



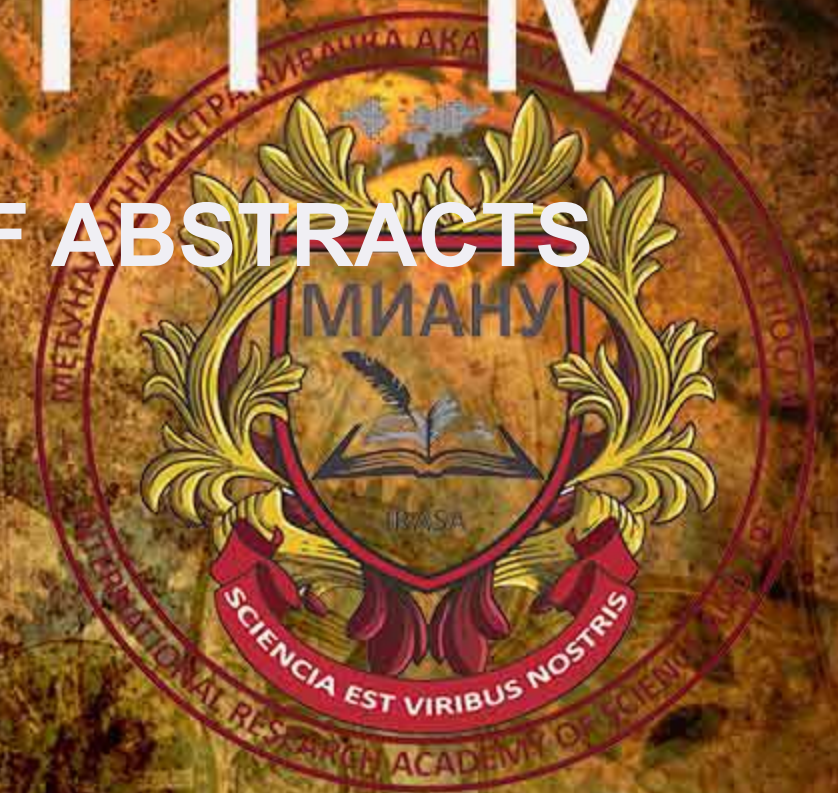
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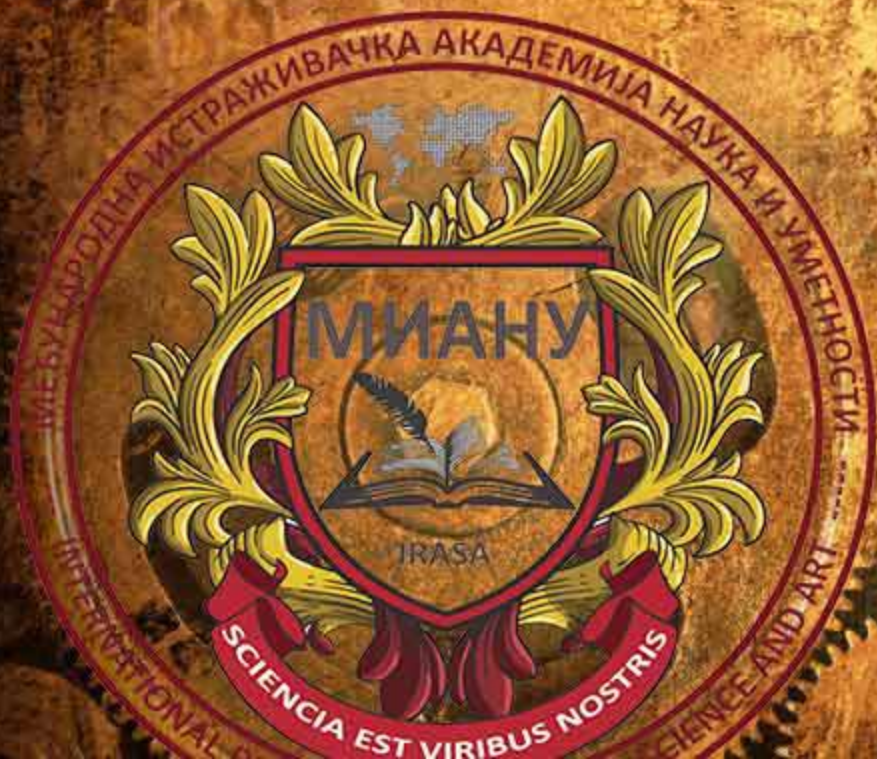
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PARTICIPATORY PLANNING IN THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD - TOWARDS NEW STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATION

Marina Nenković-Riznić¹⁵⁷; Sanja Simonović-Alfirević¹⁵⁸

Abstract

Participatory planning, as a way to reform spatial and urban planning and design during the global pandemic of virus COVID - 19 in 2020 is undergoing a serious transformation, not only in form, appearance, but also in the essential, significant sense. In this regard, the current paradigms of the need for active public participation directly related to spatial and urban planning and decision-making through public workshops, round tables, discussions and debates that require the physical presence of participants are changing. Having that in mind new participatory settings are defined and they are migrating to virtual space. New circumstances raise the question of continuing active participation activities in a (permanently?) changed environment and defining new, hybrid ways of engaging stakeholders in participatory planning activities. Thus, the participatory tools and instruments used in the pre-pandemic are changing significantly, opening new opportunities for the active participation of experts in projects of wider community importance.

The paper will consider previous ways of engaging stakeholders in spatial and urban planning processes, as well as opportunities to change the participatory paradigm, which may now include hiring remote experts, where territorial distance is no longer an obstacle to participation. Through examples of different types of engagement in pandemic and post-pandemic conditions, advantages and critiques of new hybrid ways of participation will be given.

Key words: *Participatory planning, post-pandemic, spatial and urban planning, stakeholders.*

Introduction

Legally established and common participatory processes of different stakeholders in spatial and urban planning have been seriously transformed during the global pandemic of virus COVID - 19 in 2020.

COVID-19 pandemic was having a huge impact on every aspect of human life, including public services, governance, and the well-being of citizens. In this regard,

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“normal” life in every aspect supposed be established soon after announcement of the pandemic, so that all of the important areas of human existence would continue working properly.

Existing forms of communication, types of engagement, as well as appearance have been disabled due to lockdowns, real pandemic threats, as well as fear and discomfort of the citizens, so participative process had to go through serious changes in order to maintain quality communication between interest groups.

In order to maintain the continuous engagement of stakeholders in planning and decision-making procedures, it was necessary to define new ways of their participation. Through the planetary experiences of different experts during 2020, it was determined that newly created conditions of physical distancing demand use of online (internet) tools/platforms and work in smaller groups, by combining different communication channels.

In addition, it was necessary to define a new methodology for future alternative participation, which can migrate to virtual participatory platforms. On the other hand, a large number of experts [1, 2], advocate the thesis that participation should not be exclusively realized in online spheres, but that part of the activity should be realized in live contact with experts. However, the uncertainty caused by frequent quarantines and complete bans (lockdown) on movement/contacts between people suggested the necessity of rapid mobility and a higher degree of adaptation to the organization of the engagement of experts, in which the base, for now, should be online forms of communication, through social networks, the organization of webinars and videos conferences, emails, newsletters, etc.

This type of communication, in addition to the obvious advantages (possibility of quick organization and animation of a large number of stakeholders in a short period of time, possibility of working "from home" with maximum comfort, reduction of transport/organizational and other costs of organizing webinars, online conferences, etc.), imposes a number of obstacles, primarily of a technical-technological and psychological nature [3].

New Participatory Principles in Pandemic Conditions

The processes of active participation of interest groups in planning processes began only in the second half of the 20th century, when it was institutionalized and included in the legislative framework. Participatory planning insists on predicting a desirable future and involving all stakeholder competencies [4, 5, 6, 7].

The participation of various stakeholders in the area of urban and spatial planning has long tradition and history [4, 5]. In order to ensure adequate and timely participation of all interest groups in projects that have direct implications for the quality of life of residents and their immediate environment, their early involvement in the planning process is necessary. This refers to the provision of continuous education of all stakeholders.

New circumstances in the usual participative planning procedures demanded paradigm shift and new reconstruction of the participation process towards online



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spheres, instead of usual *tete-a-tete* cooperation. Still, new participatory planning principles should obligatory following the usual participation model, adapted to the new conditions,.

