

Publicly Involved Spatial Development in the Podkarpackie Voivodship in Poland from an Environmental Point of View

Małgorzata Roge-Wiśniewska

University of Warsaw, Poland

Abstract

The paper focuses on methods used during public consultations on conditions and directions of local spatial development prepared by communes (Polish: gmina) in the Podkarpackie Voivodship. A well-executed public communication process should provide information on public preferences and concerns, as well as additional environmental information. This research has proven a hypothesis that communication techniques used by communes during studies on the conditions and directions of local spatial development differ between communes with environmentally valuable areas and those without areas of special natural value.

Keywords: public communication, spatial planning, Podkarpackie Voivodship

Introduction

Space is a common asset. Its order and organisation affect the living conditions of citizens and welfare of the state, give evidence on the culture of the inhabitants, and determine civilizational progress. Therefore spatial planning is one of the fundamental tools for sustained growth. When executed properly, it should make it possible to reconcile often conflicting short-term interests of society, the economy and environment. In the long term, social and economic interests are more convergent with the interests of the natural environment because its good condition is a prerequisite for human survival on this planet. Public communication is a very useful tool helping to implement the principles of sustained growth in such a complicated matter as spatial development. A key role of public participation in urban planning is noted in the New Charter of Athens.¹ The basic principles of public participation have been formulated in numerous publications—i.a., André et al. (2006), Długosz and Wygnański (2005)—or even pieces of legislation—e.g., in the Aarhus Convention², Principles of Public Dialogue³, the Act on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work⁴.

Public communication is a very broad term. It covers all levels of public involvement from informative processes to feedback to co-planning and co-governing. Some authors (e.g., de Piérola et al.

1. See: The New Charter of Athens 2003. The European Council of Town Planners' Vision for Cities in the 21st Century, [@:] <http://www.ceu-ectp.eu/index.php/en/component/content/article?id=85>.

2. See: Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, done at Aarhus, Denmark, on 25 June 1998 (entered into force on 30 October 2001).

3. See: Zasady Dialogu Społecznego – dokument programowy Rządu przyjęty przez Radę Ministrów w dniu 22 października 2002 r. [Principles of Public Dialogue – Governmental policy document adopted by the Council of Ministers on 22 October 2002], available at http://www.malopolska.uw.gov.pl/doc/Zasady_Dialogu_Spolecznego_dokument_programowy.pdf.

4. See: Ustawa z dnia 24 kwietnia 2003 r. o działalności pożytku publicznego i o wolontariacie [Act on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work], DzU z 2003 r. nr 96, poz. 873, and Obwieszczenie Marszałka Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 14 lipca 2014 r. w sprawie ogłoszenia jednolitego tekstu ustawy o działalności pożytku publicznego i o wolontariacie, DzU z 2014 r., poz. 1118.

2009) also included the objectives of environmental education (i.e., related to supporting the expansion of knowledge and shaping pro-environmental and sustainable attitudes and behavior). The most basic level of communication is informative, which is characterised by a one-way information flow, for example from the authorities to the public. Feedback requires greater engagement, often referred to as a dialogue, public discussion, participation, consultation, listening to or asking for public opinion. At this level, an already prepared draft of an investment or document is presented to the public for its opinion. Making use of gathered comments may mean that the whole draft needs to be reconstructed, which in consequence brings about a significant increase of time and costs consumed. A good practice is thus to invite the public to collaboration at the earliest possible stages of a project, which in other words can be described as co-planning. This level of communication is also referred to as a cooperation with the public, collaboration, bottom-up planning and planning with public participation. Co-planning is the best form of communication in large societies.

However, authorities may also invite the public to the process of cooperative decision-making, which is generating viewpoints and decisions by means of, for example, a referendum or another tool of direct democracy. Such solutions are often used in situations of severe conflict where there is no clear dominance of support for one of the options. Today, co-planning and co-governing more and more are beginning to play a greater role by extending the mechanisms of participatory democracy. This is also true for the concept of deliberative democracy involving the search for new solutions that were not previously perceived by the participants (Peisert 2010). Cooperative decision-making is also used in the participatory budgets, which involves allocating part of the budget of local government for investments selected by society. This form of cooperation is becoming increasingly popular throughout the world and in Poland. Yet the process of cooperative decision-making should not be used frequently in spatial planning because, unfortunately, most people cannot rise above their own interests and vote for solutions that protect the long-term public interest, especially those that go beyond the interests of the local community. Before starting a communication process it is worth developing a communication strategy containing, *inter alia*, diagnosis of locally occurring benefits and problems of public participation. The tool CLEAR⁵ is very useful in performing this diagnosis. The process of technique selection may be supported by good practices of participation, which are contained in documents such as the “Base of good practices of participation”⁶ and “Participation Compass”⁷.

