

Chapter 54

Recent Progress in Online Communication Tools for Urban Planning: A Comparative Study of Polish and German Municipalities

Lukasz Damurski

Wroclaw University of Technology, Wroclaw, Poland

ABSTRACT

This comparative analysis of Polish and German online communication tools for urban planning follows a similar study conducted in 2012. A comprehensive method for analysis of e-participation tools including three complimentary criteria: “transparency”, “spatiality” and “interactivity” is now enhanced with mobile applications for planning. Using the same research sample (the biggest regional capital cities) enables the comparison of the ICT tools in the years 2012-2015. The results show how public planning institutions improve and develop their online communication in urban planning processes in line with the contemporary trends and citizens’ expectations. They also point to the emerging standards in e-participation in urban planning, evidently similar in Poland and Germany despite different historical background as well as socio-political and technological contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary urban planning gradually becomes a deliberative and decentralised system, seeking to balance the formal, semi-formal and informal phenomena (see Horelli, 2013). Such an open approach, referred to as the ‘communicative turn’ in planning is supposed to make the whole process more democratic, more socially fair and more accessible to an increasing number of actors. As a result, many authors (e. g. Falleth & Hansen, 2011; Scott et al., 2012) point to the need for development of new channels of communication in planning on the municipal level.

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One of such channels is obviously the internet and its multiple communication tools. The ICT Development Index (IDI), a composite measure for monitoring the progress in information and communication technology shows that nearly all countries in the world have increased their access to and use of ICTs in the recent years (*Measuring...*, 2014). Over the past 15 years the information revolution has driven global development in an unprecedented way: the number of internet users rose from 400 million in 2000 to 3,2 billion in 2015 (*ICT Facts...*, 2015).

Municipalities recognize the important contribution of ICT to growth and development and adopt information and communication policies. One of the core concepts of contemporary urban development – the “smart city” – synthesises hard infrastructure with the availability and quality of knowledge, communication and social infrastructure, the latter being critical for a city’s competitiveness. It is argued that cities based on information and communication technology can strengthen community and improve quality of life for all (Leboreiro Amaro, 2014).

On the intersection of those trends – communicative planning and ICT – the concept of e-planning is formulated. Being a part of e-administration, e-planning aims to facilitate the online access to public planning and to stimulate citizen involvement. Therefore if a city wants to become “smarter”, it should develop online and mobile forms of participation in planning, where the citizenry is massively engaged in working towards improving the city (Batty et al., 2012). “The city of the future will be one that grows, evolves and responds according to the needs of its inhabitants. ICTs can open new opportunities for citizens to more actively shape the future of their cities by sparking new forms of civic participation (...) accessing relevant information and enabling a real-time dialogue in which city administrators and citizens can learn from one another” (UN-Habitat 2015, p. 6).

The new planning paradigms and practices greatly depend on the ICT infrastructure and usage. If online connectivity of a society is low, then the potential of e-planning cannot be fully exploited; similarly, if planning culture remains authoritarian and formal, then the best e-planning facilities will be useless. This wide socio-political and technological context matters a lot for the way e-planning is understood and adopted, and affects the manner in which traditional urban planning is being transformed (Wallin et al., 2012). Therefore when studying the emerging e-planning practices, we need to take into account the character of planning systems, the condition of societies and dominating policy practices.

PLANNING CONTEXTS IN POLAND AND GERMANY

The main purpose of this paper is to compare the development of e-participation in Western European countries with long democratic traditions and in the regions of Eastern Europe where democracy was reestablished in the last 25 years. On a continent shattered by two world wars, persisting political and ideological differences are a central issue in the discussion about governance and participation. In the period of the Iron Curtain, the contrast between Eastern and Western Europe, the poor versus the wealthy, the plan versus the market, and authoritarian versus democratic rule was very evident (see Bunnin & Duessel, 2006). Then, the system transformation in the post-socialist block brought the reintroduction of democracy, and since then the range of citizen participation on various levels of public administration, including local spatial planning, is being constantly extended.

The traditional model of administration, with its concept of hierarchical bureaucracy, formal decision-making procedures and orientation towards instrumental rationality (described as “governing”) is being

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