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Online Public Engagement and Planning Practice: a Serbian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In Serbia today we can witness a certain planning paradox — on one hand the planning practice is shifting from the traditional, top-down planning approach, to the more collaborative one, and the communication with the community and involvement of the public in the planning process and decision-making is slowly becoming the crucial element in the planning practice. On the other hand, people in Serbia have a poor sense of community, lack community engagement, trust in government, and in general have no knowledge and information about planning process.

The widespread adoption of the Internet, especially the social web, dramatically altered our society, changed the way we interact socially and facilitated communication and exchange of ideas and information. Adopting a viewpoint that the Internet can be an effective tool for public empowerment, this paper will examine current examples of online platforms for public engagement in planning process, such as civic networks, social networks etc. The paper will analyze these approaches, particularly the way they can be used to enhance and support the traditional planning methods, and enable new types of innovation and creativity. We will compare and observe their strengths and weaknesses from urban planning context, taking into account specific Serbian context.

KEYWORDS: urban planning, internet, community engagement, participation, Serbia

1 INTRODUCTION

The widespread adoption of Internet, and especially of the social web, is dramatically altering our societies, as it is changing the way we interact socially in public and in professional work. These new technologies are facilitating communication and exchange of ideas, information and experiences. Further, they provide a range of new tools that have capacity to facilitate professional work and open new options.

Internet can be an effective tool for the public empowerment. It opens new opportunities for making public services closer to public, provides ways for exchange between local governments and citizens that is more effective, and makes local organizations and bodies more affordable and closer to all. Above all, it enables citizens to exercise their civil rights and become more active in public domain as it provides ways and means for their stronger participation in local affairs.

These opportunities have been recognized in Serbia as in many other countries. This paper will illustrate the situation in Serbia, current trends and the on-going changes in planning practice and public participation, and analyze the possible impact of the raising development of ICT in the country on the

public participation. The hypothesis is that the further development of ICT and Internet services, in particular, can noticeably change the planning practice in the country and bring in many benefits for the planning profession and general public.

2 A SLOW SHIFT IN PLANNING PRACTICE AND PARTICIPATION IN SERBIA

Planning system in Serbia may be analyzed and evaluated from two very different viewpoints: from the formal point of view which focuses its institutional arrangements, legal regulation, types of planning actions and planning tools, or its formal procedures; on the other hand, there is its informal component which goes in parallel and which increasingly is attracting attention of the planning profession. Formally, the planning system in Serbia is highly institutionalized, rational, and strictly hierarchical, mostly based on the experiences from the past socialist period. In parallel, a collaborative planning model is taking more and more space, yet, in an informal way and with often-weak links to the institutionalized practice. Still, the two approaches meet, relate to each other, sometimes work together or overlap, resulting in an ambiguous planning practice that is neither rational, nor collaborative (Lazarević Bajec, 2009).

Whilst the change towards collaborative model is indeed taking place, this process is unstructured, slow and spontaneous. The whys and hows should be sought in traditional institutional organization of the planning system and the city development agencies, specific political culture, inadequate regulation (Bajić Brković, 2010), market economy that does not function fully, vague stakeholders, and decentralization that exists only declaratively (Lazarević Bajec, 2009).

For the analytical purposes of evaluating public participation in Serbia, we will follow the three stage model of participation as defined by OECD (Gramberger, 2001). As for informing the public and providing proper information to all the citizens, the majority of municipalities in Serbia have shown so far only limited results. Most often, their citizens lack even basic information on planned actions or projects the local government will embark on. In contrast, the majority of municipal governments evaluates their communication with public as good, and thinks that their citizens are properly informed. However, the stage at which public is only informed makes public passive, they are the "receptors" of information only. The active approach where citizens are in search for information in these communities is rather rare (Vukelic, 2009).

The other even more active approaches like the consulting model or active participation (i.e. involvement in decision making) are present to an even lesser degree in Serbia. The lack of any official monitoring and statistical data on their occurrence speaks that such practice has not been introduced in Serbian decision making practice as yet (Vukelic, 2009).

As far as public involvement in the planning process is concerned, it is rather limited to the right-to-appeal during the one month long public inspection. Public may also propose to start a planning process, but they seldom have any way to influence what is being planned. Informally, planners can involve them more, but this is entirely left to their discretion, and is rarely done.

These issues are becoming of important concerns in Serbia today. Planning professionals, public and professionals from other sectors are taking part in the debate which is going on.

3 INTERNET, SOCIAL WEB, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Internet, changed the way we interact socially and facilitated communication and exchange of ideas and information, both in personal and professional sphere. For urban planning professionals and their everyday planning practice, it can be used to provide a platform for community engagement that creates following opportunities (Brković & Brković Sretović, 2013):

- **Non-participation:** Population sampling and data mining;
- **Informing:** Providing/delivering one way information or making announcements,
- **Consulting:** Surveying, asking questions, asking for opinions, requesting feedback,
- **Active participation:** Civic engagement, community empowerment and collaboration.

