

Participatory Strategic Planning in the Municipalities of Lithuania

Prof. Kostas Zymantas Svetikas¹

Assoc. prof. Algirdas Astrauskas

University of Mykolas Romeris
Lithuania

Abstract

***Purpose of the paper:** to describe the situation of citizen and stakeholder participation in municipal strategic planning in Lithuania and to inform about the ways to improve participatory strategic planning in Lithuanian municipalities.*

Keywords: participatory strategic planning, participative level, participatory tools, collaboration, placation

Introduction

Participation of citizens in local public life is an essential element of effective and democratic local government. Citizens' participation is a two-way relationship between the citizens and the local authority.

The representative democracy is the principal type of democracy at municipal level in Lithuania. The governing bodies of the municipalities are elected by local representatives. In this way a municipal council is directly elected by local voters, while mayors are indirectly elected by the councils. Traditionally this category of citizen participation is well developed. But in the recent years, like in many European countries, we have observed an erosion of representative democracy at municipal level. The representative democracy is necessary, but not sufficient condition. In our complicated modern world, this system needs to be supported (Michels and De Graaf, 2010).

Currently, it becomes essential to increase citizens' involvement in direct participation in the decision making and to give effective tools for participating in the management in Lithuanian municipalities. We needed a more collaborative governance where local government, private sector, non-governmental organizations, community organizations and other stakeholders at large would come together to determine policies, strategies, programs and actions of local development; local government must provide this facilitating and coordinating role. Here public decisions, including local development strategic planning, must be undertaken collectively. Stakeholders and various interest groups must be included in the planning process, instead of it being solely decided by politicians and bureaucrats, or particular interest groups. Stakeholders are people who have an interest in a particular decision, either as individuals or representatives of a group. This includes people who influence a decision or can influence it, as well as those affected by it.

Recently, a wide set of tools of citizen participation was developed in many European local authorities. This varies from simple information and consultation tools to advanced schemes of citizen participation in municipal decision-making (Slocum, 2006). Appliance of this successful good local practice is very important for Lithuanian municipalities. Participatory strategic planning will be a significant contribution to the development of participatory democracy in Lithuanian municipalities.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the situation of citizen and stakeholder participation in municipal strategic planning in Lithuania and inform about the ways to improve participatory strategic planning in Lithuanian municipalities.

¹University of Mykolas Romeris, Ateitiesstr. 20, LT-08303 Vilnius, Lithuania.
Email: svetikas@mruni.eu; algirdas.astrauskas@lrs.lt

1. Degree of Citizen and Stakeholder Participation in Municipal Strategic Planning Process in Lithuania

According to the municipal regulation in Lithuania there are two types of local development plans: a strategic development plan and a three-year strategic activity plan. The strategic development plan is a long-term plan determining development strategies and means to reach local development goals. Local development goals must be accordant with the national and regional development strategies. The three-year strategic activity plan is a middle-term plan providing details, programs and projects clarification on the strategic development plan. The three-year strategic activity plan is a rolling plan, requiring each year revision and extension covering the coming three years. This plan provides a basis for a local annual fiscal plan (budget of a municipality) and annual action plans of municipal administration as well as public institutions providing public (municipal) services.

The extent of citizen participation in local development planning is weak; furthermore, there is no indication of equal authority in public decision-making processes. The municipal executive institution (a chief of municipal administration) and the municipal council have the authority in taking important decisions, including an appointment of strategic planning committee (or commission) and approval of the local development plans. In Lithuania, citizens and stakeholder participation in the local development planning mainly aims to collect information or consultation rather than collective public decision-making.

A helpful approach to define the degree of citizen and stakeholder participation in the municipal strategic planning process was provided in a classic model by S. Arnstein (Arnstein, 1969). Whilst this does not offer an 'ideal' approach, the risks of 'non-participation' and 'tokenism' are explained as well as going beyond participation to devolving full responsibility to 'stakeholder control'.

S. Arnstein developed a classic model (or ladder) of citizen or stakeholder participation (Arnstein, 1969). The bottom rungs of the model –manipulation and therapy – describe levels of 'non-participation' that have been contrived by some to substitute for genuine participation. Their real objective is not to enable people to participate in planning or conducting programs, but to enable power-holders to 'educate' or 'cure' the participants. The next level of 'tokenism' that allow the have-nots to hear and to have a voice: informing and consultation. When they are proffered by power-holders as the total extent of participation, citizens may indeed hear and be heard. But under the conditions they lack the power to insure that their views will be heeded by the powerful. When participation is restricted to these levels, there is no assurance that stakeholders' concerns will be addressed. Placation is simply a higher level tokenism, because the ground rules allow have-nots to advise, but retain for the power-holders the continued right to decide, municipality carefully chooses a few 'hand-picked' stakeholders to consult or involve directly in strategic planning process. The part of Lithuanian municipalities intends to reach only the fifth level of so called 'placation'.

