Public participation in response to some problems of regional planning in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

Administrative regions (counties) are a relatively new self-governing level in the Czech Republic. Before they were established in 2000, there was no self-governing territorial division between municipalities (local level) and the whole state (national level). However, the planning and decision making culture is still influenced by the former period, when regional planning was not directly connected with political decisions on the same level. There are problems resulting from it that deal with legitimacy of the regional planning process, communication issues and the limited ability of a top-down process to enhance areas which do not grow dynamically, but are economically or socially disadvantaged.

In these critical and inconclusive situations appear some emergency projects based on public participation. Based on the experience of two case study projects, this paper will try to answer if these problems can be resolved) with public participation. On the basis of personal experience and interviews with some of the involved citizens and district officers conducted after the projects completion, we will try to explain; the reasons for starting the projects, the resulting public participation methods used and discuss their success, the impact of public involvement on the quality of the final solution, limits of public involvement and limits of institutional capacity of the district officers and representatives and their readiness to work with a participatory approach.

Key words: Regional planning; Public participation; Crisis of planning; Planning methodology; Institutional capacity

1. Introduction

1.1 Planning at the regional level in the Czech Republic

Administrative regions ("Districts") are a relatively new self-governing level in Czech Republic. Before they were established in 2000, there was no self-governing territorial division between municipalities (local level) and the whole state (national level). The size equals NUTS3 (European Territorial Units for Statistics) or sometimes is bigger (NUTS2). However the planning and decision making culture is still influenced by the former period, when regional planning was not directly connected with political decisions on the same level. There are of course resulting problems.

Municipalities do not expect administrative regions to facilitate and develop a conceptual regional vision. There is not a tradition of a broader discussion about the regional development strategy (Půček 2009). We can say that the regional spatial planning still hasn´t found its "home". Also, cooperation between county and municipal

representatives is a bit unclear and therefore, problematic. In the end, although the regional planning documentation, which is called Development Principles[1], should be comprehensive, it is usually focused primarily on issues which have to be undertaken at the national level or which are desired by municipalities – transport and technical infrastructure. Transportation planning is based on planning for forecast demand because effective demand management is impossible without planning the regional settlement structure – which is impossible without a conceptual regional vision[2].

Also, there are problems in communication – the majority of citizens do not (without proactive help) understand regional issues; therefore, they stay passive and act only when they feel threatened (for example during discussions about routes of the planned infrastructure). Therefore, people are perceived only as a destructive element (Kalivoda, 2009). The planners and state administration officers then tend to act defensively in their communication with public (Richardson et al. 1998). This generates problems that the traditional top-down planning is not able to resolve. Conflicts often result because there is a lack of shared goals and coherent framework, which could be the benchmark in controversial situations (Booth and Richardson 2001).

Another problem the current top-down[3] process is not able to solve is improving areas which do not grow dynamically, but are economically or socially disadvantaged. This is a serious matter, because after 1989 the differences in development potential between various regions in Czech Republic grew substantially (Körner 2009a and 2009b).

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[1] There are three levels of legally binding planning documentation in Czech Republic. "Development Policy" for national level, "Development Principles" for regional level (administrative region) and the "Plan" for local level (municipality).

[2] You can compare with UK situation ten years earlier, see Booth and Richardson 2001

[3] The process of planning as used in Czech Republic is based on expert work with a chance for commenting the assignment in a written form and consultation in the design process – if we use the Ladder of Citizen Participation metaphor (Arnstein 1969) it is level 4. named consultation. It is worth for finding mistakes in the proposal, but cannot serve for adapting of assignment and the project goals to citizen's needs.

In these critical and inconclusive situations[4] some emergency projects appear, based on public participation. This paper will try to answer, if these problems can be (at least partly) solved by public participation, using experience from two case studies projects.

2.2 Public Participation in the Czech Republic

Just after the Velvet revolution in 1989 the enthusiasm and positive attitude toward public participation was predominant. Public hearings were added into the process of developing the local plans. Therefore, some of the urban designers and planners tried to involve citizens in the projects (for example Václavské Náměstí in Prague, Plan for Rožmitál pod Třemšínem, Riverside in Cheb). Unfortunately, the enthusiasm did not correspond with necessary skills and methodology[5]. Also the people were not used to care about planning and did not believe it to be necessary and useful. So after some disappointment, the enthusiasm slowly vanished and the planners who tried participatory approaches, returned to their routine. Simultaneously, the idealistic revolutionary era ended and a problematic era for planning began. Weak and unpopular after totalitarian central-planning it also started to be manipulated by developers (which was a new condition for everyone), keeping the power balance was sometimes unsuccessful (situation described by Maier 2001).

