

*Open Society Institute
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**URBAN SPACES OF CROATIA:
A process of development
FINAL POLICY PAPER**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Urban policies in Croatia are still based on old, inflexible urban plans that contribute to already high levels of pollution and health problems, ineffective transportation solutions crafted mostly to motorized transport and inadequate public spaces. Cities lack streets safe for pedestrians, children playgrounds (some are more than thirty years old), green areas, waterfronts, sport and recreational facilities, and other public spaces necessary for the overall healthy and sustainable urban living. Local government officials, overwhelmed with too many problems are lacking skills and motivation important for reaching out to citizens and building partnerships on projects often seen as a secondary priority.

There is very little communication with local government on the issue of public spaces, no active involvement from the side of citizens despite the requirements imposed by the government's "*Act on Public Discussion in the Spatial Development Process*" and lack of information about government policy on these issues.

The research focused on two main challenges, which if successfully addressed could open new solutions for more effective participation of local community:

1. *How to increase the capacity of the community to respond to its problems; and*
2. *How to get local authorities to change their current practices by involving community in decisions that will have an affect on their lives.*

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy paper argues that the new, community-based approach to the current inflexible policies of spatial planning and development in Croatia would contribute to more sound and sustainable local government practices and help create more usable and livable public spaces. The absence of effective community organizations can be seen as one of the main problems in the community, since local people understand the problems and needs in their areas and may generate ideas for tackling those problems and needs as well as define priorities.

Establishing community participation thus should be one of the main objectives of urban revitalization and urban development. Those alternative practices will Recommendations are primarily targeted at local government and self-government (i.e. community/neighborhood councils) in Croatia but also at the community and citizen groups that need to take a proactive stand and responsibility for their environment and livelihoods.

Question 1. How to increase the capacity of the community to respond to their problems.

1. Take “small steps” that motivate citizens, increase the trust in local government and bring quick results.

Taking “small steps” is probably the most important recipe for building a strong and dynamic community and basis for a healthy democracy. Projects that are too complex and take too long for the results to be seen usually de-motivate community and increase a sense of mistrust in the local government policy and efficiency. Starting with small, concrete projects that bring the community together can be more effective in the long run than initiating expensive, long-term urban redevelopment projects, which are too complex and incomprehensive for the community.

2. Build effective information and communication channels between local government and community.

In order to build effective communication between the local government and the community it is possible to start with some initial information tools, such as a brief newsletter about the local government activities or a leaflet with the contact information about local government’s departments. Those local governments that can afford to build an entire information network are also in a position to not only inform its citizens but also build two-way communication channels, necessary to improve local government practices. Through those channels, citizens can react to local government policies, provide feedback, push administrative procedures, answer to surveys and in some cases even vote on-line. In those cases, we can truly speak about democratic procedures. In cases where the citizen participation is at a very low level, it is possible to start “small”.

3. Educate public about their rights as taxpayers, simplifying and explaining administrative procedures.

In many cases local government does not have clearly defined policy on citizen participation especially not in the area of urban planning. They may not be also ready to make major policy or administrative changes that would cause the citizens’ reaction. It is difficult to assess the level of citizen participation in one local government or even to what extent is citizen participation welcomed. Most local governments react to citizen participation on an “ad hoc” basis, without a long-term strategy, which would include either a representative who would manage the CP process or clear policies defined in the City’s Statute.

Simplified and clear administrative policies, and developed long-term strategy on the citizen participation rather than “ad hoc” procedures can provide benefits for both local governments and citizens. Overall outcomes of improved administrative procedures include more organized and effective local

government, increased transparency and openness of local government attitudes toward citizens, and increased motivation among citizen groups (e.g. youth) about local government activities.

4. *Build effective partnerships between community and local government, as well as other sector representatives through joint activities.*

Building effective partnership among different sector representatives, especially citizens and local governments is the ultimate goal for every democratic local government and probably the most difficult task to achieve.

The partnership programs can be designed and shaped around the policies that the government is currently implementing and are of common interest for majority of citizens or interest groups (e.g. building a skateboard park for the young people). This research has proven that one of the most effective ways to build partnerships is around common, non-threatening projects that are of interest for all the participants (e.g. public spaces). Starting with small and simple projects is also key in bringing different groups together and keeping their motivation and attention high enough to achieve results.

5. *Educate children and youth from their earliest age, and involve them in the decision-making process.*

In order to create a better society and democracy it is critical to involve the youngest citizens in the processes of participation and decision-making as early as possible. Some local governments are aware of this and are promoting different ways to involve children and youth in their activities. One of the most effective ways is through the Youth councils, which have a representation at the City council. Youth councils is a great tool to involve young people in local government activities and teach them about cooperation with local government, responsibility. They also offer a valuable lesson in democracy. Through the Youth council, local government is also able to find out about the young people interest and needs and address them more adequately through its strategies and policies toward the children and youth. This in itself can motivate young people to come forward and become more proactive with the local government. The most effective way in creating the council is through elections in schools and NGOs working on youth issues. The work of the council should be clearly defined and meaningful. If possible, the council should also have its own share of a budget in order to develop a better sense of responsibility and ownership.

Another effective way to include the children and youth is through different public competitions such as e.g. art competition “My vision of the city” or through initiatives such as [MU:V] that not only teach the responsibility and team building but also provide an excellent lesson in local government work, partnership building and democracy.

6. *Increase the role of community/neighborhood councils that work directly with the community.*

Community councils or neighborhood councils are often seen as a relic from the communist past but are actually rather direct and valuable ways to reach out to citizens. More effective councils are able to draw citizen response in a number of ways that include better information to citizens about local issues; open meetings and various neighborhood events that bring people together. Many councils are unfortunately still ineffective and lack a meaning for their own existence. Critical issue is thus to improve the role of community councils, promote their activities and find more attractive ways to reach out to citizens.

Question 2. How to get local authorities to change their current practices by involving community in decisions that will have an affect on their lives

1. *Strengthen the capacity of local authorities in planning and management to facilitate integrated approach and support community-based model to public space development.*

Trainings and education are the most effective ways to strengthen the capacity of local authorities and raising their awareness about the importance of citizen participation, or, in the case of public spaces – the community –based approach to public space development.

2. *Strengthen and coordinate local policies in close cooperation with all stakeholders and develop mechanisms for enabling citizen participation in decision-making process. This is one of the essential attributes of the community governance approach.¹*

Some of the mechanisms were already mentioned above, e.g. developing better information and communication channels and building partnerships with other sector representatives, including citizens, or interest groups (youth, pensioners, women, minority etc).

3. *Encourage the formation of new public-private partnerships and promote transparency and accountability.*

Public-private partnerships have proven to be one of the most effective ways to manage public projects, especially public properties, such as e.g. large bankrupt companies. There are many different ways to manage public properties – through

¹ Implementation of the UN Habitat Agenda: Guide for local authorities and their associations; web resource: www.unhabitat.org/unchs/english/hagenda/guide2, pg.5

an NGO, association or a local foundation. Public parks are an example of urban public spaces that can with citizen involvement in their design, program planning, and management become true centers for the community and a symbol of pride for the local governments. Parks also provide a great opportunity for developing civic activism, volunteerism and cooperation between the citizens and local government and offer a ground for developing public-private partnerships that can be implemented in a number of different ways.

Each local government in partnership with the community needs to find the most appropriate way to revitalize and manage those public properties. In order to develop a successful redevelopment project the key is to initiate an open and inclusive decision-making process and involve community early in the process of planning and design. In addition, it is important to hire the best people who both understand the community's needs, as well as coordinate projects many stages that usually need to account for changing economic, political and social conditions. It is also important to start with general concepts and visions and then work with the community on more specifics. Some ideas and decisions will not be agreeable for all the participants, but that is also a part of the open and democratic process where it is important to participate and provide an input and not just be a passive observant.

The process that brings many parties together in reaching an agreement, as some experts argue is often more valuable than the result itself.

4. *Institutionalize a participatory approach to sustainable urban and spatial development based on a dialogue between different stakeholders.*

Based on concrete results, education and awareness raising, local governments should develop a longer-term strategy on public space development in order to change current inflexible policies and replace them with more proactive, community-based methods. As argued above, it is necessary to have a policy on citizen participation, rather than act on an "ad hoc" basis. Only by institutionalizing a participatory and community-based approach to urban public space development can citizens and other stakeholders truly enjoy great places that have been developed with their input and participation, and create stronger partnerships with local governments.