

Chapter 5

Promises and Limits of Participatory Urban Greens Development: Experience from Maribor, Budapest, and Krakow



Martin Pogačar, Jasna Fakin Bajec, Katarina Polajnar Horvat, Aleš Smrekar and Jernej Tiran

Abstract The chapter discusses the integration of civil society into planning, development, and governance of urban green spaces (UGS). The principles of participatory democracy and sustainable development inevitably require a more integrated approach to collaboration and networking among different sectors and actors. Until recently, the citizens/communities were only sporadically involved in decision-making and planning processes of UGS, which led to practices of urban development that failed to account for their needs. The crucial question is: What are the potentials and limits of engaging and involving people and communities in planning and playing an active part in the development of UGS? Specifically, the chapter discusses how theoretical concepts that often work well in strategies or development programs are only slowly implemented in practice. This raises the question of the obstacles and benefits faced by municipalities when trying to involve local communities in planning activities. First, the authors discuss the theory and practice of participation and community involvement in urban planning and management. Second, they present an overview of the local cases of UGS development in three Central and Eastern European cities (Maribor, Krakow, and Budapest), and thirdly, linking practice and theory, they discuss the intrinsic issues with community formation and sustainability.

M. Pogačar (✉) · J. Fakin Bajec
Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Institute of Culture and Memory Studies, Ljubljana, Slovenia
e-mail: martin.pogacar@zrc-sazu.si

J. Fakin Bajec
e-mail: jasna.fakin@zrc-sazu.si

K. Polajnar Horvat · A. Smrekar · J. Tiran
Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Anton Melik Geographical Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia
e-mail: katarina.polajnar@zrc-sazu.si

A. Smrekar
e-mail: ales.smrekar@zrc-sazu.si

J. Tiran
e-mail: jernejtiran@zrc-sazu.si

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5.1 Introduction

It is no longer a groundbreaking statement that urban green spaces (UGS) can improve people's well-being (Kothencz et al. 2017) and public health (Richardson et al. 2013), enhance social interaction, and provide the space for leisure or recreational activities (see Akpınar and Cankurt 2017). In densely populated areas, UGS can reduce air pollution and improve climate, contribute to keeping ecological balance, promote biodiversity, reduce noise, and improve urban economy (Kothencz et al. 2017; Lee and Maheswaran 2011). Moreover, UGS can foster cohesion between cities and countryside, and strengthen territorial cohesion (Toledo Informal Ministerial Meeting on Urban Development Declaration 2010).

The development of UGS plays a central part in sustainable urban development, as does wider societal awareness about the importance of greens. If the UGS are poorly planned and used, they can easily turn into a burden and a constant “battlefield” between inhabitants and responsible authorities (Anguelovski et al. 2018). Successful sustainable and inclusive development, as well as management of UGS, thus inevitably require integrated or collaborative planning and maintenance, i.e., the involvement of decision-making bodies, experts, property owners, and civil society.

Until recently, civil society (e.g., residents) has often been insufficiently involved in the development of UGS. This led to unbalanced urban development, notably in post-socialist settings: during the post-socialist transformation, the history of participatory practices has been downplayed or actively forgotten, if to different extents in different countries (Simoneti 2016). The main consequences have been poor identification of relevant actors, exclusion of various marginal communities (Anguelovski et al. 2017) from the UGS development, as well as power imbalance in the investor–authority–expert–citizen relations (Kucina 2016; Diener and Hagen 2013). The situation was exacerbated by the recent economic crisis that necessitated the dampening of collaborative approaches (Davies and Pill 2012; Durose and Rees 2012). In this light, the United Nations (UN) and its New Urban Agenda emphasize the importance of citizen and civil society participation in shaping public interest, as well as promote social inclusion in urban management (see UN 2017). Consequently, a number of bottom-up practices emerged, actively seeking and testing approaches to engaging with urban greens. Aiming at bypassing the slow implementation of participatory practices on policy levels, civil pressure exposed systemic inertia, as well as the wider political and economic motives behind the development of urban greens. Community voices emphasized the issues of why (not) to engage citizens and how (not) to do so, forcing communities to seek sustainability and durability in action and enticing the authorities to respond to such initiatives and engage in cooperative relationship (see Javaid and Habeeb 2018).