At the same time, it was necessary to insist on the fact that new pandemic conditions must not reduce the level of stakeholder participation, and that it was also necessary to consistently implement the Arnstein "participation ladder" [4], which ensures the participation of all stakeholders in management processes and ensuring their active role as crucial in making key decisions decision within the community [4]. First of all, this implies:

- information - using tools such as social networks, webinars, newsletters, 3D visualizations, blog articles, etc.
- consultations - online surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, telephone surveys and trend research
- inclusion - video conferences, online voting, use of email communication in order to engage stakeholders more often
- collaboration - distribution of documents, creation of spaces for discussion and conversations on online platforms, conversations in groups and 1 on 1, tools for 3d mapping, virtual whiteboards to ensure cooperation on the Internet
- empowerment - support for the formation of a unique opinion, which was reached by using the means of virtual reality [1].

The basic principles for the adequate participation of all stakeholders in decision-making processes in pandemic conditions are the same, regardless of whether they are carried out live (offline) or on online platforms, and refer to the fact that the degree of harmonization of views is greatest if all interested parties are simultaneously engaged [3, 9]. Online engagements were initially met with many obstacles in the implementation, primarily related to the level of (un)familiarity with technology, psychological obstacles in active participation in decision-making in changed circumstances, as well as generalized problems arising from the impossibility of continuously holding the workshop due to technical obstacles (interruption of the Internet connection, image delay, etc.), enabling equality in time for expressing individual views, etc. Having that in mind, the "new normal" way of communication established during COVID 19 has changed not only the communication and participation principles, but also the speed of exchange of the information as well as quality of training and participation. [10, 11] Also, it opened an opportunity and revealed a new, hybrid era in participative planning, whose time is yet to come.

Digital technologies have directly improved possibilities for different participatory processes. The shift from conventional planning tools towards the deployment of digital services represents a new paradigm not only for participatory procedures, but also in the urban planning field as a whole. [8]



Types of engagement in Serbian covid and post covid participatory processes

Previous ways of engaging stakeholders in spatial and urban planning processes could be defined as legally obligatory (depending on the national laws, implemented via public hearings) and informal or voluntary, implemented via round tables, questionnaires, workshops and other types of stakeholders` involvement). [12]

In the circumstances of covid pandemic, these usual methods of involvement could not be implemented due to restrictions, so the new methodology for involvement were proposed. depending on the type of engagement, experts were implemented different participatory models, such as hiring remote experts, organizing remote workshops, virtual round tables, virtual lectures and presentations, where territorial distance was no longer an obstacle to participation. These principles were implemented not only in the processes of adopting spatial planning and urban planning documentation, but also during the implementation of international projects, international conferences, online classes on the faculties, etc.

Different types of engagement in pandemic and post-pandemic conditions have also been established in Serbia, with all advantages and disadvantages that these new hybrid ways of participation promoted. These processes of virtual participation have been normalized through 2 years of pandemic threats, but some of the models of hybrid participation are still implementing in some forms in different occasions (hybrid conferences, greater territorial distance of the participants, smaller budgets for organizing conferences)

New models of public participation in virtual workshops, roundtables and consultations

International scientific projects that are carried out on the territory of the Republic of Serbia (INTERREG, HORIZON, etc.) necessarily imply the active participation of different stakeholders in the processes of determining their views on various topics. This informal and non-binding type of participation is carried out in order to determine the opinions and views of experts on a problem, through the actual method of participation in the field.

Various educational workshops and round tables usually involve prior education of the group whose opinion is being considered, the implementation of the workshop on a specific, selected group of participants and the presentation of the most significant research results to the participants through round tables, open presentations etc.

Final results of these engagements could significantly improve not only the quality of the project, but also the increase its transparency among all of the involved representatives and their institutions.

Engagements of the stakeholders on different projects before 2020 included their active participation in all project phases through workshops, round tables, DELPHI



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method of engagement as well as 1 on 1 communication with the project coordinator and the team.

However, after the 2020 and announcements of global pandemics with measures taken to prevent contagion, and having in mind that the project activities have been continued in the new circumstances, experts had to quickly and efficiently adapt to the new conditions. That included migration of the complete communication on the virtual spheres, with overcoming of all the potential obstacles not only in technological area but in the psychological area as well.

Project ConnectGREEN (DTP 072-2.3) – Restoring and managing ecological corridors in mountains as the green infrastructure in the Danube basin, which was implemented within the second call of the INTERREG Danube Transnational program in the period 2018-2022 can serve as pilot project of COVID-based public participation in Serbia, because its realization demanded constant involvement of stakeholders in all the implementation phases. In the first year of project implementation, public participation was held offline, with the thirty-six representatives of the relevant stakeholders in Serbia, including the representatives of: four ministries of the Republic of Serbia, NGOs, public enterprises and academic institutions. On three different points (tables) mediators from IAUS were discussing with the groups of ten people about different topics. Representatives were discussing proposed methodologies via world-café participation model and round table discussions, as well as through direct communication with the project leader and team members. After the workshops, participants were engaged via e mail on different subjects.