Furthermore, the Arnstein model consists of the levels of citizen power with increasing degrees of decision-making clout. Partnership that enables stakeholders to share decision making through the strategic municipal planning process, enables them to negotiate. The word "partnership" implies a relationship of equals, where everyone has an equal voice, and where power and responsibility are equally shared. Forming such a relationship, even in circumstances where everyone truly desires it, is not a quick or easy task. The development of a real partnership, acting together may be only a future goal for community. Deciding together may be appropriate in reality. Collaborative strategic planning is defined in terms of power-sharing, and five tasks are assigned to it: identifying and bringing together stakeholders; designing and using arenas for communication and collaboration; trying and using different routines and styles of communication; making the discourses of policy; and maintaining consensus. The consensus building and maintaining is central to collaborative planning: 'If the culture-building process of strategy-making has been rich enough and inclusive enough, the strategy should have become widely shared and owned by the participants and the stakeholders to which they are linked.'

Participatory strategic planning is an alternative paradigm that involves various interest groups in the public decision-making process. The participatory strategic planning process in Lithuania municipalities is hierarchic, more top down and informal.

The municipal politicians and executives are a significant mechanism pushing municipal planning to participatory processes. Now they are able to manipulate the participatory process. Various local groups of interests are left out of planning procedures to negotiate their needs with local decision makers and often are ignored in participatory activities.

For some groups, municipal leaders are highly authoritarian; their views are perceived as a threat rather than an advantage to local executives. These groups are likely to be excluded from participatory process. Particular groups have close contact with municipal executives. These people maintain a type of patron-client relationship with the mayor; therefore, debate and negotiation rarely take place. It appears from this that various interest groups are not involved in the public decision-making process and genuine participatory strategic planning is not achieved.

2. The Ways to Improve Participatory Strategic Planning in Lithuanian Municipalities

In October 2013 the Government of Lithuania set up a team of strategic planning experts, municipalities' development specialists and scientists (consultants) for the preparation of recommendations on strategic planning for Lithuanian municipalities. Except traditional strategic planning procedures the main goal of these recommendations is to enhance local democratic governance in Lithuanian municipalities by strengthening the capacity of local authorities to undertake participatory strategic planning.

These recommendations are expected to produce two main outputs:

- 1) To enhance the capacity of local authorities in participatory planning in order to better respond to the development needs of their communities;
- 2) To improve the capacity of local civil society organizations and other stakeholders and empower citizens to participate effectively in the planning process.

The purpose of these recommendations is many-fold:

- 1) To prepare the recommendations for developing the municipal development strategic plans and provide guidance in preparing them;
- 2) To develop and produce a participatory strategic planning procedural manual;
- 3) To conduct training workshops to educate stakeholders on the proposed planning methodologies and procedures;
- 4) To conduct a training workshops to educate stakeholders on the use of the manual.

The recommendations for preparing municipal development strategic plans should reflect the following:

- 1) Methodologies and procedures to be applied in the stage of strategic planning, including analysis of the existing situation and development strategies, objectives and criterions of valuation;
- 2) Institutional framework relevant to the anticipated planning process.

The manual of participatory development planning procedure should serve as the guiding document for stakeholders in the planning process. The manual should reflect the following:

- 1) A procedure for identifying a list of external and internal stakeholders, role and responsibilities of the different stakeholders in developing the strategic development and strategic activity plans;
- 2) Detailed procedures and processes for undertaking the participatory planning tools.

The Government of Lithuania accepted these Recommendations in December 2014. From January 2015 all municipalities of Lithuania will organize the strategic planning process in accordance with these recommendations.

Conclusions

1. Participation of citizens in local public life is an essential element of effective and democratic local government. Recently, a wide set of tools of citizen participation was developed in many European local authorities. This varies from simple information and consultation tools to advanced schemes of citizen participation in municipal decision-making. Appliance of this successful good local practice is very important for Lithuanian municipalities.
2. In Lithuania, citizen and stakeholder participation in the local development planning is rather weak: a) the participatory strategic planning process in Lithuania municipalities is hierarchic, more top down and informal; b) the municipal politicians and executives are a significant mechanism pushing municipal planning to participatory processes. They are able to manipulate the participatory process; c) various local groups of interests are left out of planning procedures to negotiate their needs with local decision makers and often are ignored in participatory activities.

3. In 2013 the Government of Lithuania set up a special working group for the preparation of recommendations on strategic planning for Lithuanian municipalities. The main goal of these recommendations is to enhance local democratic governance in Lithuanian municipalities by strengthening the capacity of local authorities to undertake participatory strategic planning. The Government of Lithuania accepted these Recommendations in December 2014. From January 2015 all municipalities of Lithuania will organize the strategic planning process in accordance with these Recommendations.

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