This chapter departs from the understanding that the public has the right to know about what is happening in their surrounding green spaces and should be encouraged to take an active part in activities which affect them in the places where they live and work (Bahrain Shuib et al. 2015). For example, dialog between managers or planners and representatives from various community groups helps detect their needs and ideas. Simultaneously, the community needs to analyze their own issues and voice their thoughts and solutions (Bahrain Shuib et al. 2015), while the authorities need to recognize their own responsibility as facilitators and partners in integrative urban development.

The chapter, therefore, asks: What are the potentials and limits of engaging and involving people and communities in planning and playing an active part in the development of UGS? The discussion is based on the outcomes of the “Urban Green Belts” project (Interreg Central Europe, 2016–2019), specifically on the pilot actions carried out in Maribor (Slovenia), Budapest (Hungary), and Krakow (Poland), and the adjoining FUA (Functional Urban Area, densely inhabited city and a less densely populated commuting zone whose labor market is highly integrated with the city; Eurostat 2018). Specifically, the authors address the phenomenon of theoretical concepts that often work well in strategies or development programs (e.g., INTERREG programs), but are only sporadically and slowly implemented in practice, particularly in specific urban areas marked by different past and present experiences, historical backgrounds, and contemporary geopolitics that also influence the community reasoning, etc. In other words, it asks about the obstacles and benefits faced by municipalities when trying to involve local communities in planning activities. In the Urban Green Belts project (UGB), the authors participated in the capacity of knowledge providers, selecting a number methods and tools to facilitate community identification and mobilization and to promote active involvement of communities (e.g., citizens and other stakeholders) as users and creators of UGS. Some of the methods and tools were tested by other project partners in three pilot areas, which provided data for the assessment of the participatory approaches in practice. The pilot action reports and interviews with partners were qualitatively analyzed against a theoretical background on participation approaches. The chapter first discusses the theoretical considerations on why and how to think community involvement and then proceeds to discuss the findings of the pilot actions. On this basis, the authors reflect on the limits and obstacles of participation between theory and practice.

5.2 Participation in Urban Planning and Management

One of the project’s viewpoints was that empowered and active citizens more easily articulate their problems and opinions, and contribute to elaborating solutions and implementing plans for urban greens. As elsewhere in public matters, empowerment here also rests on structuring the space for participation and inclusion (Cerar 2015). This enables the detection and channeling of the attitudes of people toward UGS, as well as the potential of collaboration between various actors involved in the devel-

opment of UGS (urbanists, architects, and decision-making bodies). The potential of participatory approaches to urban planning is their ability to provide not only the structure for involving communities in decision-making processes but also the opportunity for a hands-on informal education in active citizenship and transfer of knowledge (Ličen et al. 2017). Moreover, the focus on the integration of stakeholders, especially vulnerable and marginalized groups, can also enhance social inclusion and equality of various groups focused on their needs, demands, and expectations, regardless of attributes such as income, gender, age, ethnicity, or disability (Sarmiento and Beard 2013). Power (im)balances are critical in any discussion about or practice of participation, Mansuri and Rao note (2013, p. 77):

Understanding local structures of inequality and local social and political relationships insulates against the naïve and potentially disempowering belief that participation will necessarily benefit the poor. Explicitly recognizing structures of power and dominance could result in designs to address such inequalities with affirmative action programs, such as the mandated inclusion of women and minorities in village councils, the adoption of programs that exclusively target certain groups, or the use of monitoring and audit systems to reduce the prevalence of capture.

First ideas about a more participatory governance date back to the 1930s, when Kurt Lewin and his students ran tests to “demonstrate the greater gains in productivity and in law and order through democratic participation rather than autocratic coercion” (Adelman 1993, p. 7). They not only showed that “there was an effective alternative to Taylor’s ‘scientific management’ but through his action research provided the details of how to develop social relationships of groups and between groups to sustain communication and co-operation” (ibid.). However, more extensive practices and definitions of participatory democracy—the backbone of participatory approaches to urban greens development—emerged in the 1950s as a response to the criticism of the political system deemed disconnected from the citizens. However, the trend of implementing participatory approaches in governance has been fluctuating, “losing attention in some periods but then reliably reemerging as an apparent panacea to the shortcomings of top-down approaches” (de Gramont 2013). Participatory democracy requires that people be given a chance to take an active part in decision-making processes by using different participatory paths. In this view, normative participation is understood as “taking part in the process of formulation, passage and implementation of public policies” (Parry et al. 1992, p. 16; cf. Müller and Stotten 2011, p. 5). In theory, participation is thus understood as an improvement and expansion of democratic decision-making process.

