Guidance for Public Participation in planning and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

Public participation is an important part of the decision making process. By asking the public the right questions at the right moment, the process can be sped up and the final plans will be better. But how do you know which questions you have to ask, at what time, and to whom? This guidance will give you tools that will help project teams to come to a fitting participation plan.

The Centre for Public Participation (CPP) is part of the Dutch government. They advise on and facilitate public participation in plans and projects of several ministries. The experience they have gained over the years were developed into a guideline on how to come to a good participation process. The CPP facilitates workshops for the entire project team, in which the main ingredients for the participation plan are defined. In Macedonia, such project teams will generally be composed by representatives from the responsible body, planners and SEA experts. The CPP guideline forms the basis to this guidance written for the Macedonian SEA project (see at the end of this fact sheet for details on this project). It reflects the kind of issues that are dealt within such workshops resulting in a public participation plan for a specific plan and related SEA.

Define ambition for public participation

Before you can write a good participation plan, it is important to define a clear ambition for public participation. The level of ambition depends on several factors such as size, budget and timeline of the plan and room for changes in the plan.

If the ambition for public participation in a plan is low, the design of the participation process should be sober and formal. However, if there is a high ambition, more and open questions can be asked during the process.

The following 8 steps and questions will help you define this ambition:

Table 1

A. <u>Define a clear outline of the plan:</u>
It is important that all the participants of the workshop have the same plan outline in mind. You should therefore answer the following questions:
- What is the aim of the plan?
- What assignment did you get from the minister or mayor?

B. <u>What does the public expect of public participation?</u>
Nowadays people expect to have a bigger voice in decisions made by governments. What do you think the public expects for this specific plan?

C. <u>What does the mayor or minister expect of public participation?</u>
The mayor and minister are political figures. They are chosen by the public and their position depends on public opinion. In what way does this influence their expectations on public participation, particularly for this plan? Also think about what you expect from the mayor or minister in the process.

D. <u>What does the project team expect of public participation?</u>
Public participation can help a project team with their plans. Each plan is different, so it is important to discuss all the benefits and risks public participation can bring to this specific plan. What do you as the project team expect public participation to bring to the plan?

E. <u>What restrictions keep you from fulfilling these expectations?</u>
Every plan has its restrictions. These restrictions can be found the following areas: quality of the plan (content, administrative, legal), financial boundaries, organizational (capacity, planning) and political boundaries. Name all the restrictions that have an influence on the way you will organize your participation.

F. <u>What quick wins can you gain through public participation?</u>
The quick wins can be divided into four categories: quality of the plan, flow and timeline of the plan, smoother legal road and understanding, confidence and involvement. For each of these categories, answer the question: what public participation can bring to the plan?

G. <u>Check the quick wins in relation to the restrictions</u>
Now that you have inventoried the quick wins for your plan, you will have to check which of these quick wins are manageable within the restrictions. For each of the quick wins that are not achievable ask yourselves the following questions:
- Do I want to achieve this quick win?
- If so, what is needed to make this quick win achievable?

H. <u>Define your ambition for public participation</u>
The quick wins that the project team wants to achieve in this plan will be rephrased to the plan's ambition for public participation.

Designing the public participation process

A good participation process is embedded in the decision making process. It is designed to achieve a better plan in a shorter period of time. Every type of participation you do should bring you one step closer to the final plan. Therefore the decision making process should be leading in the design of the participation plan.

Furthermore, asking the right people or organisations the right questions is crucial for a successful decision making process.

The following 11 steps/questions will help you write an appropriate participation plan:

1. **Define the milestones in the decision making process**
   In order to embed the participation process in the overall decision making process, it is important to have a clear view of all milestones until the final plan/decision. Milestones can be, for instance, documents, start of studies, important (political) consults or decisions. Write each milestone on a separate flip over/poster, so you can answer questions 2 – 7 for each milestone. Then fill in the answers to all questions per milestone.

2. **Is participation necessary or desirable for this milestone?**
   Decide if there is a legal requirement for public participation, or if there are other reasons to involve the public in any way. Briefly discuss what the added value of participation could be. Questions 3-5 are not relevant for the milestones without any public participation.

3. **What do you want to know from the public?**
   Discuss what questions have to be asked to gain the information you need from the public. There are different types of questions. Some questions will help you test the quality and completeness of your plans/decisions. Other questions will enrich your plans with new, sometimes better, ideas and experiences. There are also questions that focus more on the process and that will help you optimise the process. To invite people to give argued responses, it is important to ask open questions (who, what, when, which, why).

