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CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, the scientific community around the world has been trying to explain and study many newly formed issues, from health problems, but also to how the city can function in adaptation to changing environment with the importance of citizen participation. The focus of these issues is mainly on city areas that have been the biggest hotbeds of infection and have seen the biggest shift in the way these areas function on daily basis. This paper gives a brief overview of some research that primarily relates to the role of how pandemic motivated the change in participation methods and how we perceive meeting spaces in physical and online spheres. Part of the paper describes the importance of citizen participation in emerging conditions along with chosen case study of the ConnectGREEN project's participation process during live and online workshops organized from 2019 to 2021, in which the authors of this paper participated.

Lessons learned through research and projects aim to help understand the impact of specific, often unforeseen situations, that can change existing patterns of urban planning and design, but also change and challenge the existing quality of life, show the need for proper community involvement, good governance, etc. The paper concludes that future cities will have a semi-online way of functioning, which in the post-pandemic period opens new possibilities in different public initiatives (some already started in various cities), and also creates specific conditions with advantages and disadvantages for participation in wider initiatives, but also in scientific and similar small projects.

Keywords: *Covid-19 pandemic, urban planning, online participation, virtual space*

INTRODUCTION

The multidimensional global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold, combining health, economic and social crises with extensive published research that emphasizes that the poor population has had the hardest impact of the pandemic. The massive death toll is a global failure on many levels showing the problem of governments' capacity (and world major powers) for dealing with multiple challenges, and inadequate system of informing the citizens which led to problems such as misinformation, disobeying the strict health and social distancing measures, etc. (Sachs et al, 2022).

Cities as part of well-connected and dense urban areas were among the first to be exposed to the pandemic areas (Stier et al, 2020). Although the density of some cities has not appeared to be the only determining factor, partly reflecting strong policy responses, still many large cities performed worse than other regions (Hamidi et al, 2020). Good governing and proper response with enacted measures to contain the epidemic in the largest cities such as Tokyo, Seoul, and Sydney, have dramatically reduced the spread of the epidemic emphasizing a proactive approach (Ramuni, 2020). Cities that are characterized by inequality and a high concentration of urban poverty are more vulnerable than those with more equal economic distribution (with better resources, infrastructure, etc.) (Iacobucci, 2020).

As a response to the pandemic spreading cities and whole countries have transferred multiple businesses to the online and remote spheres, with still some of the essential service businesses (face-to-face interaction) in urban areas continued to function (OECD, 2020). High-speed internet coverage in urban areas allowed businesses and residents to replace in-person interactions with virtual ones (OECD, 2019). With higher rates of digitization, good internet quality, and coverage cities compensated for new limited available physical space.

In the conditions of the pandemic, participatory processes had to go through serious changes to maintain quality communication between interest groups. Through the various global experiences of different experts from 2020, it was determined that newly created conditions of physical distancing demanded wider use of online tools/platforms and focused work on smaller groups. By combining different communication channels, it was necessary to define a new methodology for future alternative participation. The new type of communication in addition to the obvious advantages, also imposes several obstacles, primarily of a technical-technological and psychological nature (Buehler et al., 2020).

On the example of workshops' participatory processes within the ConnectGREEN Interreg project, this paper reviews the new mechanisms of participation and possible directions for developing functional involvements of different users/stakeholders. Comparing the participation levels and satisfaction of the participants in multiple national workshops during the project period paper discusses the advantages and disadvantages of these new ways of participation

NEW WAYS OF PARTICIPATION

Focus on defining changed participation, with the appearance of the problems with the pandemic social distancing, is important for the perpetual engagement of stakeholders in planning and decision-making procedures. Changing the communication strategy demanded mostly the use of available online tools/platforms, with some newly created along the way. Methodological procedures for future alternative types of participation, which could easily be part of virtual participatory platforms, should follow the previously adopted Arnstein 'participation ladder' (Arnstein, 1969) with the clear steps needed for enabling full and adequate participation with information-using tools such as social networks, consultations (online surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, etc.), inclusion (video conferences, online voting, email communication), collaboration (distribution of documents via emails and other types of communications, or on online platforms, with conversation 1 on 1, tools such as for 3d mapping, virtual whiteboards, etc.), empowerment (support for the formation of a unique opinion, using means of virtual reality) (Mohankumar, et al. 2020).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic shifted participation largely to the online sphere, multiple authors in their papers emphasized that participation should not be exclusively realized in online spheres, but some parts should still be realized in live contact with experts. In the meantime, in the period of uncertainties caused by frequent quarantines and lockdowns or curfews, they, however, suggest adapting for the moment the engagement of participants in the completely online form (Mohankumar et.al 2020; Buehler et al, 2020; Pantic et al, 2021; Buheji et al, 2020; Thoeneick, 2021). Coming back from 2 years of the pandemic has reenacted some live parts of participation, but has also shown that online platforms constructed new meeting places that are solely in the virtual world. Although physical space has been returning to its former potential, the question is if, after the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting places in the future will be partially shifted to the virtual sphere.