Stöger (2010) understands participation through two broad approaches: as a means and as a goal. The former includes a process by which development can be more effectively implemented, progress can be supported, and successful outcomes can be ensured. Different participation methods and techniques can be used to incorporate people’s ideas in the development plans (strategic visions) and activities. The latter, however, focuses on empowering people through acquiring skills, knowledge, and experience, and builds confidence to take greater responsibility for their development and self-reliance (Stöger 2010).

Crucial elements of participatory approach relevant for this discussion are adequately subsumed by Fisher (2001, p. 9; see also Gilbert 2015, p. 4):

Participation is a set of principles and an ethics, rather than an ideology or a model. It moreover entails learning not only to acknowledge but also to listen to opinions, ideas, and knowledge of those who in the past have been “targeted” (informed about adopted plan). It requires high levels of transparency, favors decentralization and delegation, and rests on responsibility.

Such practices require moving beyond internalized hierarchical structures, negotiating various motives and agendas, as well as power relations, and they take time. Therefore, the conceptualization of participation in terms of collaborative governance although “challenged not only by austerity politics but also by alternative, innovative and/or insurgent forms of political participation” (Citizen participation in urban green spaces, 2017, p. 6), nevertheless seems useful in its emphasis not only on the responsibility and agency of the community but on other stakeholders as well.

In addition to necessity to encourage and enable citizen engagement, participatory approaches and methods also have limits. Overall, the most obvious one is the discrepancy between various stakeholder positions/powers, meaning that the weakest (financial or social capital) are often sidetracked (usually the community), while important decisions are made among the stronger players (owners, investors, and political decisionmakers). On the other hand, it is not unusual for a group of residents formed around a specific problem to gain enough power to influence the decision-making. While this is desirable, it has to be adequately managed (both from the municipality and the community side) so as to evade the clash between often locally based desires that may not see the wider picture, and the more top-down, systemic view that takes into account the wider effects of decisions but lacks local insights. For example, in Maribor, Slovenia, local initiative succeeded in pedestrianizing a street, but failed to comprehend the effects of traffic spilling over smaller streets and parking lots, exposing a discrepancy between systemic and particular approaches.

In this light, Mansuri and Rao (2013) emphasize two aspects: the discrepancy between organic and induced participation and the failures of civil society. Organic participation will often go against authorities/power, while induced participation has to mimic the organic to, paradoxically, encourage citizens to stand up against authorities/power. The latter is often overlooked, but the issues with collective action and capacity deficits (see de Gramont 2013) have also become clear in the UGB pilot actions activities. In this light, the central issue with participation is related to implementation-related difficulties and to sustainability of such participation, which may pose significant problems in longer-term perspective, particularly in urban areas (sizeable fluctuations of inhabitants).

To sum up, participatory approach gained impetus in the context of theory and practice of empowerment and sustainability, where—in addition to the environment and the economy—special emphasis is placed on societal development (global, national, or local), predicated on transparent, accountable, responsive, equitable, and inclusive decision-making processes (Müller and Stotten 2011). However, while the problems related to participatory approaches can enhance the rigid and inert gov-

ernance structures, they also present an opportunity to find unexpected solutions arising from putting together realistic, flexible, and implementable action plans.

5.3 Presentation of Pilot Actions

This chapter builds on the findings of the UGB project thematic group focusing on community involvement. The project teams in Maribor (Slovenia), Krakow (Poland), and Budapest (Hungary) identified in their respective locales-specific case studies to find a solution to involving communities in green space development.

