

## INVOLVING DECISION-MAKERS IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF RESULTS INTO URBAN SUSTAINABILITY POLICIES

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### ABSTRACT

Mind mapping tools have been introduced to stimulate the thought processes with regard to sustainability and to objectify its content and significance for urban sustainability planning. Such tools are based on keywords that are identified and structured through dialogue-based procedures. The approach can be also applied for switching between highlighting sectorial aspects, such as territorial management and urban design, social and economic cohesion, as well as cross-sectorial aspects, such as sustainable mobility and energy efficiency.

This paper emphasizes on the structured dialogue with decision-makers representing national, regional and local level, aiming to identify what decision-makers really need and the key barriers to the implementation of existing urban sustainability tools. The work has been organized in four discrete steps. Initially, a cross-check and evaluation of results' transferability was completed, consisting in evaluating former EU projects' and initiatives' results according to analytical predefined criteria. Results were categorized into cross-cutting aspects (territorial management and urban design, social and economic cohesion) and sectorial aspects (sustainable mobility, energy efficiency). The structured dialogue was implemented in parallel with the results' evaluation in order to match projects' results with decision-makers' expectations.

The ultimate goal was to develop a toolbox for decision-makers including exiting results in a re-organized and a re-formulated way according to decision-makers' priorities, in order to offer solutions or to improve policies able to mitigate urban sustainability problems.

**Keywords:** Urban sustainability, policies, needs and priorities, Mediterranean area, decision-making, structured dialogue.

### 1. Introduction

The classic Mediterranean city combines two complementary concepts that make it more suitable to human habitat, while being conducive to the lower consumption of natural resources; the compactness and complexity. The compactness of a city means that the buildings are grouped together closely, creating a dense environment and sufficient population critical mass so that there is a high level of different activities taking place, and therefore a transfer of information and relationships. Complexity goes hand in hand with compactness, representing the diversity of human activities that are located in different parts of the city.

The idea of sustainability in urban models involves the interplay of territorial actions on the city configuration combined with environmental and landscaping elements as well as the optimal management of natural resources, while promoting social cohesion and the participation of citizens (Perry, 2013; Perry and May, 2010). It is not possible to work on a part of the urban mosaic, without taking into account the impact on other elements.

Urban planning can provide a powerful tool if it addresses the real needs and capacities of a city. Planning can support stakeholders to visualize alternative future scenarios that are more sustainable, economically productive and responsive to the trends and challenges, and facilitate

decision-making and mobilization and empowerment of communities. Urban planning can also promote more efficient and eco-friendly cities through the densification of urban settlements and of mixed land-use, the integration of infrastructure, housing and services, and the careful shaping of public spaces and natural urban territories (Hodson and Marvin, 2010).

Urban planning is essential to reach a city's urban development strategy, which is mapped out for all those who live, work, invest and contact all kinds of activities in the city, as well as for visitors and many others. Dialogue-based methods (structured dialogue) for decision-making with politicians and the citizens towards the formulation of urban sustainability strategy clearly take preference in this process.

## **2. Methodology**

The structured dialogue is a process implemented with decisions-makers in order to identify strategic problems and key barriers they encounter to implement European sustainable urban policies and their national adaptation. It aims to identify what decision-makers really need and the key barriers to the implementation of sustainable urban policies in the EU (Reed *et al.*, 2006).

This process has been applied by the research team at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in an effort to help selected decision-makers to adopt existing tools and results delivered in the framework of European projects and key European initiatives that respond effectively and are easily transferred in order to meet their needs and priorities in the field of urban sustainability. A mechanism (methodology) has been created and followed in order to support the transferability of results to decision-makers.

According to this methodology, three decision-makers, related to the same kind of sustainable urban policy, were selected by the research team. This permitted to avoid getting lost in too many different policies and to focus on one specific aspect (either sectorial or cross-sectorial) for the three chosen decision-makers. The sectorial aspects were the following: Territorial management and urban design, social and economic cohesion. The cross-sectorial aspects were sustainable mobility and energy efficiency.

### **2.1. Decision-makers selection criteria**

Decision-makers were selected very carefully, according to the following criteria:

- (i) Responsibility and influence: Decision-makers should be politicians (elected representatives, who can draft policies) or high-level public administrators (change agents – in charge of urban projects, like new areas and developments – people who can put the policies into implementation sector by sector). According to the methodology, both politicians and high-level administrators should be selected.
- (ii) Field of competence: Two options were offered, as follows;
  - As the interviewer might be interested specifically in some projects results, decision-makers related to the topic of those results could be chosen.
  - Interviewers could also choose decision-makers not in relation to topics, but in relation to the current trends in urban sustainability policies.
- (iii) Decision-making level: All levels (national, regional, local) should be represented.
- (iv) Political diversity: As the approach of sustainable urban policies is depending also on ideological points of view, the political parties present in the European Parliament should also be represented.