HOW HAS URBAN MEETING SPACE CHANGED DURING COVID-19 - VIRTUAL NETWORKING PLATFORMS

The paradigm of rapid urbanization globally, until COVID-19, was that urban centers offer better opportunities, jobs, quality of life, and access to better services and goods. With the start of the pandemic, the cities were perceived as dense clusters of people, where disease spreads quickly and efficiently, and with the pandemic and online working system, the need to live and function in cities has no longer been seen as a need

for various types of jobs. With the beginning of the pandemic, the urban lockdown opened the question of what a cosmopolitan city is and whether it is sustainable in the time of any epidemic, and whether it is then an attractive place to live (Martínez, 2021). It wasn't any more necessary to live in the city to be able to go to work. Because of that, the post-pandemic city will be faced with new planning and living challenges (Honey-Rosés et al, 2020).

With this pandemic virtual meeting spaces created new opportunities to introduce communication once again but with higher levels of health safety. These and other initiatives can become permanent changes in urban planning (Thompson, 2020). As the risk of future pandemics remains a real possibility the post-pandemic city cannot be the same as the city before 2020 and has to have better regard for public health, but also envision ways for people to meet and participate in the urban space and community (Thorpe, 2020). All these problems open many questions about the future and new paradigms of planning in cities.

Various platforms emerged in 2020 to become the backbone of the new virtual meeting places. This new type of connecting people and enabling participation led to multirole platforms which explored how people connect and how can online sphere mimic the physical space. Most notable platforms e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, etc. emerged as video conference platforms with the standard audio-video-file-sharing concept, but some other platforms tried to create virtual spaces as more focus on social aspects with meeting and networking. Platforms such as Berlin-based Wonder enabled guests/users to "move" freely inside the platform and conversational space choosing their partners and shaping the events, groups, and joining discussions (Figure 1). This fosters interaction between participants and is a reaction to increased tech fatigue during the pandemic, driven by the data that more than 80% of respondents claimed that they do not fully pay attention to classic video conferences and feel drained. Authors of the platform stated the importance of the "social spaces as the core of our lives are filled with meaning because of shared experiences" and the goal of the platform concept was to build those spaces online (Takahashi, 2021). Because of a new understanding of virtual networking, upgraded virtual meeting spaces can motivate better participation and help to foster a wide range of experts and citizen participation in the future.

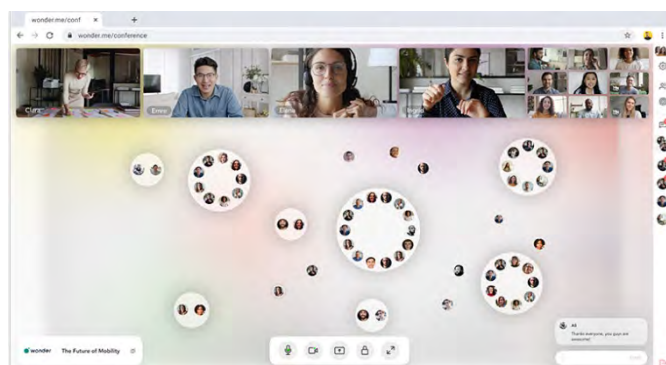


Figure 1: Wonder networking platform (circles are virtual chat/discussion groups)

SOURCE: <https://meetings.skift.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/800x530px-inposts-canvas-no-areas.jpg>

THE IMPORTANCE OF CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE PARTICIPATION PROCESS DURING THE PANDEMIC

There is a continuous need for active public participation in the cities and especially in decision-making regarding urban and other topics. The ways how the participation processes were done naturally and spontaneously changed during COVID-19 following global tendencies and local policies. Standard decision-making through lectures, public workshops, round tables, open discussions, and debates with the physical presence of participants shifted abruptly to a new virtual space. This situation directly influenced the change of participatory tools and instruments used in the pre-pandemic era and opened new opportunities for different ways of active participation of experts and city residents in projects of wider community importance. Stakeholder consultations with the community were key to sustainable and inclusive growth and increased accountability in the pandemic and post-pandemic period. Two-way dialogue with communities and other stakeholders, essential for trust building, established through multiple channels with transparent, accurate, and consistent information helped address rumors and misconceptions which included regular feedback mechanisms for monitoring and course correction that reveal how knowledge, beliefs, and practices are changing (Bhattacharyya, 2020). The pandemic has helped to reaffirm the importance of community, especially in the virtual sphere and their participation has become an important component in emergencies. In Singapore,

the Ministry of Health regularly clarified misinformation and encouraged the public to follow accurate and reliable information from official channels and also be aware of the different kinds of knowledge and experiences that different communities and individuals can bring (Adenipekun, 2020).