The participative methodology and experience from western countries were supported by two foundations with initial funding in western countries – Via[6] and Partnership. Thanks to them, the concept of public participation was established. Some elementary theory was translated and adapted for Czech conditions, and pilot projects were supported (and still are) by grant funding and technical support. Both of these foundations focus on supporting projects and implementation of

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[4] Other problems could also be identified, but we will focus on those named above, because there were few attempts to solve them using the same tool – public participation in planning.

[5] The first texts explaining the methodology were published quite late and were too brief and general (Blažek 1994, Blažek 1996, Lenda 1998)

[6] Heinz Endowment were the primary funder of Via projects in the early years.

public spaces, small-scale projects and local community visions (Nawrath 2004). Grant funding occasionally brings one problem –abusing participatory projects only to obtain easier access to grant money for the project design or construction – so there is no real interest in involving the public, which makes the public participation untrustworthy.

There is limited experience with participatory approach in projects at other scales – at the level of one house (school, community centre, and clubhouse) and at the regional level. The main reason is Via and Partnership don't support these type of projects.

1.3 The two case studies and the aim of this paper

We would like to present the two projects, both regional studies, which were initiated by regional authorities as a case study. On the basis of personal experience and interviews conducted after the projects ended with some of the citizens and district officers involved, we will try to explain the reasons for starting the projects, the resulting public participation methods used and discuss their success and the impact of public involvement on the quality of the final solution, limits of public involvement and also limits resulting from institutional capacity of the district officers and representatives and their readiness to work with participatory approach.

Both of the regional projects we will present were led by Vlasta Poláčková from the studio UP-24. The authors of the paper were responsible for the methodology of public participation as well as some parts of the design.

2. Case study 1: Střela regional project

2.1 Reason for the project and expectations behind public participation

The territory around the river Střela is located at the interface of three counties: Karlovy Vary, Plzeň and Ústí nad Labem. The entire area is problematic in many aspects. Its image is overshadowed by the well known spa Karlovy Vary. Twice, the inhabitants were forced to move away (Czech people before and German after the 2nd World War) and now the third generation of the new inhabitants is slowly gaining a stronger relationship with their home. There is a low education level and poor economic performance (there is only one area weaker in the Czech Republic). Location at the border of 3 counties means administrative obstacles while addressing these problems. On the other hand, it is a cultural landscape with beautiful nature and a number of exceptional sites.

Regional Study Střela aimed to deal with these problems was processed during 2007, the project area consisted of seventeen municipalities (6 towns and 11 villages) in the Karlovy Vary administrative region. Public participation was an idea of one of the officers in the regional office. Staff of the Regional Office of the Karlovy Vary region requested the use of public participation to boost the region's recovery from the inside – they did not know exactly what to expect (it was the first use of public participation in spatial planning at the regional scale in Czech Republic), but they thought that if this will not help, nothing else could. The assignment was to use principles of both strategic and spatial planning. The politicians accepted the idea of the study, but they were not particularly interested, because the area is not densely inhabited, which means not many votes for election.

2.2 Background

The county office is located outside the area; none of the staff reside there, so they did not have personal experience with the local communication culture or potential community leaders and opinion makers. But fortunately, the Karlovy Vary region was running a program funded by EU Structural Funds (ESF) "Partnership for Future", which created a network of "spatial managers" whose job was to help with the ESF project development and the transfer of information between stakeholders in the territory. Whether it was originally intended or not, these people got an overview of what is happening throughout region in various fields. Jiří Šindelář and Kamila Prchalová who were in this position for the project area have foresight, drive and a devoted relationship with the region. Their contribution to initiate public involvement was substantial. There were two Local Action Groups (LAG) in the area. There was not much communication between them because of personal animosities and both burdened with their own internal problems, so their contribution to the