### **2.2. Holding of the interviews with decision-makers**

The structured dialogue was held with the use of a Questionnaire containing both close and open ended questions. The main fields of the Questionnaires were dealing with the following issues:

- (i) Policies for urban sustainability in general: The most important urban problems in the political or technical agenda were discussed. The following policy areas were ranked:

Energy efficiency in buildings, sustainable transport, sustainable urban planning, lighting, waste, economic development, architectural heritage, according to the decision maker's view.

- (ii) Application of European legislation on urban sustainability: Problems that hinder the implementation of European legislation affecting urban sustainability aspects were discussed.
- (iii) Barriers about sustainable urban policies, among:
  - Internal barriers of the administration such as technical/lack of competence, financial barriers, regulatory and legislative barriers, lack of governance tools, lack of partnership and organisational instruments to support the involvement of different social actors, wrong policies with respect to urban problems.
  - Political barriers, such as opposition of some actors and lack of political support, change of political agenda, conflicts between priorities between different decision-makers.
  - External barriers, such as acceptability by citizens and by the beneficiaries of the actions and different priorities for people involved, economic crisis that can drive to other problems people's expectations, weak instruments and methods to involve citizens
- (iv) Needs and expectations about policies for urban sustainability: In this section, the issues that decision-makers wish to improve or focus better, in order to enhance the policies they are working on were discussed. Also, the needs of decision-makers in order to develop urban sustainability policies, e.g. in selecting different typologies of instruments, such as incentives, direct actions, taxes, rules, voluntary instruments, personnel, competences, innovative instruments, funds, etc., were discussed. Additionally, availability of financing sources or tools with long-term effects or to resolve immediate urban problems and/or emergencies were exposed. Existing European activities and initiatives addressing the constraints and needs previously expressed were discussed as well as suggestions for the next programming period to support some priorities and policies for 2014-2020.

### **3. Discussion of results**

Based on the above the structured dialogue was held for the region of Central Macedonia located at the northern part of Greece, between the Aristotle University Thessaloniki's research team and the following representatives:

- (i) President of the Organization of Planning and Environmental Protection of Thessaloniki, representing the national level.
- (ii) High-level administrator in charge of the permanent committee for spatial and urban planning and development of the Technical Chamber/ department of Central Macedonia, representing the regional level.
- (iii) Deputy Mayor of the City of Thessaloniki, representing the local level.

The common barriers that were expressed by all three levels of political governance as the most importantly affecting the implementation of sustainable urban policies were:

- Non-existence of strong political willingness towards the creation of a vision for the cities.
- Lack of metropolitan governance – flexibility and cooperation between local and regional administrations (lack of administrative integration).
- Non-implementation (or low implementation) of existing tools for metropolitan governance.
- Financial issues (low ability to finance urban sustainability projects in cities).
- Conflicts between national regulations (deriving from different Ministries).
- Inability of regional and local administrators to formulate and/or modify the regional, local regulatory framework, and adjust it to the regional and local needs, respectively.
- Opposition of some actors, due to conflicts between priorities of different decision makers.
- Weak methods to involve, mobilize the citizens.

- Lack or wrong policies concerning sustainable development.
- Financial crisis that has lead cities to deal with different priorities.

The suggestions expressed by the representatives were summarized as follows:

- Enhancement of metropolitan governance and use of the existing tools
- Strengthening of the role of local and regional government, by increasing resources and institutional responsibilities
- Better collaboration of local and regional authorities and replacement of out of date bodies with more flexible schemes
- Continuity and consistency in administration, regardless the changes to persons, through permanent mechanisms to monitor implementation of the agreed projects at national or local level.
- Better coordination – avoidance of contradictions between legislative initiatives of various Ministries.
- Strengthening and establishment of methods for increasing social acceptance of different projects, public consultation, promotion and dissemination of good policies, rewards for effective citizen participation etc.

All decision-makers agreed that there is great need for enhancement of the metropolitan governance and common decision making according to a clear vision for a city and for better use of the existing financial tools. Collaboration between different economic actors for the exploitation of new funding mechanisms is also of great importance. In terms of financing, the difficulties to its optimal utilization, is linked to the poor administrative coordination between Authorities, slow spreading of information, "tight" deadlines, immature proposals and lack of specialized human resources for timely preparation of proposals. Also, the bureaucratic procedures and the institutional and legal framework affect the ability to absorb financial sources.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Concluding, according to the structured dialogue results conducted to three selected decision-makers representing the national, regional and local level in the area of Central Macedonia in Greece, the main findings regarding the national level is the need for introduction of EU policies that address spatial management in a holistic way. Individual components, such as microclimate, desertification etc., exist in the regulatory framework, but there is lack of an integrated approach. Also, there is a gap at national policy level for urban and peri-urban landscapes. At regional level there is a need to increase mobility and remove obstacles to the transfer of employees and goods, enhancing the means of transportation within the region of Central Macedonia and the wider buffer zone. Also there is a need for prevention and management of natural disasters (floods, forest fires, earthquakes). Finally, at local level the improvement of the economic environment and the enhancement of social cohesion are of great importance as well as the promotion of local products and initiatives. The structured dialogue results were used to assess the transferability of former tools and results developed in the framework of former EU projects and initiatives, aiming to enhance urban sustainability.

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