A large number of local and regional governments are now coordinating and energizing these efforts not only as community action to survive in times of pandemic but as a tool for future improved participation processes and building post-pandemic cities. Organizations such as The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) and Eurocities network collected experiences of cooperation between civil society and local governments with more than 50 examples of good practices during the pandemic, together with initiatives for post-pandemic future cities (IOPD, 2020; EUROCITIES, 2020)

There are various initiatives such as Haute-Garonnes' French department which launched a consultation process for its citizens to decide how they want the post-COVID-19 society to look like, tackling issues not only related to public health but the organization of society as a whole, with nearly 2000 participants visiting this platform to consult or participate in this citizen dialogue. The "society after" the participants' outline is marked by 4 requirements: a more sustainable society, inclusive and united society, society of proximity, in all dimensions of our lives (work should no longer require hours in transport, etc.), society of simplicity (with focus on people, as opposed to that which is usually granted by economic drives or profitability) (Conseil départemental de la Haute-Garonne, 2022). In Bogotá, the city council, together with several civil society organizations, launched the Hackatón contest, where citizens shared data analysis proposals on how to improve the organization of public transport to serve those who need to use it and avoid contagion, with awarded group design of a web viewer for analyzing public transport trips, with which, based on the information from the Survey of Mobility 2019, defined routes for trips essential within the context of the pandemic, with additional web form in which people interested in the example route can program a service, to guarantee an adequate and safe occupation of the service (NUMO-New Urban Mobility Alliance, 2020). In Barcelona, the citizen participation platform Decidim.barcelona received numerous proposals from different groups, in fields such as sport, culture, education, and care. The platform is based on open source, and any citizen can see how it is built, reuse it or improve it, enter the participatory processes, add proposals, share ideas in the debates or make comments (Decidim.barcelona, 2022).

New examples of community engagement through digital and virtual methods in the context of COVID-19 included innovative community management systems while mobilizing local resources and volunteers. UNICEF recommended using UNICEF's 16 minimum standards for community engagement beside existing frameworks or standards for community engagement in participation processes to support planning, implementation, and monitoring encouraged to support high-quality implementation (UNICEF, 2020). Examples of using the standard and new models of participation varied from the country, city, and from a specific topic in a project that involved various communities, experts, and stakeholders.

ADAPTED MODELS OF PARTICIPATION IN CONNECTGREEN PROJECT

Different types of engagement in pandemic and post-pandemic conditions have also been established in Serbia, with all advantages and disadvantages that these new virtual or hybrid ways of participation promoted. 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 process of determining their views on various project topics. This informal and non-binding type of participation is carried out to determine the opinions and views of experts on a problem, through the actual method of participation in the field, with various educational workshops and round tables, however, with pandemic and strict social distancing measures, projects' activities have usually been continued with the migration of the complete communication on the virtual spheres.

The research paper shows the example of the project done by the Institute of Architecture and Urban&Spatial planning of Serbia - IAUS, in the period 2018-2021, as part of the international INTERREG project from the Danube transnational calls - ConnectGREEN (DTP 072-2.3) – 'Restoring and managing ecological corridors in mountains as the green infrastructure in the Danube basin'. This project demanded the constant involvement of stakeholders in all the implementation phases. Comparing the live and online experience in the workshops, as well as the evaluation forms filled by the participants in three national workshops for the ConnectGREEN project paper presents three different and evolved participation situations: 1) live participation (workshop in 2019) 2) online participation at the beginning of the pandemic (in 2020), 3) online participation after more they a year of the pandemic (in 2021).

In the first year of project implementation, public participation was held offline, with the 1st national workshop being held live in Belgrade in 2019., with the active participation of thirty-six representatives (Table 1) 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 different topics, with stakeholders and experts 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.

