

## **PARTICIPATIVE PLANNING IN THE CONTEXT OF METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE. A CASE OF CLUJ METROPOLITAN AREA**

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**ABSTRACT.** - **Participative Planning in the Context of Metropolitan Governance. A Case of Cluj Metropolitan Area.** Public participation became an essential element of the modern governance practice and a norm in the contemporary spatial planning. It is also endorsed as an important component in creating sustainable development and an efficient tool in strengthening legitimacy. Nevertheless, there is also a lack of confidence in management decisions and in political structures as mechanisms to conduct effective strategic governance and to address the needs of various stakeholders in the strategy and policy formulation. The aim of study is to examine how public participation is perceived in the view of different stakeholders in a complex governance setting of a metropolitan area. The findings show that the process of public participation is perceived differently depending on the group of stakeholders and the actual public involvement differs between the rural areas and the urban core. Although public engagement is widely endorsed, there are different views on what this process should comprise. Nevertheless, the question of how far the common citizens actually influenced the spatial development of the metropolitan area, is open for debate.

**Keywords:** *public participation, metropolitan governance, public engagement, strategic planning.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Engaging the public in decision-making became an essential element of the planning process and a basic condition in local democracy. According to the traditional post-war planning theory, the planner itself is endowed with

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the ability to produce good quality planning documents that serve the public interest (McKinley *et al.*, 2021). However, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought 'a new wave of ideas' that seeks a strategic approach that recognizes the importance of community collaboration founded on the principles of participatory democracy (Healey, 1996) in the field of planning. Additionally, in the last thirty years there was a growing pressure on governments to establish and embrace participative planning into the modern governance practice (Baba *et al.*, 2009), hence the participative turn in European democracy received an increased attention. Participation is viewed as a means to achieve an objective in the development activity which demands particular attention from the Member States to encourage active involvement of all interested parties. It is therefore, dependent on the policy context and the local community characteristics. In this perspective, after the regime change, the Central and Eastern European countries were marked not only by substantial political and economic changes but also faced new challenges in terms of socio-spatial organization and spatial planning.

In Romania for example, after the 1990's the transformations in land-use planning driven by change of land property, decollectivisation of agriculture, privatization, deindustrialization processes (Grigorescu *et al.*, 2021) marked the turn from socialist mechanisms to the post-socialist neo-liberal initiatives which changed the role of the actors involved in the planning and decision-making processes (Nae *et al.*, 2020). This was also induced by the country's accession to the European Union in 2007 and consequently the adoption of the EU's Urban Agenda that brought new challenges in terms of governance especially with relation to the metropolitan-wide integrative planning, development as well as allocation and use of financial resources (Nagy and Benedek, 2021). In relation to this, it is important to mention that the country's EU accession also triggered the initiation of the growth pole program, a top-down initiative that aimed to decrease regional disparities which in spatial terms was translated in the creation of metropolitan areas. From a governance perspective they function under the umbrella of voluntary associations between the urban core and the neighbouring rural communities. Within this setting, participatory planning and consequently, the engagement of citizens in the decision-making processes became imperative for the effective metropolitan planning and development process. This claims not only an understanding of community participation from a conceptual perspective but also empirical investigations of the experiences with citizen participation in planning decisions.

Therefore, our study is based on the case of Cluj Metropolitan Area (CMA) situated in the North-West region of Romania. The CMA is composed by the core city of Cluj-Napoca and 19 adjacent localities divided into two

metropolitan rings. The first metropolitan ring consists of seven communes: Florești, Feleacu, Ciurila, Apahida, Chinteni, Baciou and Gilău. The second metropolitan ring is composed by: Aiton, Bontida, Borșa, Căianu, Cojocna, Gârbău, Jucu, Petrești de Jos, Săvădisla, Sânpaul, Tureni and Vultureni. The paper is analyzing the perception of different stakeholders in the case of Cluj Metropolitan Area, Romania. It discusses the level of participation in the view of various stakeholders, in enhancing the planning process. It starts with the discussion of participatory planning as a basic condition in local democracy and a tool for effective planning.

The empirical analysis first investigates the stakeholders' perception regarding the level of public participation, whereas the second, the openness of local authorities in the inclusion of the public in the decision-making process. The main findings show that in the stakeholders' view public engagement is perceived as an important element of spatial planning and it is believed that it produces 'better' decisions. Public participation is however more common in the urban setting than in the rural areas of the CMA.

## DEFINING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Participation and participatory planning are both concepts that refer to the direct involvement of community members where ideas, opinions and concerns of local citizens are collected (Roux and Cilliers, 2013; Baba *et al.* 2009) to form joint decisions (Nared, 2020) and bring about better planning solutions for a sustainable society (Sulemana and Ngah 2012). According to Smith (1973) participation is a form of legitimacy in the decision-making process. This is supported by Hassan *et al.* (2011) who believe that it creates a sense of local ownership and safeguards the citizens' rights. Nevertheless, it is debated whether participatory planning increases the effectiveness of the planning process (Smith, 1973) or it is only a vague commitment to protect and integrate the values of the public, especially if decisions and value judgements are taking place somewhere else in the system (Davies, 2001). As pointed by Moser (1989, p. 84) "in reality it is not the evaluation of participation either as a means or as an end which is important, but the identification of the process whereby participation as a means has the capacity to develop into participation as an end." Participation is not a goal in itself but an instrument that leads to the achievement of an objective (OECD, 2004), it is context-specific and should have a clear purpose. As determined by Nared (2020), in the context of a metropolitan region participation should be addressed in the framework of its governance where planning is formulated as a process of a wide stakeholder involvement with a clear purpose. Just hearing out the voice of the public in the planning process is a scarce attempt to achieve a participative democracy

based on the model of civic engagement (Davies, 2001). Therefore, organizing capacity is considered to be as one of the prerequisites for effective and sustainable governance. For that reason, it is seen as a ‘fundamental mediator’ which connects the ability of a metropolitan area to identify the occurring challenges with its capacity to effectively act on these (Carvalho *et al.*, 2016).

## **WIDE STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATORY PLANNING**

The continuous emphasis placed on the so-called network governance, raises the question of how to bring more actors together on one hand but also how to engage them in identifying and delivering planning goals and objectives on the other (Rydin, 2010). Therefore, to create conditions for sustainable planning and development, a governance arrangement must have such an organizing capacity which provides the ability “to enlist all actors involved, and with their help generate new ideas and develop and implement a policy designed to respond to fundamental developments” (van den Berg *et al.*, 1996, p. 1). Hence, as collaborative and cooperative efforts strongly contribute to a more effective and durable regional governance the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in the regional debate is of great importance (Healey, 1998). Next to this, the steering capacity of these interaction processes is wider if the involved actors are heterogeneous and have various capabilities (Heinelt and Kübler, 2005). As Berg, *et al.* (1993) remarks, the urban processes became so complex, that a government on its own is unable to create a link between the public and the private sectors.

Next to the public and private sectors however, there is a necessity to involve in the metropolitan governance the non-profit sectors as well (Wallis A. D., 1994). Yet, the involvement of a wide variety of stakeholders can raise several constraints especially if no such circumstances are created where a consistent dialog can be achieved. As social relations take place on several levels when involving stakeholders with different levels of authority the subject of stable co-working relationships might be questioned. Consequently, several authors raise the problem of the power dimension which can lead to a greater dominance of some actors (Healey 2003; Kemp *et al.*, 2005; Nealer and Naude, 2011). According to Le Galès (2011) the policy instruments themselves are a form of power as in their nature they represent policy settings and issues in specific ways. On the other hand, several scholars believe that it is not possible to equalize power implications (Innes and Booher, 1999). Others, consider that power can be effectively used through the establishment of interconnected networks between various stakeholders where power is achieved through

information, financial resources and granted rights (Kemp *et al.*, 2005, Rydin, 2010). Nevertheless, according to Berg *et al.* (1999) the interdependent relationship between stakeholders is not a premise for balanced power relations because flexibility, trust and openness for cooperation are the factors which define the performance of such networks. On the other hand, another element that is able to confront power relations and enforce the achievement of consensus, is the previously discussed participatory planning (Harrison *et al.*, 2004).

Within the last decades participative approaches gained great attention in the decision-making process especially in the context of achieving sustainability goals. According to Appelstrand (2002, p. 289) public participation is a necessary tool for policy practitioners to “create more qualified operative decisions, provide a more solid base for the final agreement and increase the likelihood of reaching ‘sustainable’ decisions that consider long-term effects.” Next to this, public participation does not only integrate the so called ‘local knowledge’ about local values, conditions, problems but it also has the ability to lead to potential solutions within a specific area (Healey, 1998; Innes, 1998). The challenge of involving a wide range of public actors is however to find those instruments which lead to a mutual agreement between stakeholders, lower the chances or find solutions for different disputes and result in common agreement (Burby, 2003). Analysis of Harrison *et al.* (2004) for example show that even if new groups are included in the consultation process, the already existent power relations can be deepened or lead to new ones where some groups might be driven by interests that emerge from their professional status and not by their interests as citizens.

