

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION FOR BETTER URBAN GREEN SPACES



This policy brief illustrates the resources citizens can bring to green space planning and management, while also providing guidelines for how to design effective participation processes.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION FOR BETTER URBAN GREEN SPACES

By

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Municipalities across the world can benefit from well-designed participation processes, for example where urban green spaces are concerned.

This policy brief illustrates the resources citizens can bring to green space planning and management, while also providing guidelines for how to design effective participation processes.

THE CHALLENGE

Urban green spaces are crucial for the wellbeing of citizens. A well-designed network of green spaces provides a number of benefits related to e.g. resident health and wellbeing, climate change adaptation and biodiversity, many of which also significantly benefit the economy of municipalities, tax-payers and land owners. Traditionally, urban green spaces have been planned and managed by experts employed by public authorities such as municipalities. However, in recent decades, this public service has been influenced by trends of enhanced governance. This means that today citizen participation is a frequent part of green space planning and management. However, too often participation is not living up to its full potential: resources are not fully activated, opportunities for improving urban liveability are missed and capacities for collaboration are diluted.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN CONNECTION TO NATURE, LANDSCAPE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IS ON THE AGENDA IN A NUMBER OF INTERNATIONAL POLICIES:

Agenda 21 is a comprehensive worldwide action plan resulting from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. It focuses at global, national and local scales on areas where humans impact the environment to ensure sustainable development. It is a non-binding and voluntary agenda implemented by the United Nations, other multilateral organizations and individual governments around the world. Locally, 'Local Agenda 21' should be adopted through consultation and consensus-building by local authorities with inputs from community and business.

The Aarhus Convention established a number of environmental rights of the public by promoting the right to participate in decision-making related to projects affecting the environment.

The European Landscape Convention sets out to support the protection, management and planning of landscapes and organizes European co-operation on landscape issues by encouraging the public to take an active part.

The **European Commission's green infrastructure strategy** stresses voluntary action by civil society in order to enhance ecosystem services, i.e. the multiple benefits arising from ecosystems.



Picture 1: Volunteer events can be a way to support citizen activism and discussion on creation of local participatory management practices. Scything is about to start at a volunteer event in Lersøparken arranged by the Municipality of Copenhagen. Photo: Ole Frøik Molin

TOWARDS EFFECTIVE CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

User participation is widely promoted in connection with planning of urban green spaces. However, participation is often organized without clarifying how participants' contributions will be used in the planning process. It is up to the individual planner to decide how participation is approached. Benefits of participation in planning as well as management of green spaces are easily taken for granted. Participation may be seen as separate from the process by which decisions are actually made. In management and maintenance of green spaces, the potentials of citizens themselves shaping places are still seldom recognized.

Place-specific knowledge and capacities for action

Citizens often have comprehensive knowledge about their own living environment and embody a resource of local capacities for maintaining and improving its quality. Many are motivated and possess resources for engaging in various activities such as fundraising, event-making and publicity. Citizen participation in green space planning makes it possible to supplement the knowledge of various professionals with this valuable local knowledge. The participatory process enables building shared understanding of what liveability means in the specific area and which actions for enhancing it are desirable.

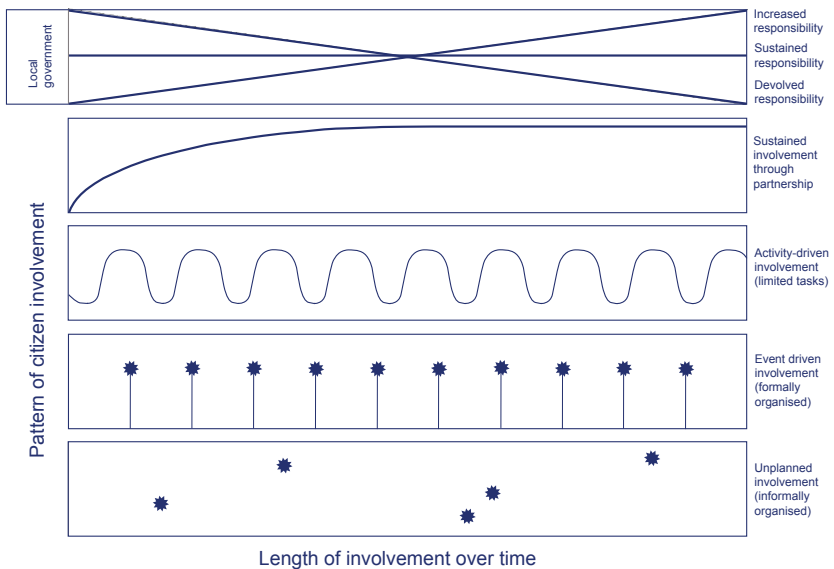


Figure 1: The figure was developed in collaboration with Alice Mathers in connection to the EU funded project "MP4: Making Places Profitable, Public and Private Open Spaces" (2009-2013).

Adaptive participation: Different patterns of involvement

The dynamics of citizen participation often do not follow the structures and rhythms of traditional (hierarchical) planning and management. In many cases citizen 'patterns of involvement' vary by seasons or resources available or are occasional and focused around specific events. Municipalities can embrace and support activism when it arises. For example, the abilities of citizen activists to engage diverse local actors around an issue they find important can also be an asset for authorities that cannot access the local networks themselves.

Clear goals for citizen participation prevent frustration and build trust

Involving citizens in planning is worth organizing only when there is a real need for it and attention is paid to quality rather than quantity of participation. Clear goals for participation in planning, especially specification of the role of citizens' input in the making of solutions and decisions can:

- 1) help prevent overly optimistic expectations;
- 2) ease the work of planning and management professionals;
- 3) contribute to trust that fosters capacities for future collaboration.