1 The purpose and scope of the research

The aim of this paper is to present the research concerning public communication in the field of spatial planning in the Podkarpackie Voivodship⁸. The purpose of the study is both to diagnose the state and evaluate the activities in the field of public communication carried out by local government units. In particular it focuses on checking the extent to which public communication, accompanying the development of the local study on the conditions and directions of spatial development depends on nature conservation in the area. The object of the research was the choice of techniques used by authorities during public consultations of a recently created study or its modification which yet required the approval of the entire study. The investigation of publicly involved planning from the point of view of the natural environment was made in mid-2013.

The survey was conducted on the basis of questionnaires filled out by selected communes administration in the Podkarpackie Voivodship. Fifty two communes were selected for the study. The process consisted of selecting all communes with the highest percentage of areas conserved under Act of 16 April 2004 on the Nature Conservation,⁹ and selecting all similar (rural and urban-rural)

5. See: CLEAR tool [LR-DP(2008)9], Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe, Committee of Experts on Democratic Participation and Public Ethics at Local and Regional Level (LR-DP), European Committee on Local and Regional Democracy (CDLR).

6. See: Baza dobrych praktyk partycypacji [Base of good practices of participation], [@:]<http://dobrepraktyki.decdujmyrazem.pl/>.

7. See: Participation Methods, [@:] <http://participationcompass.org/article/index/method>.

8. One of the 16 Polish administration regions on the NUTS 2 level, localized in the eastern part of Poland.

9. See: Ustawa z dnia 16 kwietnia 2004 r. o ochronie przyrody, DzU z 2004 r. nr 92, poz. 880, and Obwieszczenie

communes of the voivodship which do not have such areas. The data serving as the basis for the selection was derived from the Local Data Bank published by Central Statistical Office (CSO 2012). The study involved twenty nine communes lacking areas of particular natural value and twenty three communes which had above 90% of legally protected sites of natural value. Only four communes had 100% of such areas, but only 69% send back questionnaires. The communes which took part in the study were as follows:

- 32 thirty two rural communes: Adamówka, Bojanów, Borowa, Chłopice, Cisna, Dębica, Dubiecko, Fredropol, Gać, Gawłuszowice, Gorzyce, Harasiuki, Horyniec-Zdrój, Jarocin, Jasło, Komańcza, Krasiczyn, Krempna, Krościenko Wyżne, Krzeszów, Lutowiska, Majdan Królewski, Niwiska, Olszanica, Orły, Padew Narodowa, Pawłosiów, Przeworsk, Tarnowiec, Tyrawa Wołoska, Wadowice Górne, Żyraków
- four urban-rural communes: Jedlicze, Narol, Radomyśl Wielki, Sieniawa

Data from the questionnaires filled out by individual communes was studied for diversity in selection of communication methods when areas of natural value were compared to those of no particular natural value. The study used a standard Chi-square test.

One of the objectives of the public participation process accompanying the creation of the study is to collect additional data from the public about the environment in a given commune (Roge-Wiśniewska 2012). Therefore, a research hypothesis was formulated that communication techniques used by communes during the creation of the studies differ between communes with environmentally valuable areas and those without areas of special natural value.

2 Results

Techniques that have been listed by the commune's authorities have been divided into the following ten categories (fig. 1): announcements in an office, announcements in the press, going public with comments, going public with proposals, draft documents for public viewing, information for the general public, information to all inhabitants, information to selected people, official websites, public meetings. Almost all communes:

- used the official announcements placed on the notice board in the commune's office,
- made the draft study on the conditions and directions of spatial development available to the public,
- enabled the submission of suggestions concerning the study,
- provided for the submission of comments to the draft.

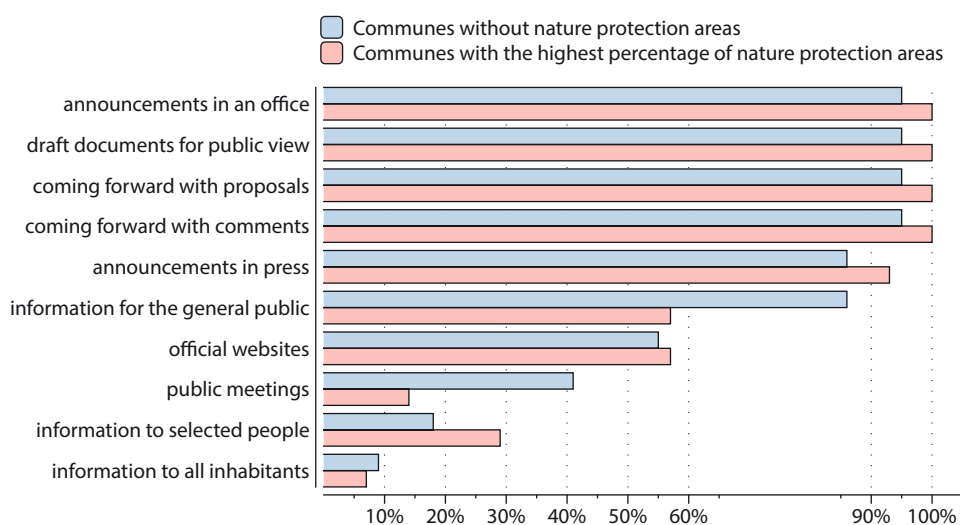


Fig. 1. Communication actions (public communication techniques) used while preparing the study on the conditions and directions of spatial development in communes of the Podkarpackie Voivodship

These activities were mandatory in the planning procedures at local level at the time when a planning document in the shape of a study appeared in Polish law.

Only four communes didn't put announcements in local or regional press. Two groups of techniques were popular: information for the general public and official websites. The techniques of informing the general public include those such as publication of information:

- on a website that is not administered by the commune's council executing the process of public communication,
- on notice boards in the town or villages.

Neither local nor regional radio or television were used. Among the techniques mentioned above, notice boards are by far most popular, which represents almost 93% of techniques gathered in this group. As many as 69% of the surveyed communes used this technique.

An announcement informing about the availability of the study for public consultation placed on the commune's official website or in the Public Information Bulletin has been mandatory in recent years, and this is why this form of communication has been separated from publications on other websites. Its popularity is quite high—twenty communes used it, which is about half of the communes participating in the study (fig. 1). This technique was quite popular after 2008 (see fig. 2). This indicates a growing interest in the use of Internet by officials during a public consultation. This change is consistent with the results of Damurski (2011), who indicated that the aversion of clerks and local governments to public consultation could be more easily overcome by digital democracy. It clearly indicates a change in practices associated with the changes in Polish law. The popularity of this method in Podkarpackie Voivodship is therefore lower as is the average Internet access and broadband connections by households in Poland (Löf and Seybert 2009).

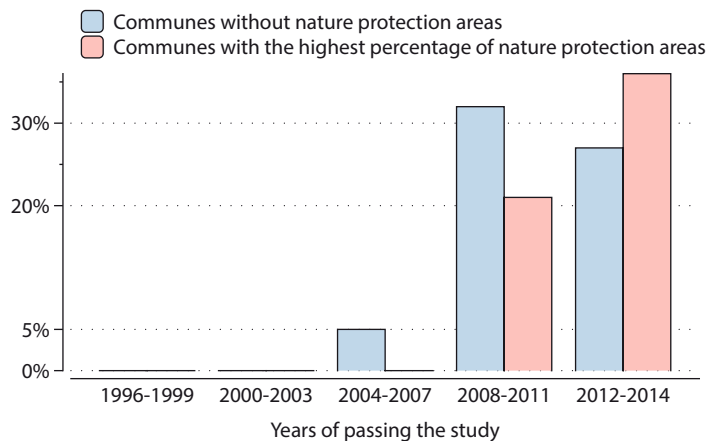


Fig. 2. Use of official websites as part of public communication accompanying the development of the study—variability in time

