and hardly visible demonstration of real impact on decision making and outcomes;

...more...

4) Incomplete exploitation of the e-potentials

Many experiments of e-Participation in spatial planning depend on the planners' individual initiative and are therefore constrained by the planners' ability to conceptualize the role of technologies

Use of ICT is often limited to rudimentary shifts of spatial planning settings into web-based environments, with reduced opportunities for process innovation

No prescription or recommendation regarding use of ICT methods and tools
is available at the moment

Only exceptions: the Aarhus Directive, a few pieces of legislation (LT, LV...)

Awareness of the e-dimension is still missing at the policy level (chicken-egg problem?)

CONCLUSIONS

A significant plurality and diversity of participative planning practices makes the use of ICT still very differentiated and almost exclusively depending on planners' personal visions and skills. **There is a growing need for planners to reinterpret well-established communication frameworks out of institutional protocols.**

ICT usage is limited to rudimentary instantiations of the planning process and focused on the migration of selected stages of the process from off- to on- line environments. The majority of adopted systems merely mirror the traditional modes and tracks of citizen and stakeholder interaction with local planning agencies. **The full potential of ICT is far from being grasped at the moment.**

There is significant room for **European policy making** here.

Many electronic services already available in this domain are not scaling up at EU level (also) because of the different weight assigned to the “e” dimension in participation by the national urban planning systems.

Additional efforts should come from the Commission and Member States towards the creation of electronically enhanced governance models for spatial planning and territorial development related issues.

One opportunity in that direction would be to use the OMC to enforce the transposition and extension in scope of the Aarhus Directive provisions for electronic participation, also towards other similar fields of application like those covered by the SEA Directive and the Territorial Agenda.

Possible steps ahead:

Leveraging on the Local Digital Agenda for integration of available instruments and policies

A joint EU/MS initiative at strategic level (ESDP-like) focused on ICT & Spatial (and/or Strategic) Planning at Municipality level

Ditto at operational level (e.g. an IDABC-like programme supported by DG REGIO)

Promotion of flagship projects (CIP Pilot A-like) by DG INFOS

Thanks for your kind attention!

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