4. **Who do you want to ask these questions?**
   It is not necessary to involve the entire public in every participation moment. Sometimes input from specific groups is needed. To be able to know which organisations/people to involve, a good stakeholders analysis is needed. Decide which groups to ask which questions. Keep in mind that sometimes it is written in the regulation which groups you have to involve. In general, the public can be divided into five groups:
   - Organised stakeholders; people (residents associations), planet (environmental groups), profit (chamber of commerce)
   - Unorganised stakeholders; people (civilians), planet (birdwatchers/hunters), profit (local shop)
   - Experts; legal but also professors from universities
   - Other governments; e.g. Sub-municipalities
   - General public; anyone without a clear concern with the plan

5. **How will we ask these questions to the relevant people/organisations?**
   Now that we know who to ask which questions, it is time to focus on the participation method. There are several methods for involving the public. Depending on the type of questions and the size and composition of the group a suitable participation method can be chosen. Keep in mind that sometimes it is written in the regulation in which way the public should be involved.

6. **When is this milestone planned?**
   Two moments involving each milestone are important for the planning. Firstly, when is the milestone itself expected to be completed? Secondly, what is the planning for the public participation?

7. **Who is responsible for the execution of the milestone and the public participation?**
   Last question for each milestone is to determine who (or which organisation) is responsible. Make sure the people whose names are written down are aware of the participation plan. It is even better if these people or organisations are involved in the public participation workshop.

8. **Check on ambition**
   Do a quick check to make sure that the proposed public participation will help you achieve your ambition. Does the number of participation moments suit the ambition level? Will the questions help you achieve the ambitions? Are the right people/organisations involved to achieve the ambitions?

9. **Determine the role of the mayor or minister in the participation process**
   The person/people who will make the final decision can play an important role in the participation process. The participation results will help them make a decision that is supported by society. Therefore, it is in their interest that the participation process will be a success. By publicly supporting the participation process and stressing the importance of it, the public is more likely to get involved. The mayor (or mayor of a sub-municipality) could, for example, do the kick-off for a participation session. The public will see that their opinion is important to the final decision maker.

10. **Secure public participation results in the decision making process**
    When you involve the public, it is very important to explain what you will do with the results. Engaging in public participation does not mean you will have to adopt all ideas put forward by the public. When ideas or suggestions are not usable, explain why this is the case. Be transparent about all considerations made in the decision making process.

11. **Communication and participation**
    The public will need to know when you expect them to get involved. Decide what communication is needed for the participation process designed.

Writing the participation plan

The outcomes of the public participation workshop will de documented in a participation plan. Decide who will write the participation plan and make sure all steps mentioned above are included in the plan. When the participation plan is ready it should be sent to the decision makers. They are the people who will have to use the participation results, so it is important that they support the plan.

An example of a participation method

In the City of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, a new urban plan, including an SEA was made in which an extensive public participation campaign was undertaken. One of the participation methods used was an enquiry to the general public, where students assisted in its execution. In de box below, part of this questionnaire is demonstrated.

Table 2

Dealing with resistance against public participation

Do not ignore objections against public participation, deal with them. Below the most often heard arguments are summarized including their answers:

It's too early, we haven't yet got a proposal:
early public participation will still avoid rumors and build trust.

It will take too long and will cost too much:
cost of not involving people can be even higher, the long term benefits generally outweigh the longer decision making stage.

It will stir up opposition and activists will take over the process:
this will happen anyway, public participation can deal with issues before the opposition raises them.

We will only hear from the articulate:
focus on the 'silent minority'.

We will raise expectations we can't satisfy:
make very clear what already has been decided and on which issues public participation is desired. Promised action on decisions that cannot be changed will undermine the public's trust.

The local community won't understand the issues involved:
they will if you keep it simple. Locals have a better understanding of their own surroundings. Technicians talk theory, people talk practice.

Public participation in planning and SEA?

Usually a planning process has certain legal requirements regarding public participation. SEA regulation as well establishes public participation requirements. It is good practice to define in an early stage how both requirements can possibly be matched to make plan and SEA implementation more effective.

Dealing with results

It is necessary to create an overview of the outcomes of the participation process and subsequent stages of the plan. It is very important to communicate about these outcomes to all stakeholders involved. In large and sensitive plans, probably large amounts of comments will be submitted and it will take a lot of effort to process them appropriately.

It is also important to think about how to use the results of public participation in the drafting of the SEA and/or improvement of the plan or decision making.

More information

This guidance has been developed in the course of a co-operation project on Strategic Environmental Assessment between the Macedonian Ministry for Environmental protection and Physical Planning and the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment (NCEA). The co-operation was funded by the Dutch Ministry for Infrastructure and Environment, and administered by Agentschap NL, the Agency for the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation.

This document intends to provide guidance for public participation in planning and SEA. The guidance cannot be taken as legal advice nor should it substitute case specific advice by the relevant Macedonian authorities.

For questions or more information, please contact the Centre for Public Participation in the Netherlands.
- Maaike de Beer, +3170 456 8771 maaike.de.beer@centrumpp.nl
- Mayke Deuss, +3170 456 9656 mayke.deuss@centrumpp.nl

Pictures from Workshop on developing a public participation plan, at City of Skopje municipality. Illustrations from the Netherlands are thanks to Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment.