

Effectively Integrating Citizen Participation in Strategic Environmental Assessment of Municipal Master Plans

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Synopsis

This document presents the research findings and recommendations to assist policymakers and stakeholders involved in the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) processes of Portuguese Municipal Master Plans (MMPs) to integrate citizen participation more effectively.

Problem

Citizen participation in Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) processes of Municipal Master Plans (MMPs) in Portugal is nearly nonexistent. Citizens are unaware of the Strategic Environmental Assessment process's importance and transformational potential and do not trust the Municipal Administration, believing their opinions are overlooked.

Citizens tend to disregard environmental and collective issues when participating, adopting a more individualistic and tactical view of participation.

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About the study

This study examines the SEA processes of MMP in six cities in the north of Portugal. The goal was to understand how the interactions between the municipal administration and citizens can either facilitate or hinder urban sustainability transformations in decision-making processes. The case study employed deductive content analysis guided by a conceptual framework. This analytical framework allows for understanding how actors may act on or influence decision-making through specific 'agency features.' The following 'agency features' were examined in this study: 'learning, information and knowledge', 'awareness', 'resources', and 'shared vision'.

Context

SEA is a strategic policy tool aimed at promoting and integrating sustainability early in decision-making processes. But, despite the strategic and participatory framework established for SEA processes of MMP in Portugal, citizen participation remains weak and often ineffective. Municipal administrations' initiatives to engage citizens usually focus on gathering opinions on policy proposals or comparing different options without fully integrating citizens' views into the decision-making process. In some instances, municipal administrations may appear to listen to citizens but ultimately reinforce their power and authority. This context makes citizens distrust government institutions and SEA and MMP processes. By involving the public in the planning process, political choices are more aligned with actual conditions, more responsive to current priorities, and more capable of supporting the plan (Carreira, Machado and Vasconcelos 2016).

In addition, citizens lack awareness of the SEA process and its potential to drive sustainability. Municipal administrations focus primarily on promoting the importance of citizen participation and provide initiatives to discuss and clarify the Municipal Master Plan (MMP). However, they overlook the need to raise awareness about the SEA process and create initiatives that explain and encourage debate on this crucial policy instrument. Furthermore, citizen participation in the SEA processes of MMP should start early. Also, to be effective, citizen participation must have a vision more aligned with sustainability issues and more collective and strategic. As Partidario (2015) explains, SEA should be motivated by the necessity to develop and evaluate strategic alternative options and support the implementation of strategies that more effectively address environmental and sustainability concerns.

Results

The research findings provide a foundation for developing policy recommendations to enhance citizen participation in SEA and MMP processes:

Trust issues

Citizens' distrust of government institutions and the SEA and MMP processes hampers their willingness to participate. While municipal administrations promote citizen engagement, their efforts often do not translate into meaningful participation.

Agency features impact

The agency features 'learning, information and knowledge', 'awareness', 'resources', and 'shared vision' play pivotal roles in influencing decision-making processes and the effectiveness of citizen participation.

Insufficient resources and information

A strong relationship exists between the availability of resources and information and degrees of participation. Consequently, participation rates fall when resources and information are limited or discontinued.

Limited awareness and knowledge

Citizens lack significant awareness and knowledge about the SEA process, constraining their effective participation.

Weak shared vision

Achieving a shared vision of participation that is more strategic, collective, and aligned with sustainability is challenging throughout all phases of SEA and MMP processes. Generally, participatory contributions focus more on self-interest and improving citizens' individual living conditions rather than addressing local sustainability and collective issues.

Policy recommendations

To effectively integrate citizen inputs and foster a more sustainable, collective, and strategic view of participation in SEA and MMP processes, the municipal administration and other stakeholders responsible for the elaboration of the processes should consider the following recommendations:

1. Raise awareness of the SEA process

Raise awareness about the importance and effectiveness of citizen participation in SEA content.

2. Foster participation and collect knowledge from citizens

Employ innovative methods to gather citizen participation and collect knowledge, such as surveys and forms at the site and during initiatives for debate and discussion.

3. Provide high-quality and continuity of resources and information

Provide high-quality resources, information, and learning arenas for debate and discussion that focus on enabling citizen participation and knowledge exchange.

4. Enable a more strategic, collective, and sustainable shared vision

Enable a shared vision of participation that is more aligned with sustainability, more collective, and more strategic by providing more possibilities and initiatives for interactions between citizens and between citizens and the Municipal administration in the initial and elaboration phases of SEA and MMP processes.

5. Adopt a flexible and reflexive governance and empower citizens

To ensure the effectiveness of these recommendations, citizens must be actively involved and empowered in the decision-making processes. The municipal administration should adopt a more flexible and reflective governance approach.

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Original study

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More information can be found on our website: <http://envision.web.ua.pt/>

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