We must admit however that the imprecise legal conditions regarding the extent of public involvement in the decision and policy making process (Harrison *et al.*, 2004) impede the success of a structured and multi-stakeholder-based process for reaching consensus. Nevertheless, as pointed by Wheeler (2000), the involvement of the public in a sustainable metropolitan planning is important because it is an expectation of democratic ideals to include the local knowledge and interests of community in urban planning. It is also essential in creating public education, training and building political support for the emerging policy initiatives.

## METHODOLOGY

In tackling the main aim of this paper, we were aware that public participation is a context-driven (Narayan, 1995) and its implementation approaches are highly debatable. The primary or preparatory phase included an internal desk research through which relevant sources were consulted

about the topic of this paper. Based on the desk research two main topics were defined: first, the level of public participation in the decision-making process, and second, the openness of the local authorities to involve the public in this process. This gave the basis for the next phase of our research which consisted in interviews with a range of relevant stakeholders.

The second part of the research involves a qualitative approach that consisted in interviews that were semi-structured and followed certain topics where the interviewees had the opportunity to elaborate on their perspectives. The fieldwork for the interviews was conducted between April 2016 and November 2016. All fieldwork was performed by the first author. Based on our desk research we identified four groups of interviewees: decision makers (analysed in two separate groups), civil society representatives, professionals dealing with urban/metropolitan wide planning and representatives from administrative institutions. In order to raise a better contrast, decision maker from the first and second metropolitan ring were analysed as two separate groups.

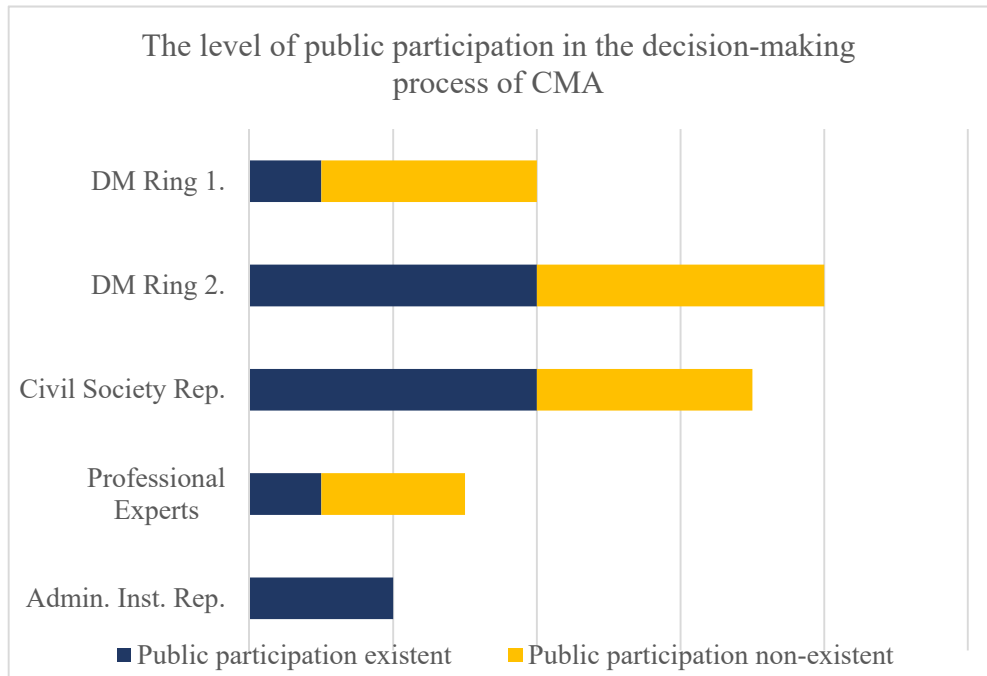
A total of thirty interviews were conducted out of which fourteen were with decision makers (DM) from separate local authorities of the metropolitan area, six were identified as representatives of the civil society (CSR) working for local NGO's, eight professional experts (PE) such as urban planners, architects, academics, financial consultants and two representatives from administrative institutions (AIR) such as the County Council. Invitation for the interview took place over the phone and anonymity and ethical information was assured. All the interviews were made in person, on-site, audio-recorded and later transcribed, coded and analysed by using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. Nevertheless, we need to highlight that the study also had some limitations especially regarding the selection criteria. As the main aim was to include a wide range of participants in the study, there is no numerical balance between the professional affiliations of the interviewed stakeholders.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Public participation in the decision-making process**

