Guiding Informed Choices on Participation Tools in Spatial Planning: An E-Decision Support System

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ABSTRACT
Participatory Planning (PP), as a streamline approach in coping with sustainability concerns, is nowadays largely acknowledged in research and policy makers’ community as a ‘bridge’ between decision-making processes and society. Its implementation implies substantial preparation, ending up with certain choices on participation tools, relevant for use at the different stages of the planning process. However, lack of planners’ deep insight into such tools leads them to either follow well established traditional planning paths, discouraged by a possible failure of participatory attempts; or join PP processes that lead to unsuccessful planning outcomes and frustrating participation results. The contribution of this article lies on increasing capacity of planners towards more informed PP tools’ selection by: providing an exhaustive list/explanation of factors affecting such choices in each single PP context; and sketching the architecture/functioning of an e-Decision Support System (e-DSS) as a tool supporting planners towards the design of more effective PP processes.

KEYWORDS

1. INTRODUCTION
The concept of participation has penetrated many scientific fields since the beginning of the 20th century. This concept, although lagging behind with regard to its legislative establishment in many countries (Council of Europe, 2015), demonstrates a steady progress concerning its consolidation and implementation in planning efforts and policy making processes in these fields. Such a progress is marked by the continuously raising concern about sustainability at a glocal (global/local) scale; and the quite noticeable transition from a top-down to a bottom-up, more inclusive, decision-making model. Both tendencies are gradually gaining ground since the ‘80s (Morris, 1999) and are considerably streamlining planning approaches during the last two decades. In fact, the concepts of sustainability and participation seem to be tightly interwoven, with participation being nowadays considered by a large part of the scientific community and policy makers as a prerequisite for achieving sustainability objectives. This view is underpinned on arguments such as (Dalal-Clayton & Bass, 2002): the complex nature of the sustainability concept per se implying, among others, multi- and inter-disciplinary considerations and fertilization of knowledge emerging from a variety of actors of the studied ecosystems; the necessity to collaboratively develop a future vision in order legitimacy and broad commitment to its implementation to be ensured; the need for adopting an integrated approach of sustainability pillars (economy, society and environment) through the interplay of actors presenting

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respective stakes or interests; and the currently evolving governance and cooperative, multi-level, policy making schemes.

The gradual realization of the role of participation in coping with sustainability objectives and contemporary glocal challenges in a highly uncertain and complex environment (Stratigea & Giaoutzi, 2012) has also been marked by a number of international as well as European initiatives. At the global level, a range of such initiatives are carried out for almost half a century, aiming at raising awareness on sustainability issues and setting up universally shared policy initiatives towards futures that are more worth living. At the European level, pioneering initiatives have also been undertaken, ranging from the Aarhus Convention (1998), dealing with sustainability issues and public participation, to the European Citizens’ Initiative (2012), setting up the scenery for the institutionalization of participation at the highest European decision-making level.

Such initiatives have fertilized the ground for the institutionalization and wide use of the concept of participation in various fields (e.g. urban planning, water management, marine spatial planning; waste management; participatory budgeting); spatial contexts (e.g. local developmental plans, national/regional strategic plans, and European policy directions); and a variety of problems and related case studies (e.g. Krommyda et al., 2018; Panagiotopoulou et al., 2019; Tsilimigkas & Rempis, 2017). Also, they have further nurtured the understanding of the value of participation; and have broadened its implementation in an increasing range of case studies (Morgan & Dowlatabadi, 1996; Rotmans, 1998; Smith & Wales, 1999).

From the variety of scientific disciplines adopting the concept of participation, the focus of this article is on spatial planning, a specific field that deals with problems directly addressing societal needs, values and expectations; and falling into the overarching planning goal of sustainability. Vagueness and long term perspective of sustainability as well as complexity and uncertainty of the environment within which this has to be pursued (Friend & Hickling, 2005; Hines & Bishop, 2006; Schwartz, 1996) have rendered spatial planning problems ‘wicked problems’ (Ballint et al., 2011). These are characterized by high ambivalence with regard to their scientific solutions; the way these solutions are grasped from recipients of planning endeavors; and the potential conflicts these can raise within each specific societal and value system (De Roo & Porter, 2007).

Participation in planning in general and spatial planning in particular is of course not a brand-new notion. On the contrary, it has a rather long history (Geddes, 1915), entering the body of planning theory during the sixties (Garau, 2012); and gaining emphasis during the nineties (Morris, 1999; Ozcevik et al., 2010; Stratigea et al., 2018). Nevertheless, a shortage of participation knowledge and practical experience is often noticed among policy makers and spatial planning experts (Stratigea & Papadopoulou, 2012). This implies a certain gap of understanding as to the scope, approaches, and tools that are of relevance in a large variety of spatial planning problems. This gap is even more noticeable, when spatial planners are confronted with the tricky decision to select proper participation tools or effectively dealing with the various stages of a participatory planning exercise.

Having this deficit in mind, the goal of this article is to provide support to spatial planners and decision-makers for selecting proper participation tools, in order to ensure that more effective participatory processes will be accomplished. In this context, the main research topics, forming the two pillars of this work, are: i) the identification of factors that can affect the choice of suitable, case-specific, participation tools from the wide pool available; and ii) the way these factors can be embedded in an e-Decision Support System (e-DSS), guiding planners to more knowledgeable decisions as to the choice of those participation tools that are relevant to each single specific planning problem/context; or stated differently how these factors can be linked, in a structured manner, to participation tools in order an e-DSS to be framed.

In responding to these research topics, the structure of this work has as follows: first, a section concisely sketching the context of participatory spatial planning, i.e. the background of this article, is presented, clarifying also the main concepts upon which the very essence of the article will be built. Next, an exhaustive list of factors is thoroughly explored, which are pertinent to the diversifying
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