project phase	**Střela regional project**	
	method of participation: aims	details and comments
analytical phase[8]	Organizational group group of local NGO people, officers and businessmen formed to help with organizing public meetings, communication and promotion and to give the immediate feedback on the proposed methods before they were used for the public.	Potential members were identified by the spatial managers. Fifteen of them were interested and formed the group[9]. The group met 3-times during the phase.
	First public planning meeting The aim was to identify strengths, weaknesses of the area and ideas for future improvements	Done five times the same way in all the smaller towns in the territory that naturally behave as a small center In two cases was managed to join the planning meeting with a traditional cultural event. One more planning meeting was organized for municipality representatives and officials[10]. Meetings started with individual work – individual spatial behavior in the region, followed by a small exercise focused on the strengthening the identity of the region. The main group work was focused on collecting and prioritizing the strengths and weakness of the current state[11] and collecting and prioritizing the ideas for the future improvements.
	Webpage with project outputs	Web page was not a main media (because of the peripheral character of the region), all the results were displayed at the web pages of one of the cooperating NGOs.
concept phase	Workshop with external experts The aim of the workshop was to select the most important information from the analytical phase and get ideas for development of the region based on analyses and people's preferences[12].	A workshop with experts from a various background (similar as described by Ptáček et al., 2004 or Condon, 2008) – spatial planning and social demography, local economics, tourism, energetic systems, strategic planning, landscaping etc.
design phase	Organizational Group The task was to comment the proposal, further progress and test clarity of design outputs for meeting with the public.	The group played an important role, but different from the analytical phase. The members worked continuously, not only at two meetings that were organized.
	Local people in the project team This should improve the chances of transmission of information and the implementation of ideas from the proposal.	Some members of this group, who are well skilled in some specific problems being solved, have become directly part of the project team, which was not previously planned, but it naturally emerged from the cooperation. Spatial managers processed the topics of tourism, small business and part of the topic of landscape protection, an employee of the Czech Railways issue of rail transport, and sustainable energy, the owner of two boarding houses was involved in tourism, the other two members in smaller topics.
	The Second public meeting To obtain the design feedback and answer specific questions.	Only one meeting over the draft of the proposal in the place where most people came to the first meeting. The reason for only one meeting was to enable direct dialogue between all stakeholders. In the first part were three blocks of presentations, each with time for questions and comments. The second part was an open-space of sub-themes – Landscape, tourism and transport.

Table 1. The methodology of public participation in Střela regional project.

project was relatively minor.

Two years after the project, we asked the spatial managers, one of the officers and two participants of the meetings about their opinion regarding the success of the study; about quality of the process, output, and if and how are the results implemented[7].

The participatory methods used in the project are shown in table 1, the scheme was inspired by most common sources at that time (Nawrath 2003 and 2004, Wates 1999 and 2000, Day 2003).

3. Case study 2: Study of opportunities for Kocbeře and Choustníkovo Hradiště

3.1 Reason for the project and expectations behind public participation

The municipalities Kocbeře and Choustníkovo Hradiště are located in eastern Bohemia in the transition landscape between the lowlands and

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[7] For details see Klápště and Klápšťová 2007

[8] Public involvement is essential especially in the analytical phase of the project, which aims to identify strengths and weaknesses of the area and their priority. We knew that the proposal of regional project will operate with a number of complex topics and be difficult to understand for ordinary citizen – but in the beginning the issue of describing current state and problems to solve is much easier. Because the first impulse for the project came from the county officers, we needed to involve the people as soon as possible.

[9] Original intention was to reach the parity (NGOs, officers and businessmen) and to have a person from every municipality. In the end half of the people were from NGOs and four of the seventeen municipalities did not have a representative.

[10] Some of them refused to come to meetings with the public. In one of the cities the mayor (member of the Communist party) not only refused to come, but even stated, that participatory process is a sabotage against the elected representatives who know the best what shall be planned.

[11] Such maps that people generally know – a map from the school atlas for a wider context and a map which is the basis of tourist maps, enlarged to scale 1:30 000

[12] It was fulfilled only partly, some participants (mainly high academic people, who are used to lead the project and research teams) were not willing to accept the workshop structure, even they got it one week before to comment (nobody did). So after three lost hours of discussing, how to work, they invented the same structure and topics. Still the teamwork was disturbed by too much self-promoting of the same people. Despite that, the workshop brought contributing ideas, such as the idea of regional grant programs to support projects that have the potential to bring together active and capable people.

highlands. The proposed highway R11 shall go through this area (it was decided in August 2009 by the central government, although contemplation of the route started in the early nineties) and the alignment is going to be fixed by the development principles. The project was initiated by both municipalities who felt threatened by the proposed highway, but had no money and experts to be able to predict the impacts and act to avoid the negatives and take advantage of positive ones.

3.2 Background

At a meeting between the mayors of both villages and the new head of the administrative unit government just after the elections, it was decided to conduct the study. But unfortunately two things happened right in the beginning. The administrative unit representatives who were funding the study and wanted to control the money, decided that the assignment will be prepared by their regional office staff and not by the municipalities. In the assignment was determined to limit the study area to the two municipalities. However, most of the problems also occur in another two municipalities (who did not "fight for their say") – so although the topic was of regional dimension, the area was made artificially local. The officers had no experience with public participation and so they downloaded outputs from the Střela project and without much enthusiasm prepared the assignment. Because the county was in fact forced to do this study by the villages, it was done hurriedly in 9/2009-12/2009 because of the development principles time schedule.