These can be realized in different ways, and the approaches can be roughly divided into the following groups (Brković & Brković Sretović, 2013):

- Using existing (vertical) social networking services;
- Using services built for the specific planning purpose/tasks;
    - Establishing a new service, built from the ground up;
    - Opting into the existing state-level service;
- Adding new (horizontal) layer atop of already established services;
    - Starting a new service, built from ground up;
    - Using existing service;

In the following paragraphs (taken and adapted from (Brković & Sretović, 2012)), we will examine, compare and note the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches from urban planning context with particular emphasis on the way they can be used to enhance and support the traditional planning methods and enable new types of innovation and creativity.

3.1 Using existing social networking services

This approach is the most used one. Social networking services such as Facebook, Twitter, or Foursquare can be used to expand the outreach capabilities of the government agencies, including the planning related ones, and to broaden the abilities to interact with public. The typical use case scenarios are sharing information, plan mock-ups, making announcements, conducting polls, asking and answering questions, brainstorming, etc. Social networking services can be used for data mining too, without the explicit permission from the users.

There are some advantages by using the existing social networking service as compared to the others, conventional approaches, such as:

- There is already the existing user base,
- They are easy to implement,
- There are no maintenance costs.

However, when deciding for, or using this approach there are issues that are to be considered:

- These are privately owned services
- Privacy issues
- Who owns information?
- Specific service policies may limit the scope of their use
- They are not fit for every need
- User interface is often not appropriate for planning purposes, limiting the scope of its use
- Social networks tend to reinforce a positive approach (e.g., there is a "Like" button, but not "Dislike")
- User bias—careful research is needed to determine the user profile;

The existing social networking services require planners to adapt to the specifics of the service, instead the other way round. Taking into account the advantages mentioned above, this approach could be used as an excellent supplementary way for informing the public, conducting polls, or communicating and discussing the planning issues with the citizens.

3.2 Using purposely built service

On the other end of the spectrum, the second most common approach to the use of Social Media are the services that are specifically built to enable e-participation in planning. We can differentiate the two subtypes of these solutions: (a) first are the state–level services that municipalities can opt into; (b) second are the stand-alone custom-built solution.

The benefits of this approach are:

- Allows flexibility and custom tailoring to the specific needs for planning purposes;
- Complete control and ownership of data;
- Allows tight integration with city GIS;
- Allows tight integration with city services and/or municipal departments;

However, whilst it does have its advantages, this approach also has the shortcomings. The degree to which these shortcomings come across depends on whether the service is created from scratch, or is it a state-level service that municipalities can opt in. The shortcomings fall into one or more of the following:

- Effort, time, money and people needed to build the service;
- Maintenance costs;
- In order to function, it is necessary to attract users first;
- User bias—careful research is needed to determine users' profiles;

3.3 Adding horizontal layer atop of the already established social networking services

This is a somewhat novel approach (taken by services such as SeeClickFix from US, or Urbanias from Brazil) that tries to combine the benefits of using the existing social networking services (particularly its established user base), with flexibility of custom/purposely build solutions. The idea is to try to traverses across multiple social networks, further extending the user base and varying ways it can be interacted with. Similar to the purposely-built solutions mention above, this approach also can include privately owned services that municipalities can opt into or stand-alone custom-built applications.

Whilst to some extent more difficult to implement, this approach does indeed combine best of the both worlds. Likewise, it also inherits some of their weaknesses, such as building and maintenance costs and a possible user bias. In addition, even though it does start with an existing pool of users, it still needs to attract them to actually use the service, though this is slightly easier than starting with no user pool at all.

4 E-ENGAGEMENT AND LOCAL PLANNING PERSPECTIVE

The inert behavior and thinking present in Serbia places too much focus on the role of state, by assigning the state as the only one to raise the question, develop strategies, set the regulations and only then, through scale of responsibilities, bring it down to a local level (Bajic-Brkovic, Sretovic, & Brkovic, 2012). Whilst the state-level support is indeed necessary, some flexibility is permitted when it comes to local-level governance. Namely, the state of affairs on the local urban level is being monitored by local governments and their respective bodies who are allowed to undertake different actions and programs to some extent independently of the state.

From this perspective, Internet and social web can be viewed upon as a good opportunity for local governments to engage the public in planning matters. Implemented as such, they can benefit planning practice by assisting participation of local population and stakeholders who better understand local values, conditions and phenomena, supporting local community and local values, providing detailed, specific and targeted data about concrete problems appropriate for local–level development, and motivate and rebuild people's trust in government.

However, certain requirements need to be fulfilled in order and enable broader use of the Internet and social media in planning practice and community engagement successfully. In terms of changes necessary to planning system and method, these can be classified as:

- Institutional,
- Legal,
- Related to public awareness, and
- Technological prerequisites.

4.1 Institutional challenges

In order for results offered by the e-engagement services to be usable, they have to be applicable to the plan-making process. Often, the e-engagement systems rigorously follow the already established division of responsibilities and the existing institutional organization. Moreover, in many cases they are made and used by ~~a~~ single municipality department, without sharing information with others. In contrast, the public opinion rarely follows the same division and often crosses multiple jurisdictions.