Maribor

Maribor Development Agency (MRA) has undertaken a project to regenerate the area around the Karantena building, the former Prison Maribor—built before 1900. The pilot area, including the facility and its immediate surroundings, is classified as cultural heritage of local importance and is divided into several plots of land with different owners or co-owners—private and public (e.g., MRA, Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Nature Conservation) and users. For several years, the area around the building has been used as an illegal parking lot for FUA commuters and citizens. The challenge was to set up a feasible and transferable concept of community-led planning in the process of regenerating the degraded green space, characterized by mixed ownership, public users, and low involvement of some private owners. MRA tested consultative and self-mobilized participation of the local stakeholders. To achieve successful impacts, online survey, face-to-face interviews, online campaign, green festivals, and workshops were implemented.

Krakow

The Krakow municipal green space authority in cooperation with the Małopolska region undertook a pilot project Witkowice Green Living Lab in the Witkowice forest on the outskirts of Krakow. The pilot included the revitalization and transformation of existing recreation infrastructure, the regulation of existing green spaces, and the implementation of innovative practices of green education (information boards, and multimedia application). The goal was to involve the surrounding local communities (school, NGOs) into the whole development procedure based on consultation process and participation of other stakeholders. Moreover, the aim was also to involve the neighboring municipality and institutions at the regional level, also showing the possibility of cooperation on the FUA level. Several participatory methods and tools were tested through the pilot actions (art contest, picnic, running events, educational workshops, etc.). Krakow Municipal Green Space Authority, therefore, devel-

oped measures to increase people's awareness of the benefits of green spaces, in order to speak out and become part of the decision-making process.

Budapest

The central challenge of the 12th district, Hegyvidék Municipality team was to find a way to use UGS as a tool to change residents' mind-sets about the importance of green spaces, as well as about the crucial contribution that the communities can make to their planning and maintenance. The pilot action aimed at creating a community of volunteers through a newly initiated stewardship program, thus also promoting pro-environmental attitudes. The main stakeholders were the stewards and the wider community. Stewards were fine-tuning and partly implementing pilot activities (workshops, social events, thematic sessions, and communication campaigns) to build up trust and community spirit. In addition, stewards would give feedback to the municipality regarding the pilot and share ideas related to the planned activities.

Before the start of the project, the three pilots emphasized several crucial elements of sustainable greens development: community, participation, and cooperation between the authorities (given their FUA level focus), residents, experts and private owners, which proved difficult to implement. Below, we discuss in more detail the concept of community and related issues in the context of the three pilot actions.

5.4 Involving the Community

Decisionmakers are often reluctant to involve communities or are simply lacking the necessary expertise, skills, and know-how to approach this important path. Often, participation is understood as a means rather than an end, blurring the distinction between organic and induced participation (see Mansuri and Rao 2013), thus positing participation both as a want and an obstacle, an ideal and a funding requirement (e.g., projects or strategies). This is one of the aspects detectable and, to some extent, implicitly reported by the municipalities or regional development agencies in authority–community relations during the course of the UGB project. This leads to a three-fold problem: (1) the issue with involving (detecting and mobilizing) a community; (2) the issue of management and flexibility of community, and the related question of sustainability and durability of such actions, particularly where longer-term cooperation is essential for the maintenance of UGS; and (3) the issues arising from the project funding requirements and the applicability of such project work, including the very practical issue of adapting participatory methods to various transnational locales, i.e., adjusting approaches to specific (legal, social, and historical) situations (which is only addressed marginally).

5.4.1 *Detecting and Mobilizing the Community*

When working with citizens or communities engaged in participatory approaches, the starting question is: Who (or what) is a community? According to the UGB pilot actions findings, a community in UGS management can be a heterogenous and ad hoc group. It implies more longevity than a civil initiative, which forms primarily around short-term goals. A community can be a group of people—of local or non-local residents, FUA commuters, but also visitors, the elderly, property owners or investors, depending on the context and situation—potentially (but not necessarily) bound by shared interests, motives, and values, who come together around a specific problem or project for longer periods of time. At the same time, factors such as income, gender, cultural and social capital, individual traits, etc., also expose the inherent differences/incompatibilities in the community that may lead to internal power disbalance and informal hierarchies. This plays out most clearly in involving vulnerable groups/individuals, often failing to improve their position but rather reinforcing and replicating existing societal hierarchies:

Greater inequality contributes greatly to asymmetric information; richer and more powerful people are likely to have better-connected networks, better access to powerful people in government, more education (and therefore, greater awareness), and greater capacity to influence decision-making. (Mansuri and Rao 2013, p. 79)