After the analysis phase one political decision nearly destroyed the project. The politician who was in charge of the project decided that he must first check everything that was to be presented to the public; because, the first time he was only able to see the results was after the final delivery of the project (!), he in fact ended the participatory process (and also the trust of the participants in the project). We had to stop preparation of project web pages and cancel the second public meeting. The second meeting was organized just for the working group (the smaller group of active participants made from first meeting).

The presentation of the final proposal to the municipalities occurred after his agreement four months (!) after the project was completed – at a

	Study of opportunities for Kocbeře and Choustníkovo Hradiště	
project phase	method of participation: aims	details and comments
analytical phase	The first planning meeting To describe the use of area (both in the villages and in the open landscape) by residents and visitors and to evaluate settlements and landscape from the perspective of users: strengths, weaknesses and also opportunities and threats in the future. All also with priorities.	The same meeting organized twice - in each village for better chance for citizens to attend. Secondary task, but also important, was to explain to the participants the passing, ongoing and future procedures associated with the R11 speedway and also clearly explain the objectives and limits of the study.
	Planning excursion To create a landscape character assessment.	Participants created a landscape character assessment according to the methodology of ECOVAST (outline for assessing landscape by citizens-non-specialists) (Spiegler, Dower, 2006). They prepared themselves for the planning excursion by filling in a worksheet which they received at the first planning meeting. There they identified main features of the settlements and landscape character in the worksheet. It was consensual deciding on features and their value at the excursion.
	Webpage To explain the procedures attached to R11 and to display all outputs, even some unfinished for commenting.	Planned but cancelled. The outputs were displayed two months after the end of the project on the regional office webpage.
concept phase	Work Group Create a vision of community development, discuss the assignment of project plans, which will be developed in the design phase and also means to eliminate / mitigate future problems caused by the construction of a speedway R11.	The key role of this phase played group which was created from active participants of the first meeting (This was the only way we found out, that made participatory project work somehow and in the same time not to break directly the political decision. Originally we wanted to open it to everybody). These participants had an overview of community issues and were able thinking about topics in a strategic way.
design phase	The Second public meeting To obtain the design feedback and answer specific questions.	Planned but cancelled.
	The final presentation To end the project and comment the outputs.	Originally not planned, but added afterwards to close the project.

Table 2. The methodology of public participation Study of opportunities for Kocbeře and Choustníkovo Hradiště.

time, when almost all the participants were angry and confused. After the last presentation we asked the officers (we will ask the participants later as well) about quality of the output, and what they think about public participation after the experience.

The participatory methods planned for the project with description and which of them were really used in the project are shown in table 2. The ECOVAST Landscape identification method was included. (Spiegler and Dower 2006).

4. Experience

4.1 Public participation – impact on the quality of the final solution

In both projects the final result in the absence of public participation would be completely different and less suitable for the needs of the project area. These differences are not only in the details, but also in choosing the main focuses of the project. All the planners in the team agreed that public

participation had positive influence on the quality of the output. The spatial managers (Střela project) agreed too. The district officers engaged in the Střela project are convinced that the public participation increased the quality of the result and want to request public participation in all planning projects they will initiate.

4.2 Public participation – limits and specifics at the regional level

There are some specifics of regional projects from the point of view of public participation. They are at a scale and topic remote from the daily experience of ordinary people, but that does not mean that their role in the project is not useful! Only, that the process has to be adapted to fit.

- The public should be involved at several levels. While the experts and active, motivated people can work continuously in working groups, for the general public it is better to organize fewer, but well-prepared meeting (at each stage of a project).
- Clarity of the presented output is particularly crucial in the design phase – if the attendants do not understand the proposed solutions, they cannot comment and evaluate them.
- For understanding the life of a territory, it is as necessary to choose the appropriate participation methods as it is important to have a team of active local people. If possible, it is appropriate to engage them in parts of the analysis and design.
- Formal structures of participation as a local action groups (LAG) may not always be supportive of participation, and sometimes are more formal than active – they are formed only because it is a means to obtain EU funding.

4.3 Limits in institutional capacity and readiness to work with participative approach

Officials
- The important characteristics both officers and politicians need for participatory projects is empathy and social intelligence. The officials are unfortunately often technocratic, which goes together with the nature of the work they are doing – following strict rules and principles. Really important in the Střela project was that most of the county officials were emphatic

enough to understand the participatory process, which is not common in our country – more often they are more technocratic – like in the R11 project.
- The problem is strict division of agenda between the departments in the regional office – the proposed changes that should be done by another regional office department than the office running the project, often do not happen. They are not able to cooperate and accomplish tasks that address more than one single agenda. Unfortunately, most of the really important and easy-to-do tasks in the Střela project were of that kind. For example, one of requirements (emerged in participatory process) was to modify current District grant program in terms of timing and aiming at smaller projects rather than bigger ones. Because a department other than the Department of spatial planning (which conducted Střela project) is responsible for this grant program, nothing has happened.
- In the case where officials are better informed and understand the project better than the politicians (which can happen quite often), they unfortunately have no power to make the politicians to listen or understand. Officials are very dependent on political decision.

Politicians
- The empathy is also problematic with politicians because they tend to view the decision making process the same as elections – which means struggle (win-lose strategy), not consensus (win-win strategy).
- They also are not used to complicated projects – they tend to make decisions quickly after seeing an executive summary in 5 minutes – but making decisions without a deep understanding can bury the participatory process.
- As a reaction to Czech people being quantitatively oriented, they value more investment into infrastructure or buildings than investment into people. The successful program "Partnership for Future" in Karlovy Vary can serve as an example. It was canceled on the day it was no longer necessary for the EU Structural Funds (although the officers tried to lengthen it). The politicians did not want to support investing money into networking and people's skills – the concrete, asphalt and steel being more popular.
- Politicians are not particularly interested in low

population density problem areas – it means only a few votes in the election.

Others

- The workshop with external experts after an analytical phase is useful, but they have to be selected according to their teamwork skills.
- Former spatial managers are still working on helping the region at the NGO level. They did not get much support from the administrative region for implementing ideas resulting from the regional study; but they think it was worthwhile. They use it as background and source of ideas, arguments and information for preparing projects and grant applications.

5. Conclusion

For full success, participation should be desired by both politicians and officers. In both case studies public participation was used because of the lack of other possibilities, how to deal with the topic of the project. Before, it was not an integral part of planning in the administrative regions. In one case (Střela) the district officers really wanted to try the participatory process. But politicians did not believe it can really work, and in fact did not care about the process. So they did not get real insight to implement the results properly. Now the involved people must care about the implementation and push the politicians if they want the proposals to happen. In the second case, both politicians and officers were forced by the municipalities to do the study. So the politicians reluctantly agreed that some form of public participation was necessary. In the beginning politicians did not care much and in the middle of the project, without insight, they started to interfere with the process, bringing more problems than benefits – and it damaged the planned procedure, negatively influenced the communication and relationships as well as the results of the project. Comparatively, the uninformed interference by politicians was worse for the quality of the proposal than their total passivity. But on the other hand, in both projects the officers learned a lot and changed positively their attitude to the public and in one of the cases they decided to do also the future studies with participatory approach.

The pressure of using EU funding for motivating people to form formal structures such as Local action groups (that are basic for participation in western countries) are frequently formed only to get money and so they have misguided motivation to form the core of the participatory process. It raises a great question: Is this funding support effective? Does it really contribute to spreading of participatory approach?

The regional scale increases importance of choosing the proper methods of participation. The means should be chosen with respect to nature of the problem to be solved. Even in the same phase of a project, it is worthwhile to use different techniques to discuss different topics. Some of the topics are important for almost everybody and so broad discussion is necessary. Some topics are crucial for small groups while they are not at all interesting for the rest. So for some topics the public should be involved at several levels. While the experts and active, motivated people can work continuously in working groups, for the general public it is better to organize fewer, but well-prepared meetings. Because of the scale of the region, clarity of the presented output is particularly crucial in the design phase. If the attendants do not understand the proposed solutions, they cannot comment and evaluate them and at the regional level there is a danger of being too abstract for lay people.

The institutional capacity of politicians and officers is a significant barrier for public participation. The biggest problems are the win-lose mentality of politicians and their focus on quantity rather than quality, insufficient communication skills of both politicians and officers and the inability of different regional office departments to cooperate.

Public participation had positive impact on quality of the project output (opinion of the planners and also involved citizens and officers). The contribution is mainly in choosing the main focuses of projects that match the local needs. Also in case of the Střela project the involved people are the main force in implementation of the proposal.

In the end public involvement appears beneficial for regional planning, but there are a number of obstacles and challenges that are described above. For further development of public participation, it is crucial not only improve the methods, evaluate them to be able to share the experience, but also try to spread the understanding of participatory process between officers and

politicians, so they will understand it not only as a technical tool, but also as a design philosophy. But to be positive we must say although there are lot of problems and obstacles, but there is one great thing – these projects have started to happen.

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