Large number of institutions and organizations are legacy of a simpler past, and often are too rigid, hierarchically and sector-oriented to tackle the changes of complex problems, uncertainty and change (Alexander, 2009). Because of this inherited incompatibility in Serbia, municipal departments frame opinions and questions asked by the public within the existing divisions of responsibilities, and take expressed opinions only in part. This severely reduces the possibilities for active public participation.

This problem needs to be solved on an institutional level in order to increase the e-engagement use in planning practice, which translates to questioning of the existing rigid division of responsibilities, but even more so, to the efficiency of present horizontal communication. Legal system and institutions in Serbia in general react very slowly to changes and adoption of new technologies. Lack of political motivation to tackle these problems, coupled with deficient financial and organizational capacities and knowledgeable authorities make~~s~~ these tasks difficult in Serbia.

4.2 Legal challenges

Legal challenges are closely tied to the institutional ones. They are concerned with (a) enabling e-participation (as a broader category), and (b) laying out the legal foundation for the use of the acquired results in planning practice. As far as the ICT and e-government groundwork is concerned, Serbia adopted a series of national strategic documents concerning development of information society, reform of public administration, e–government, etc., all of which have created a favorable environment for further development of ICT tools to support every segment of management, including spatial and urban development and environmental protection (Lalović, 2010).

As previously mentioned, the use of social web and the Internet in planning practice is possible through an informal planning process in Serbia. Furthermore, it is a mitigating circumstance that planning practice in Serbia does not always require a full disclosure of all input data, and tolerates the development of planning proposals based on the estimates planners make. However, when such deployment is not possible, or when a widespread application is desired, these systems need to be formally recognized as a means for valid participation and source of information for planning practice.

4.3 Public awareness challenges

E-engagement for planning support depends on a widespread public usage of the Internet and social web services. In Serbia, ICT solutions are at this time available throughout the country, and the Internet is widely used, but the same cannot be said about e-government services. Therefore, part of the solution lies

with the Serbian government and municipalities making their online presence more available and engaging.

The other part lies within the public. Interpreting data and using it in planning process requires that there is enough data in the first place. The widespread and throughout usage of e-engagement services is necessary in order to acquire the adequately large sample size, minimize margin of error and gain results of statistical significance. This solves the problems of wrong or biased picture and validation of crowd–sourced data (Brković & Sretović, 2013).

In Serbia, there is a notable regional disparity in the usage of the Internet, as well as disparity in income structure, and education. The person most likely to be a user of Internet in Serbia lives in urban area, most likely in Belgrade or other urban area in Vojvodina, is educated, employed or is still studying, and has higher than average household income (Brković & Sretović, 2013).

Evidently, it is necessary to encourage wider participation and inclusion of all social groups, through promotion of systems, rising of public awareness, and enabling access to necessary technology (Brković & Sretović, 2013). However, the fact that the information is based on data which do not represent entire population of Serbia, but only its subset should be acknowledged as well, and the identified users should be carefully studied in order to exactly determine which group they represent. In these cases, these systems should not be used as sole-source of data, but only as additional tools to verify data obtained in other ways.

4.4 Technological challenges

Finally, there is technological challenge in the use of e-engagement in planning practice. The quantities of data that can be acquired in Serbia today do not present pressing challenges to technological or educational capacities in local governments. However, as the development of the ICT in Serbia is growing, and demand for e–participation is rising, it is not unreasonable to imagine that very soon planers in Serbia will be faced with a huge amount of unorganized, uncategorized and very diverse data. At that moment, the interpretation of data relevant for decision making will become a key challenge planners will be faced with. The development of algorithms that can filter such massive and diverse data, in order to figure out the patterns, and how the reality could be understood and explained in an unbiased way will become a complex and a fundamental problem planners will be challenged with (Presser, 2011).

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

E-based systems provide a new and powerful media for use in many domains of public interest. Governments have an important role to play in creating and enabling environment for making a big shift happen. However, many citizens in Serbia still do not recognize that they have a role as well. Being used to rely on a strong and powerful state and state authorities whose mandate was to create and deliver, they still do not recognize that they have a role as well, and that part of the power for making a change is in their hands as well (Vukelic, 2009). Actually, it is on local communities to recognize the potential of smart systems in planning practice and local development, and push for their implementation. Local governments should (a) recognize the potential benefits of e-engagement, (b) choose the way to implement it, (c) define immediate and concrete goals of its implementation, but above all (d) work on promotion and facilitation of access to such systems in order to gain necessary public support.

If implemented properly, Internet and social web can be an effective tool for the public empowerment. It opens new opportunities for making public services closer to public, provides ways for exchange between local governments and citizens that is more effective, and makes local organizations and bodies more affordable and closer to all. Above all, it enables citizens to exercise their civil rights and

become more active in public domain as it provides ways and means for their stronger participation in local affairs.

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