In the first part of our study, we aimed to investigate at what level is public participation perceived by the stakeholders, in the decision-making process within the CMA. Based on our analysis summarized in Figure 1. half of the interviewees considered that the public participates in such initiatives, whereas the other half believed that there is a lack of interest in getting involved in such consultations. Nevertheless, especially decision makers from the first

ring considered that there is no interest from the public to participate at such events. In the case of the civil society representatives and the group of professional experts, opinions were fairly divided. On the other hand, both interviewees working at the Administrative Institutions had an affirmative answer to this question.



**Figure 1.** The level of public participation in CMA – from a stakeholder perspective  
*Source: Nagy, 2019*

Several interviewees felt important to point out that when it comes to the public, we must consider what group or segment of population we talk about as their attitude differ from each other depending on factors such as age, education, spatial affiliation, personal interest, availability etc. This remark is well argued also in the literature (OECD, 2004; Hassan *et al.*, 2011; Nared, 2020; McKinley *et al.*, 2021) that public participation is context specific and is highly dependent on the complexity of the setting such as geographical area, demographic variables but also the size and structure of the local administration, political majority. In relation to this, there was a common observation of the interviewees especially active in the urban core, on the fact that opened participative behaviour is more visible at urban than on rural level. This was

attributed to the diverse and dynamic community of the municipality that is more aware of such practices and presents greater openness to participate. It was also pointed however, that “the larger the community, the more divergent interests arise” (AIR1).

Few have pointed that the civil society especially in the municipality “is in continuous formation” and “gets stronger and well-organized”, it tightens the openness of the public to participate at planning consultations (AIR1, CSR3). Nevertheless, few representatives of the civil society and professional experts pointed the fact that often times the civil society is not taken seriously enough, this drives them to demotivation and the belief that no matter what they say “it is not going to be considered” (PE1) even though “they are the layer that local authorities should use in mobilizing greater masses” (CSR2, CSR8,). This is an issue that is well supported by Davies (2001) who made the point that only ‘hearing’ voices in the planning process is insufficient and can’t be viewed as participation especially when decisions are made in other parts of the arrangement.

Within the context of the rural areas in CMA, few decision makers felt that inhabitants of rural areas are opened to know what developments are planned and to say their opinion regarding those decisions. According to them “the population is interested as long as you ask them” (DM5), “some are conscientious and interested in development opportunities” (DM8) and “they might be skeptical at first but after a dialog they are glad that they have been consulted” (DM9). Next to this, it was also highlighted that “you have to know to listen to them” (DM5) and “from the multitude of opinions to select” (DM7).

On the other hand, other decision makers experienced that in some communities even if inhabitants participate at such consultations “many are afraid to express their opinion and leave that to those who have a more imposing kind of attitude” (DM4). Next to this, others were on the opinion that in the remote communities the public is more reserved and leave the control of decision making to some leaders such as priests, teachers or mayors because “they know better” (AIR1) or “local administrations use public participation only to confirm to themselves some of the theories” (CSR6).

In addition to this, some interviewees felt that even if there is greater interest to participation on urban level, “in many cases people confuse these consultations with meetings within the Tenants’ Associations” (CSR4) and bring up problems that have no relation to the topic of the consultation. In support of this, one interviewee stated that “it is difficult to teach people what participation is about [...] to act in a logical manner, to teach them to give feedback in an organized manner and on the discussed subject” (CSR5). Other interviewees felt that “the public does not care how decisions are made” (PE5),



“if they do not have immediate interests, they do not get involved” (DM12), they think that “it is the local councillors’ job to represent their opinion” (DM4, DM13) or “they only express their discontent when the project is not implemented in the way they thought it would” (DM2).