A community may already have a legal status within a municipality (e.g., NGOs, institutes), while in some cases, such status still needs to be obtained. For example, in the case of FUA, there is usually no immediate (“organic”) community. This may pose problems in planning and management, particularly from the perspective of taking care of infrastructure, as was the case in Krakow where they were having difficulties in finding/organizing people to take on the responsibility of the infrastructure; or in areas where there are no nearby residents with vested interest to improve the area, as was the case in Maribor, where the immediate potential community is property owners and users of the illegal parking lot, with no explicit interest in ending the status quo. Or, in the case of Budapest, where the community (e.g., group of volunteers from different neighborhoods) was formed using a top-down approach: the idea and its implementation were conceived by the Green Office of the 12th district, Hegyvidék Municipality (local authorities) and then delegated to stewards. All three cases fall in the category of induced participation, which is understandable given the specific characteristics of each pilot action.

Krakow faced the problem of geo-administrative configuration of the pilot action. Stretching across municipality borders, Witkowice project had difficulties in finding a community willing to take on maintenance. Three potential caretakers were identified (e.g., runners, visitors, and nearby youth correction school), but the sporadic nature of their engagement could not guarantee a longer-term commitment. The team had no problems in attracting visitors to the forest; they organized a free bus service from the city and back, picnics, running events, and arts competitions. Reportedly, the turnout was satisfactory, but mobilizing users/visitors as caretakers remained unrealized. Clearly, the configuration hardly made things easier: distance is a factor

(see Akpınar and Cankurt 2017). One promising option was the involvement of the nearby school: the inclusion of vulnerable young population could have a positive social effect by delegating teenagers' responsibility to take care of their immediate surroundings and to (re)connect to the wider social space. The teachers from the school showed interest to participate, but failed to engage the pupils, so the task of maintaining the forest path intact now lies with the Municipal Green Space Authority.

In this respect, we would like to reiterate the potential of semiformalization of communities, to which the Maribor team came closest: they adapted and tested the Community Consultative Assembly (CCA), a semi-formal entity that can participate in UGS planning and management. To test the CCA in practice, MRA organized a Wellness Festival, a thematic social event dealing with green issues, where they were able to detect, define, and map the interested community. While the Krakow team attempted a similar approach, it didn't work due to the administrative configuration and possibly the specific nature of the school (delinquent youth). In Maribor, on the other hand, the CCA facilitated the conditions where student projects—visualizations of improvement of the existing situation that followed the needs and wishes of the ever-broader group of people involved—were commissioned and put up for voting.

Thus, it was possible to reach consensus and provide suggestions for areas of direct interest for each groups (for example, the general community of the city district was only involved with the overall arrangements of the pilot area, while the owners and users of the cultural hub were involved in the overall and specific area of the joint parking). The owners and users were involved in public consultations, while indirect users were invited to provide their own ideas; they were given an opportunity to submit their ideas through the suggestion box and online survey. (Pilot Action Report from UGB project 2018, p. 3)

The Maribor situation, however, lacked an organic community. In comparison to Krakow and Budapest, it lacked “motivational content” to address and engage people in the process. If Krakow had a sort of organically convincing and motivating content (the forest path), and Budapest small plots of land to be used as gardens, the Maribor team wanted to regenerate an illegal parking lot (effectively eliminating the free parking option for FUA commuters) and transform it into a useful and safe public space. As various plots around the building are publicly or privately owned, this added an element of negotiating public and private interests. So, when it came to a community that could or would take part in the planning of regeneration actions, the potential community of owners and users only shared disinterest or at least ambiguity about what to do with the pilot area. Given the often unstable nature and potentially low levels of interaction and interests in such communities, it is often difficult to detect or mobilize one. This may pose a problem both for the authorities and for interested members of a community, particularly when the proposed plans or changes do not affect them immediately.