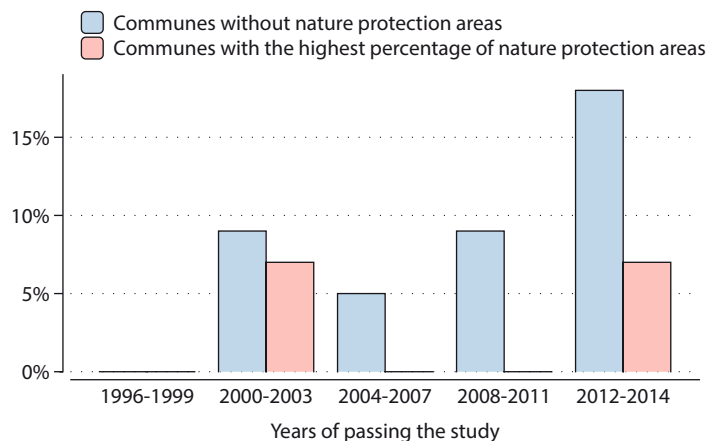


Fig. 3. Organising public meetings as part of public communication accompanying the development of the study—variability in time

Only eleven communes, which is about 31% of the sample, organised meetings for residents. Public meetings serve public discussions, which considerably recently have been made mandatory when passing a study. It follows from the analysis of the use of this method in different years that this method is three times more popular in the communes without nature protection areas in recent years (fig. 3).

Informing selected people includes techniques such as letters or copies of the official announcement forwarded to village administrators or councillors, or meetings with village administrators. This technique was used by eight communes, which is by about 22% of communes areas (fig. 1).

Techniques aimed at informing all residents were used by only three communes. Notifications of this type took place by means of the so-called circular, which involved forwarding a copy of a letter or notice from house to house in all administrative units of a given commune. In this group a slight, 1-point predominance of communes without protected areas of natural value was recorded (fig. 1).

The Chi-square test covering all the above techniques showed that these variables are dependent on the state of environmental conservation. The calculated value of chi-square was 3,778, which with one degree of freedom gives a significance level of 0,05.¹⁰ The test did not deny the tested hypothesis indicating a correlation between the techniques of public communication and the type of commune (with or without protected areas of environmental value).

Summary and conclusions

Properly conducted public communication processes should provide information on public preferences and concerns. They can also be a source of additional information on the state of the natural environment. The knowledge of these conditions enabled the author to put forward the following research hypothesis: communication techniques used by communes during the creation of the local studies on the conditions and directions of spatial development differ between communes with environmentally valuable areas and those without areas of special natural value. The study of publicly engaged spatial planning from the environmental point of view executed in 2013 among 36 communes of the Podkarpackie Voivodship proved this hypothesis to be true.

Most communes execute the process of communication accompanying the development of the study in compliance with the law. The most poorly executed task enforced by law is the obligation to organise public debates, which can be carried out by means of for example public meetings. This obligation has appeared relatively recently, which may have contributed to the low use of this method among communication techniques adopted by the communes. Low popularity of public meetings with residents is quite worrying. These meetings enable discussion and make it possible for the authorities to get to know different viewpoints of the representatives of various interest groups. Unfortunately communes focus only on informing the public and gathering comments and suggestions from individuals. Of course, officials were having plenty of discussions with people coming forward with proposals and comments. These are conversations in a very narrow circle, so they can't be treated as a public discussion.

Among the non-compulsory methods the most popular techniques are those used to inform selected people and the general public without focus on particular recipients. The least popular techniques are those used to inform all residents.

The research showed that the most common objective of communication in spatial planning is only to inform the community and to make the process of decision-making more public. Actions aimed to increase the communication skills of society were not taken in the communes under study. In the long term education may have a positive influence on public processes of decision-making. Therefore such actions are worth trying. Officials executing planning procedures, even if they do not take special actions to educate the public, should be aware of the fact that there is an educational dimension to public communication. In the future, the educational role of public communication should be strengthened. Without this it will be difficult to create a civil society.

10. [In the journal European practice of number notation is followed—for example, 36 333,33 (European style) = 36 333.33 (Canadian style) = 36,333.33 (US and British style).—Ed.]

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