### **Challenges and limitations for public participation**

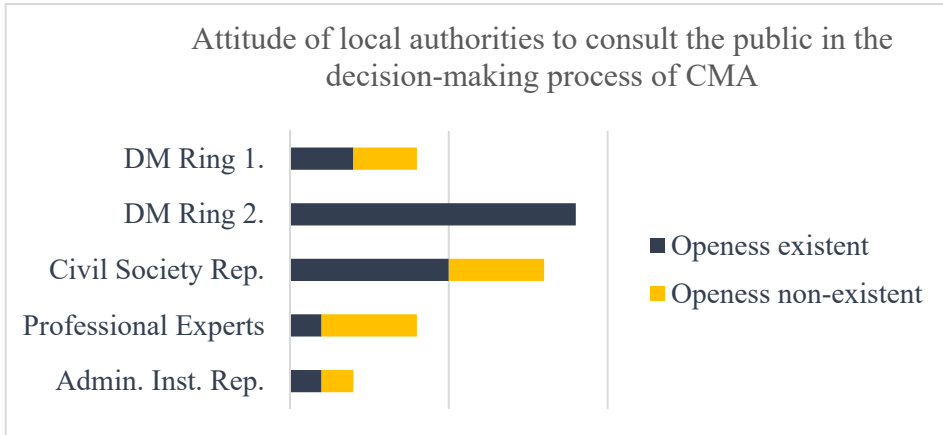
Several arguments were considered by the interviewees to explain the limitations of public participation. The answers are summarized below:

- especially in communities with ageing population it is difficult to inform and mobilize people through digital media
- complexity of planning documents – when the public consultation is regarding the development of a planning strategy, some might not participate as this requires the reading or even studying of the specific strategy
- lack of consciousness “people do not have the consciousness that they are the active parts and have the impression that someone above decides in their place” (CSR1)
- lack or low level of trust in public institutions “the public feels distant by various institutions and is not able to identify itself with the aims these assign” (PE1). According to the interviewee even if the root cause of several problems is present in the awareness of people as well as institutions, the latter ones are not able to communicate in such ways that the public feel that they “speak” about the same problems
- public education and building of trust require long period of time “to launch a process we need at least two mandates and in terms of increasing public participation it would take even four years” as people do not have the exercise of participation” (PE1)
- artificial participative planning “there is a breach between what residents do and what administration does [...] yet everyone understands the important role [of local authorities] they play in financing projects and further, of these movements at greater scales” (PE1)

### **Attitude of local authorities to public participation**

In the following section interviewees were asked if they believe that there is a positive attitude of local authorities for a better implication of citizens in the decision-making process. As Figure 2. below shows, most interviewees agreed on the fact that authorities do try to involve the public. Mostly decision

makers from the second ring and representatives of the civil society answered affirmatively to this question. Within the representatives of the administrative institutions, answers were fairly divided and most of the professional experts believed that local authorities do not make enough efforts to involve the public.



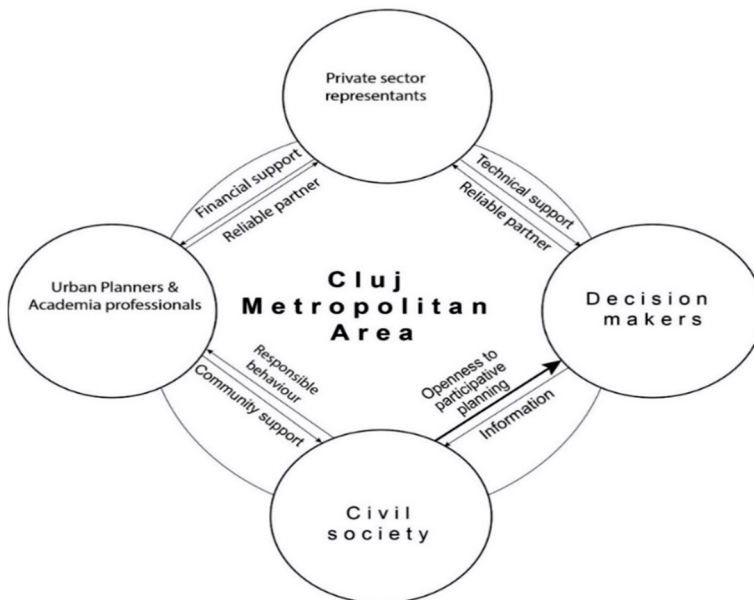
**Figure 2.** Attitude of local authorities towards public involvement in the decision-making process

