

ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS

INTRODUCTION. PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES THROUGH THE EYES OF ACTIVISTS AND PRACTITIONERS

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Public participation over the last years has become one of the declared trends in the different areas of public affairs and the activities of state agencies in Ukraine. The values of participation and engagement, participatory practices, new tools and approaches based on obligatory citizen participation along with public discussion on urban policy related issues have become part of compulsory procedures in those areas of urban governance where decisions have been traditionally made "behind closed doors", documents kept secret and special permits were required to look at them.

At the same time, the way from the declared values and procedures to well-established practices is inevitably long and complex. It requires not only numerous explanations, training programmes, lessons learned (also negative lessons), subsequent changes and amendments to these procedures and next explanations... But no less important, introducing the practices of participatory planning and governance is closely related to changing attitudes towards civil society and citizens as equal actors in urban planning and urban policy. Indeed, the latter sometimes constitutes one of the biggest challenges faced when trying to implement participatory practices in Ukraine: policy decisions do not necessarily are publicly debated, public hearings are usually held as a mere formality, and civil society is often perceived as a threat to rapid and "effective" decision-making.

Experience shows that various actors often have quite different and sometimes even conflicting notions about the goals of urban planning and the outcomes of the planning process as well as the place of public participation in urban policy-making and particular urban renewal projects implementation. In view of this, the edition is supplemented by several interviews and essays provided by various actors in one way or another involved in the process of urban transformations in different cities.

The interview section includes conversations with Oleksandr Korotkykh, an architect and practitioner, who reveals the vision of participatory processes from the perspective of urban planning and city spatial development, and Hanna Davydenko, a politician and public figure, who address the political dimension of participatory decision-making on issues of local development. In particular, Oleksandr is interpreting various forms of participatory practices institutionalization in Vinnytsia and also experience of the Spatial Development Agency, which aims to develop informal approaches to urban planning and to promote the publicity of urban projects. Hanna instead is raising the question on the effectiveness of the formal tools of participation, noting that these tools in many cases have little to do with real practices of urban transformations. In their answers, both Oleksandr and Hanna, pay attention to many other appropriate issues in the context of participatory planning: awareness on urban projects and mechanisms for its strengthening, public interest in urban renewal issues, assessment of the project outcomes, development of participation tools and raising of legal awareness, public dialogue and different forms to ensure it.

The essay section seeks to present the multidimensional issue of participatory urban governance and planning as seen by public activists, who have a deep understanding of the diverse aspects of the issues as a result of their activities, in particular how obligatory procedures in the realm of participatory governance are being put into practice and what are the outcomes.

Public activists have a particular role in establishing participatory practices, since it is civil society in general, and activists in particular, who are doing outstanding work on reviewing and monitoring tools and procedures as well as their compliance with the declared approaches; analysing the effectiveness and potential impact of participatory practices on urban development and planning; establishing successful local alliances to transform urban spaces and also contributing to the development of local initiative and the implementation of the principles of democratic governance. In light of the above, interpretation of participatory practices typically used at the local level, which is made by activists in their essays, is not simply interpretation given by one of the actors involved, it is also a view through the eyes of those who take part in participatory practices, analyse them, promote and develop.

Anna Ambrosova and Yulia Orekhanova reveal the participatory practices in the field of environmental protection for the case of Kryvyi Rih - a city where poor air quality is an ongoing problem and where it is particularly difficult to develop a sustained policy, based on interaction with big polluters from one side and public society from another. By analyzing new tools in the field of environmental protection as a basis for citizen involvement, Anna and Yulia reveal both successful examples of their application and also negative ones, rethink the tools themselves along with their role in shaping more balanced policy approaches with civil society institutions involved.

Second essay by Anna Atamanchuk includes reflections on citizen involvement issues, where Anna, building on her own experience, is rethinking particular tools, attempts to develop long-term policy in this area and changes in perceptions and attitudes of various actors to participatory governance as an idea and a process. In particular, Anna draws attention to the role of initiative in development of participatory practices, however, this according to Anna should be accompanied by constant pressure and willingness to advocate for views, suggestions or demands in every possible way.

All views expressed in the essays and the interviews in this special issue are personal. Their publication aims at enhanced understanding of participatory governance and planning, increasing the effectiveness of public participation in shaping urban policies and developing collaboration between various actors.