5.4.2 *Managing and Sustaining a Community*

The already formed community, or one in the making, should reasonably expect that their involvement will not only be acknowledged, but that the necessary legal mechanisms be put in place and integrated into a dynamic process of finding a consensual solution. It is therefore crucial to facilitate empowering by providing a legal frame and appointing competent interlocutors: “Local development moves from being ‘participatory’ to ‘empowered’ when decisions made by ordinary people through deliberation are tied to policy decisions and actions” (Mansuri and Rao 2013, p. 87), which ideally should lead to participatory governance (Fung and Wright 2003). Although several studies have shown that the best way for a successful urban greens participatory process is to link top-down and bottom-up approaches, i.e., negotiate between the systemic and the particular, this is difficult to translate into practice for various reasons. For example, one of the challenges faced by Maribor’s MRA was to find the suitable time to ensure all relevant stakeholders could attend meeting or workshop:

.../If an event is organized in the morning, people are at work and it is very difficult to get anybody who is not present as part of their working obligations. In the afternoon, people who would come as part of their working obligations do not attend as they have other private obligations ... Also, the interested public has very varied obligations and is difficult to find a suitable date. As it was organized on Saturday morning, the interested and general public were present, but no public officials attended. (3rd Stakeholder meeting report 2017, p. 5)

However, as one of the partners from Maribor’s MRA concluded their partner’s report.

Including stakeholders in the process instead of just consulting them to confirm a proposed solution has proven to be a good strategy to gain consensus for what has to be achieved. (Pilot Action Report from UGB project 2018, p. 8)

For better stakeholder interaction, the emphasis should be on “soft” methods for facilitating and enhancing participation connected to informal ways of community building (Ličen et al. 2017). Soft methods make use of specific locally recognized locations and venues (schools, religious centers, open-air locations, i.e., parks, botanical gardens, and municipal woods) and adequately conceptualized and localized content (e.g., thematic walks, community picnics, sport events, art workshops, etc.). Venue plays an important role in structuring the event as it can contribute to de-formalizing the space of interaction, opening ways to a more relaxed environment. The Budapest partner organized several social events in their green areas and pointed out that:

Celebrating [e.g., a community picnic] is a core part of community building. Celebration is a big part of common culture that creates an opportunity for bonding and trust building. Celebration and connection are key. Community actions linked to UGS might be a very important step for the involved municipalities and communities to rethink not only UGS but also our joint role in the maintenance and improvement of local ecosystems. (Hamza et al. 2018, p. 10)

This, in the end, can result in an ad hoc space of interaction where the hierarchies and power play can be readily monitored and, if necessary, neutralized. Structuring the environment so that various stakeholders can “meet softly” may thus lead to relaxed conversations, generation of ideas, while solution building processes can in fact become more open and flexible (not forgetting the internal power imbalances). Importantly, not only will ideas proliferate in such an environment but also trust will be built and the community will flourish, having realized its power to improve their greens. Or will it?

This is not an easy question and certainly a multilayered one. Our experience shows that FUA-related disinterest and issues of timing are, in addition to the missing organic participation element, among the main reasons impeding convergence around a specific cause, let alone the development of a community. These uneasy conditions may lead the initiator (e.g., the municipality) to disregard or exclude the community for very practical reasons. At the same time, it is critical not to see the community as a passive actor that has yet to be found and externally empowered; instead, in order to connect various ideas and points of view, it is crucial for the authorities to understand the systemic inertia and inherent community drawbacks (see Sect. 2) and use this understanding to provide the necessary legal provisions, competent personnel, and the environment for a community to grow as organically as possible.

During the systematization of the pilot reports, several other topics relevant for this discussion emerged: the role and relevance of socialist history and transition and practical issues regarding the involvement of communities. The former issue was most explicitly emphasized by the Budapest team, who has located the absence of pro-environmental collective action in the legacies of communism:

[Community involvement in UGS] is a very ambitious goal in a post-socialist country where self-organizing was blocked for decades, since community development takes time and changing mind-sets needs even more time. (Hamza et al. 2018, p. 2)

Krakow and Maribor, however, did not attach much importance to it. While this may be the consequence of different experiences under various modalities of socialism and of contemporary politics of memory, it is also related to the characteristics and contexts of the specific pilot actions. It was the Budapest team who had applied the most decidedly top-down approach to the implementation of their planned stewardship program. When discussing these issues with the partners, it was clear that they did not at all refuse to use participatory approaches in practice. Yet, there was a clear expectation that the situation might slip out of control when not in a tight grip. In the case of Budapest, the team genuinely attempted to involve the residents of the 12th district in stewardship of the designated area. At the beginning of the pilot action, the Hegyvidék Green Office tried to define appropriate “greening spots,” to advertise the opportunity locally by putting up information signs, to find stewards, and to establish a communication channel with them. It soon became clear that people are not necessarily skilled enough to select adequate plants, so the team organized several workshops with a horticulturalist who was then tasked with drawing up a planting plan. The Green Office organized several awareness-raising events for different generations. In their report, they highlighted:

