

Improving the Practices of Public Participation within the Spatial and Urban Planning Field in Serbia Relating to Environmental Matters

Belgrade Town Planners' Association, Serbia and Montenegro (Belgrade)

Project Background

Belgrade has a number of means by which both environmental and public concerns can be taken into consideration in the area of land use. The Planning and Construction Law sets the conditions for both the facilitation of public debates and requires planners to undertake Strategic Environmental Impact Assessments (SEIA). While the institutionalization of these measures provide a basis for public participation in environmental decision-making, in practice, they contain a host of problems. To begin, public debates take place at the final planning stage and documents are not made readily available to residents – including SEIAs. Secondly, rapid rezoning measures have managed to bypass public participation completely. Specifically, Belgrade's Master Plan is subject to “permanent planning” which allows rapid zone changing. Consequently, citizens tend to discover new developments as investors start construction. Belgrade Town Planners aims to help citizens understand their rights through a pilot project they hope will encourage further public participation and provide positive publicity for the Aarhus Convention, a UN initiative which Serbia and Montenegro has yet to endorse.

Goals and Overall Objectives

Networking, Public Information, and Participation

Many institutions/stakeholders are involved in planning, including institutions that develop plans and those that measure, construct, and regulate environmental protections. By linking these two groups, Belgrade Town Planners hopes to increase the accessibility of information on environmental matters and public participation in the decision-making process.

Raising Public Awareness on Regulations and Aarhus Conventions

Citizens need to become educated about public participation opportunities through the Aarhus Convention and existing regulations. Such measures will encourage the public to demand access to SEIAs while participating in public debates.

Advocating for the Adoption of Aarhus Convention

While the current project is designed to deliver immediate results to residents of Belgrade, the project will also inform the wider public about the benefits of the application of the Aarhus Convention to urban planning, increasing public support for its endorsement.

How to Get There – Specific Activities

- **Identifying Informational Gaps through Roundtable**

After identifying all departments that take part in planning activities and selecting a working group of key departmental representatives to work closely with Belgrade Town Planners' Association, a roundtable will be held to identify gaps in public access to information and draft a document listing both current problems and possible solutions. The details of departments responsible for planning, and other documentation will be listed on a website.

- **Holding Workshops to Raise Capacity in Pilot Case**

After selecting a pilot case in which fast-track zoning changes are taking place and environmental factors weigh heavily, a workshop will be held with relevant authorities to increase their skills in enhancing public involvement in the pilot.

- **Holding Public Hearing**

With the pilot case and target residents selected, a public hearing will be held to inform the public of building plans, public participation processes, and gather public input.

- **Conducting Media Campaign**

Based upon information gathered in the public hearing, a media campaign will be launched to raise awareness of the pilot project and keep residents updated on current developments, describe how local residents can get involved, and reinforce to the general public within and outside of the pilot area that the Aarhus Convention poses many benefits. Such activities will be facilitated through leaflets, articles, and posters.

- **Recommendations for Spatial and Urban Planning**

Given that it is unrealistic to expect planning policy to change quickly, the dialogue and common work via the selected case will emphasize that current practices contain the potential for broad public participation in the field of environmental matters, and that problems lie in poor and selective implementation and a lack of regulative instruments. Recommendations will also emphasize the need for improved communication between departments, and use the pilot case to verify the usefulness of public participation.

Outcomes

Throughout the project, Belgrade Town Planners' Association hopes to engage administrators and the public in a dialogue about important legal requirements and adequate environmental assessment in planning and zoning, and the benefit and necessity of public engagement, as well as the usefulness of the Aarhus Convention.