From 2020 project team reorganized the participation procedures, strictly following the Arnstein 'participation ladder' but adapted for functioning in the online sphere. The 2nd national workshop was held via Zoom platform in April 2020. The transition from offline to the online sphere was done during the most intensive part of the pandemic, with the information distributed via e-mail, the project's web page, as well as newsletters. Somehow expected participants from previous workshops were semi-interested in this new system of workshops and communication (Table 1). Unfortunately, this lack of interest was also motivated by the lack of technical knowledge in working with new technology, as well as a sense of discomfort with communication through online platforms in the type of conference calls (via Zoom platform). Although Zoom was still new to most of the participants, they were not oversaturated with other similar seminars in that period. Compared to the first workshop, they were not as much interested in joining the call. It can be seen that, considering the depressive state during the first months of COVID-19, the satisfaction of the participants in this workshop was high with the remark on the length of the all-day online workshop.

The 3rd workshop was held online in 2021, with a lower number of participants, probably showing some amount of a "burn-off" with these online activities in the previous period. However, the experts and stakeholders who participated have shown that are more prepared to the new online circumstances, with better use of online tools. Participants showed satisfaction with this workshop and had a better response to the presentations, discussions, and duration of the workshop (Table 1).

Parallel with 2 online pandemic workshops project has held online education methods of engagement, as another type of public participation. Team members gave lectures online for the students of the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Belgrade, and in the master's studies and at the Metropolitan University, Faculty of Applied Ecology – FUTURA. Compared to the expert and stakeholders' workshops, online lectures did not contribute to a decrease in student engagement, and also encouraged them to take a more agile approach in interactive discussions of the observed issue.

Table 1: Evaluation of three national workshops held during 2019-2021 for the ConnectGREEN project

No. of workshops	No. of participants	Workshop completely fulfilled the expectations	Presentations were interesting and informative	Discussions were adequately moderated and informative	Appropriate duration of the workshop
1	31	77%	68%	78%	100%
2	23	83%	74%	87%	91%
3	14	93%	79%	79%	100%

Source: Report of ConnectGREEN project part D 2.3.2 – Events attended at the national, international, and EU level to present, disseminate and promote project outputs (Annex 5-Rating of the First National Workshop by the stakeholders, Annex 5-Rating of the Second National Workshop by the stakeholders, Annex 5-Rating of the Third National Workshop by the stakeholders)

These workshops and online education lectures have shown the advantages of new online approaches such as a better overview of the presentations for the participants, the opportunity to attend the workshops from different locations in Serbia, the possibility of a bigger number of participants compared to conventional limitations of physical space, or smaller focused groups, duration of the workshops not being constrained to the working hours of venues, participants can share their data/examples online with others during the discussions, health compromised individuals can easily be part of the workshops, reduced cost of organizing workshops, can organize potentially more frequent workshops at no additional cost, etc. Also, these types of online events have disadvantages such as a lower number of participants due to oversaturation with these types of events, problems with technical illiteracy regarding the online platforms, semi-interest in changing the way participation is done, semi-attention as participants are multitasking while attending the workshops, lack of motivation to be involved (fewer benefits of networking in the online sphere), etc. These remarks have

shown that the future participation models should always be improved to adjust to the needs of the participants and also the organizers.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has affected the quality of life of almost every urban resident around the world. This paper tried to show the reshaped relationship of citizens' participation in the city, community, and local and state government and how it reflected on the quality of life. The lessons learned during the pandemic and the adoption and implementation of ambitious sustainable development policies can help prevent future global shocks, including new pandemics, while continuously promoting resilience not only in the city systems but also in the community's resilience.

It can be concluded that it is important to strengthen multilateralism in all key dimensions: political, cultural, institutional, and financial. It is also necessary to involve the civil and private sector, local self-government, parliament, the academic community, and youth in these processes more than before. Managing participatory spaces requires sensitivity and the ability to recognize and use the different types of knowledge and experience that different communities and individuals bring. Given the many limitations, it can be said that the pandemic highlighted existing problems and opened up new dilemmas and questions. All the long-term consequences of this pandemic and how it will transform cities in the future have not yet been seen, but the urban areas are already experiencing some more permanent transformations regarding work, leisure, and allocation of working space (virtual, etc.).

There is a significant impact of this pandemic on urban economies, including the informal sector, which will have direct consequences on finance, inequality, and increased poverty, especially in cities, and strengthen already pronounced social and economic inequalities. This state also represents an opportunity to rethink the capacity and how we manage governance structures, public service provision, data use, and citizen and community self-management. COVID-19 has forced us to rethink urban living and rethink how we perceive and govern the cities. We should seize the opportunity to reimagine a more vibrant, and engaging city in which participation leads to less vulnerable cities in the future.

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