Following the announcement of the epidemic, and having in mind fact that the project obligations demanded two more organized workshops with the representatives from different institutions, project team had to reorganize the participation procedure, strictly following the Arnstein "participation ladder" but adapted for functioning in the online sphere.

Information about the future steps of the project were distributed via e-mail, project`s web page, as well as newsletters. Not all of the participants were automatically interested in the new way of communication, mostly because of the lack of technical knowledge in working with new technology, as well as sense of discomfort with the communication through internet and different types of conference calls (such as ZOOM, Teams, Skype etc.). Before the online workshops, all the relevant materials and documents on the elaborated subject were distributed to the participants.

First round of consultations and queries were sent to the participants via e mail in order to form focus groups for future virtual workshops and round tables

Inclusion was implemented through video conference (ZOOM platform) using new technologies of online voting on subject that needed to be queried. After initial discussions, people were divided in several groups depending on the subject of the discussion, and later on brought back again in a single online conference room for defining common conclusions.

Unlike the offline method of stakeholders` engagement, virtual workshops had less participants. Although all of the previously engaged representatives have been invited, lack of technical literacy and ability to quickly learn new technologies, as well



as psychological barriers decreased the number of active participants on the second held workshop.

By the time of the third workshop, which was held several months after the second, experts/stakeholders got used to the new circumstances and had better response to the online workshop and round table than on the previous one. Overcoming the psychological barrier and public speaking in front of the interlocutor's cameras was evident. Also, participants showed more enthusiasm in answering the questions related to the project, which brought better results of the overall discussion and better participation process in the project.

New models of public participation in virtual presentations and lectures

In the pre-pandemic era, all of the presentations on the national and international conferences, as well as lectures in schools and universities were held offline. Territorial distance of the participants was not an obstacle for the presentation, mainly because there was not a possibility for conference attendance online due to lack of technical capacity.

COVID 19 also brought a significant change in this area, and demanded fast shift from offline to online model of presentation and lectures.

Project ConnectGREEN set different goals related to the education of the different target groups. Some of the presentations and lectures were held online in the first phase of the project, while in COVID 19 period, all of the educational activities were moved to different online platforms.

Two different lectures were given to the students of the Faculty of the applied Ecology FUTURA and students of the Faculty of Architecture University of Belgrade. In the new pandemic conditions, students were less interested in active participation and questioning during the presentation. Only some of them were actively involved in the discussion, while others were listening and observing. On the other hand, more students were attending the presentation than in the offline era, mainly because this type of presentation was more reachable and easier to approach.

Conferences related to the ConnectGREEN projects were held both offline and online with the huge number of participants from different partner-countries. Online conferences had much more participants but were marked by a lack of active participation despite good organization, due to abovementioned reasons.

Last conference of the project had made possible new approaches and possible future solutions for the active participation of all relevant stakeholders through HYBRID organization, which means both online and offline involvement. For this type of active participation exceptional technical capacities, adequate training of the organizers are needed as well as the desire of the participants to attend these types of conferences.

Conclusion

Previous ways of engaging stakeholders in spatial and urban planning processes have gone through great changes in the light of new pandemic circumstances. This



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sequence of events has raised the question of possibilities for continuing active participation activities in a (permanently?) changed environment and defining new, hybrid ways of engaging stakeholders in participatory planning activities. The participatory tools and instruments used in the pre-pandemic era have been significantly changed (and improved), opening new opportunities for the active participation of experts in projects of wider community importance, and on the different parts of the world, making territorial distance no longer an obstacle for stakeholders' involvement.

Through the discussion of existing participatory paradigm and potential for its change, new directions for the development of the participatory process were defined, namely through hiring of the remote experts. Through examples of different types of engagement in the case study of INTERREG DTP project ConnectGREEN, the paper has presented advantages of newly established practice, but also has given the critiques of new hybrid ways of participation.

It can be concluded that the new ways of participation have both their positive and negative side. On the other hand, research of the process on one specific project has shown that it will be needed much more time for implementing newly adopted procedures. Also, they must be followed by the application of developed knowledge in the field of planning and social psychology as well as technical training of experts in order to improve position of online and hybrid models of participatory processes in practice and theory.

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