Citizen contributions in planning are also needed for ensuring that the plans **leave room for creative, less planned action**. In green space *management*, clarification of the rights and responsibilities of each party at the beginning of the participation helps to avoid confusion from potentially differing views. Follow-up practices enable evaluation and continuous improvement of the participatory processes.

Link process and outcomes

A participatory planning process can be rewarding for all parties if the use of citizen contributions is designed by thinking of the desired outcomes already at the beginning. What will these contributions be used for and how are they linked to what will actually happen in the area?

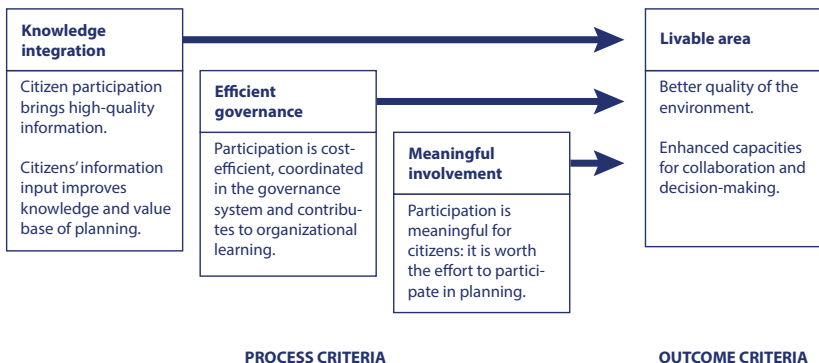


Figure 2: One way to start enhancing the effectiveness of participatory planning is a workshop in which people discuss what could be the criteria for successful participatory planning in the particular organization. Such discussions can be inspired by research-based criteria.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Acknowledge the diversity of participation patterns

Citizens have specific knowledge about the liveability of their own living environment and represent local capacities for enhancing it. Understanding the quality and liveability of an area and how to develop it further becomes possible when participatory processes recognize the diverse rhythms and dynamics of various citizens and authorities, and let them meet, rather than forcing one to fit to the patterns of the other.

Integrate citizen participation with local policies

Citizens' views about what is desirable help in defining policies that guide the whole cycle of green space governance, from policies to maintenance and towards maximizing benefits for citizens and society at large. Citizen participation in planning and management of green spaces is an opportunity for elected and appointed decision-makers to obtain information from citizens and to reflect on how local policies meet with citizens' deeply held values.

Encourage planning and management organizations to specify their goals with citizen participation

Clarifying goals and redirecting resources from inefficient processes to where participation is most needed helps in saving resources, generating concrete results and fostering potentials for collaboration in the future.

Support continuous evaluation and improvement of participatory processes

Efficient use of resources for citizen participation - and thus for finding new forms of collaboration between public officials and citizens - can be supported by integrating evaluation into already existing processes. Support by an evaluation expert may help at the start, but evaluation is possible without additional resources. Even small efforts, for example feedback discussions as part of events that are organized anyway or a couple of feedback questions included in user surveys, can provide helpful information.

Provide training in participatory processes

Urban planners, green space managers and other 'green experts' need to be competent and feel confident about collaborating with citizens. Investing in professional training on how to design, implement and evaluate citizen participation processes is a way of increasing the likelihood of unfolding the potentials of citizen inputs in green space planning and management in the future. Skilled professionals are able to use resources for collaboration effectively and obtain citizens contributions so that they can help making decisions that are also well-grounded economically.



Picture 2: Consideration of citizens' local knowledge in the planning of green spaces makes it possible to identify planning solutions that help making green spaces livable for many. Photo: Maija Faehnle

The authors would like to thank their co-authors who have contributed to the research which forms the basis of this policy brief.

This policy brief is based on research projects from Denmark and England about user participation in place-keeping (or management) of urban open and green space and, on research from Finland on collaborative planning of urban green infrastructure as well as a review of existing international research within the field of urban (green space) planning and management.

The present policy recommendations are based on the following publications:

Faehnle, M. 2014. Collaborative planning of urban green infrastructure – need, quality, evaluation, and design. Diss., University of Helsinki. Unigrafia, Helsinki. Available from: <http://hdl.handle.net/10138/44687>

Faehnle, M., Bäcklund, P., Tyrväinen, L., Niemelä, J., Yli-Pelkonen, V. 2014. How can residents' experiences inform planning of urban green infrastructure? Case Finland. *Landscape and Urban Planning* 130, 171–183.

Faehnle, M., Tyrväinen, L. 2013. A framework for evaluating and designing collaborative planning. *Land Use Policy* 34, 332–341.

Fors, H., Molin, J.F., Murphy, M.A. & Konijnendijk van den Bosch, C.C. User participation in urban green space planning and management - for the people or the parks? Under 2nd review after revision by Urban Forestry and Urban Greening.

Mathers, A., Molin, J.F. Burton, M.: Evolving involvement: exploring the devolution effect on patterns of UK community involvement in urban green space. Conference presentation at EFLA Regional Congress 2011. Mind the Gap: Landscapes for a New Era November 2nd – 4th 2011, Tallinn, Estonia.

Molin, J.F., Konijnendijk van den Bosch, C.C., 2014. Between Big Ideas and Daily Realities – The roles and perspectives of Danish municipal green space managers on public involvement in green space maintenance. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* 13, 553-561.

Forestry in the Nordic and Baltic countries is increasingly influenced by urban values, norms and demands. For this reason, Nordic Forest Research (SNS) supports collaboration and knowledge exchange among leading researchers in a Nordic and Baltic Centre of Advanced Research on Forestry Serving Urban Societies, 'CARE-FOR-US'.

Front page: Local children involved in planting flower beds owned by the Municipality of Frederiksberg. Photo: Karsten Klintø, Municipality of Frederiksberg



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