As pointed above, all decision makers stated that on local level, they do organize meetings where the public can say its problems and views. Some pointed out that everyone’s opinion is important, nevertheless as “it is impossible to respond to every single request, they need to be harmonized and handled in an effective manner” (DM4, DM5). On the other hand, according to an interviewee in order to gain trust of the community “first they have to see that something really materializes” (DM2). In support of this, an example of the local authority of Cluj was given when the civil society’s opinion was considered in a project regarding the inclusion of an extra road lane for cars on a busy road that passes through the city centre. According to one of the interviewees this was a successful example which shows that “it is possible to converge the interests of politics with the interests of the citizens” (CSR1). According to a professional expert, it is more and more recognized by the local authorities that in order to make the residents to understand their goals, “they need to bring these questions closer to the public [...], yet this is a long process that needs continuous improvement and development” (PE5). There was also a common agreement on the fact that the level of public involvement depends on the local authority “there are localities where the level of involvement is higher, others where the mayor decides” (PE6) or cases when there is no dialog or communication “the connection is very weak” (PE1) between the communities and local authorities.

Most examples given by the decision makers regarding public engagement were connected to the process of spatial plan and strategy formulation. Nevertheless, few interviewees pointed out that these meetings are compulsory in such procedures, as local authorities need to organize such public consultations when producing development strategies and plans. In addition, some professional experts were on the opinion that these strategies are already made and people are purely put in front of a statement of facts. The impediment was believed to be the fact that local authorities are the ones who reimburse the making of these strategies – usually by private companies – therefore, these are made in a way that firstly satisfy the interests of the procurer. This issue has also been revealed by Healey (1996) who argued that in strategic planning discussions often take place after these have been articulated when politicians or experts have already ‘invented’ the strategic ideas.

### Relationships established between the stakeholders involved in participatory planning in CMA

Drawing on the findings of our analysis and to highlight the level of interaction established between all relevant stakeholders involved in the participatory planning of Cluj Metropolitan Area, the following relationships were observed (Fig. 3.):



**Figure 3.** Relationships established between stakeholders involved in the CMA's participatory planning

- participative planning approaches are most welcomed by the civil society representatives who expressed their intention to be informed, consulted, and involved in any decision related to their quality of life.
- in practice, some relationships based on collaboration are translated in technical or financial support sustained by the local representatives of the private sector or the professional experts (academia, urban planners, architects, etc.).
- the most common relationships are supportive in their nature and can be assigned to the decision makers; in their opinion, the inhabitants and the NGOs must be informed for any major decision or project related to CMA; the private and professional environment are considered to be reliable partners when involved as responsible entities for development or planning studies or even some specific projects.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study provides a comprehensive overview of the findings on the role of public participation in the decision-making process of Cluj Metropolitan Area, that was obtained from interviews with various stakeholders such as decision makers, planners, academics, representatives of the civil society, of administrative institutions and of the private sector.

Based on our analysis, it was determined that the culture of participative planning varies between the urban and rural communities of the metropolitan region with an increased openness and greater visibility in the urban core.

It was also determined that the level of participatory approaches -both participation and engagement- are much dependent on the locally specific context with the sense that what works in one situation may not be appropriate in another. Every context has distinctive power relations, social and economic realities that influence the capacity to effective public participation. In terms of a metropolitan region however, participation should also be discussed within the context of metropolitan governance whereby a wide variety of stakeholders must be involved in the decision-making process, in the managing and developing plans and strategies. Therefore, supportive conditions must be created for networking to function. It is important that decision makers and planners with their expertise, experience and knowledge play the role of facilitators and create a link between various types of stakeholders and create settings where participation is not only an instrument to express problems but also an instrument to reach possible solutions.

The paper argues that even though the concept of participation is well-known in the views of planning and decision-making practitioners, the degree that it is effectively used, is quite low. According to our study in various cases public engagement is only used at an advanced stage, when ideas and plans are in their ending form. Another important finding is that the various backgrounds of the stakeholders drive them to play various roles in the participation process. Participative planning approaches are most welcomed by the civil society and the relationships built on collaboration are mainly characteristic to the representatives of the private sector and professional experts with higher emphasis on financial or technical support.

Therefore, it is important that each member knows its role and there is a balance in meeting everyone's interests. A greater institutional transparency about the process of public participation but also about the end results of such initiatives would increase trust and facilitate better involvement by the public. The participatory process is largely dependent on trust between those who initiate, participate and those who implement.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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