Generally speaking, stewards were satisfied with the program, but they need more “freedom” and ownership. On the other hand, Green Office emphasized difficulties mediating between the stewards and the gardening company, as well as regarding the maintenance levels of some stewarded spots. They conducted in-depth interviews that revealed their satisfaction with the spots, which showed different expectations. The interviewees also emphasized the importance of having a contact with a professional gardener, noting that contact with her was only possible through the Green Office. This proved inefficient and generated unnecessary work for the office. Therefore, less control from the municipality would be beneficial for both parties. They would welcome more thematic workshops to improve their knowledge. (Hamza et al. 2018, p. 5)

This suggests that the Budapest partner actively sought contact with residents. Crucial in this context is the realization that some form of management is necessary, while too heavily induced participation may fail: less top-down control would give stewards more autonomy. However, people expressed the need for specialist guidance, which corroborates the above argument that it is essential to negotiate not only between the stakeholders but also between various internal community dynamics.

Having acknowledged the issues with top-down approach and having taken action to alleviate its effects, the Green Office of Municipality Hegyvidék introduced major changes to the structure of the program. Two are particularly relevant for this discussion: (1) stewards can propose places themselves, which may lead to more motivated, if perhaps fewer stewards and (2) stewards will have to sign a document—a legal provision that fosters participation and regulates inactivity (no penalization). This suggests a certain need for and usefulness of community formalization (e.g., NGO, association) in order to ensure accountability and contribute to sustainability. The Budapest case made clear the importance of sharing responsibilities and ownership, especially within the stewardship program, where the limited formalization would facilitate the negotiation between the fluidity of community and the rigidity of the system.

5.5 Conclusion

The UGB project was an opportunity to see how the promises and limits of community participation play out in practice. The studied pilot cases reveal that public spaces “remodeled” through participatory planning and management initiatives are seen as an opportunity to cocreate or at least contribute to creating livable spaces and responsible citizens. However, the case studies also demonstrated that when subjected to strict deadlines and project requirements, certain activities which appear to work in theory demand much more time than three years in practice (typical duration of such projects). This brings us back to the discrepancy between induced and organic participation: to expect that a community will form “organically on demand” is illusory and misleading. It can potentially be “induced on demand” but in such cases, it is questionable whether such a community has any relevance outside the immediate instrumentalization of residents/communities for short-term purposes.

Communities should act as equal partners in the process, which cannot be realized when overambitious goals are set for short periods of time. This simply does not allow enough time for comprehensive community transformative processes to take place. Any work with humans takes time and patience, and “soft” methods can stimulate, encourage, and raise awareness in citizens, which can—in due time—support community building, sustainability, and participation in urban green development. Time and “organics” proved to be the biggest obstacle to participation, often steering the authorities to return to rather top-down, nonparticipatory, but in the short-term more pragmatic approaches. Finally, this confirms the importance of continually assessing both top-down (induced participation) and bottom-up (organic growth vs. potential failure) approaches as a basis for future action. Importantly, it takes into account the continually shifting and changing societal, cultural, political, and economic conditions and environments. What is more, a thorough assessment of participatory democracy in practice is also essential for problematizing over-bureaucratization of project funding bodies and schemes that latch on promoting a certain approach or concept (e.g., smart, intelligent, participation, community, etc.). It is at the same time easy to forget that empty concepts obscure the nature of the problem and its solution. What is worse, sometimes similar, if differently named, practices of participation may already be in place, but are either neglected or forgotten through such schemes (as, for example, the legacies of socialist workers’ actions, self-management, etc.). In such cases, top-down imposition masks considerable political, social, and historical diversities with a false aim to ensure a sort of conceptual commonality across the EU as the basis for building a more commonly accepted and recognizable union. In reality, things are not so easy; in addition to the emphasis on sufficient time for social changes, such projects also hardly make room for organic innovation and the localization/applicability of the project results.

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