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# Online survey as a tool in participatory urban governance - The Polish experience

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## Abstract

Sustainable urban governance needs to be participatory. Municipal decision-making processes have to be responsive, transparent and inclusive, they should also actively promote citizen involvement. While the concept of participatory urban governance is increasingly popular in Western societies, in East-Central Europe it struggles to overcome the complex effects of system transformation. The Polish experience of participatory urban governance is still quite shallow with few examples of good practice in this field discernable. To stimulate cooperation between local authorities and citizens we need to develop new tools of social participation in decision-making. In this paper I present the results of public consultations held in **Wrocław and Zielona Gora in 2007** by means of online surveys. The findings of the studies were used to define the principles of the future development of the respective cities highlighting the growing possibilities for the use of using online surveys as effective mechanisms in co-operation and co-governance.

## Keywords

Urban governance, citizen participation, Internet, online survey, Poland

# 1. Introduction

Contemporary urban governance may be defined as “the sum of the many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, plan and manage the common affairs of the city. It is a continuing process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and cooperative action can be taken” (UN-HABITAT, 2002: 9). Sustainability, decentralisation, equity, efficiency, transparency and accountability, civic engagement and citizenship security are therefore the interdependent and mutually reinforcing features of good urban governance. Consequently, good governance can fruitfully be viewed as participatory governance. Good governance implies a fundamentally new approach to municipal decision-making processes and outcomes, organisation, management and relationships, and formulates an integrated development approach (Pieterse, 2000: 12-13).

A key tool in ensuring good governance is urban planning. Not the old-fashioned, top-down, technocratic master planning, but strategic planning, which is selective, action-oriented and participatory. This renewal of planning theory is reflected in the idea of communicative planning which accepts the multiplicity of interests, combined with an enduring common interest in finding viable, politically legitimate solutions (Healey 1997, Campbell and Fainstein 2003). Planners serve the public interest by negotiating a kind of multicultural, technically informed pluralism, and by setting the networks of collaboration and social learning. As a result, “planning is (...) no longer about plans. It is, and must increasingly be, about people” (Narang, Reutersward, 2006: 8).

Despite many crucial works on communicative urban planning, the development of innovative processes of citizen participation remains an important challenge. How to involve all stakeholders (local authorities, decision-makers, public and private institutions, business managers and individual citizens), how to secure the common interests of all groups, how to develop effective mechanisms of co-operation and co-governance – these are the main problems of democratic urban planning (ECTP, 2003: 13-19).<sup>1</sup>

Looking for good solutions in this field, many local authorities and civic leaders strive to reach out and practice deliberative democracy, in which the views of all are heard, particular issues are fully aired, opinions gathered, policy options are explored and decisions are mutually beneficial to all segments of the population (Sisk, 2001). The concept of deliberative democracy is becoming more and more popular among Western European societies, creating a favourable climate for citizen’s public activity. Unfortunately, East-Central Europe is still struggling with complex effects of its recent system transformation. The shift from expert-driven to more participatory planning in the developed countries has not fully occurred in the transitional regions of Europe (Hirt and Stanilov, 2009; Juchacz, 2006). Amartya Sen’s cautionary note: “Just as it is important to emphasize the need for democracy, it is also crucial to (...) examine ways and means of making it function well, to realize its potentials” (Sen, 1999, p. 158-159) becomes a real problem here – as a low level of democratic participation is directly related to the poor condition of democratic institutions. As such, we cannot rely solely on democratic laws and institutions as they do not alter political practice (Flyvbjerg 1998).

In Poland for example, in spite of the positive changes that have occurred in terms of the legal regulations for public participation in the decision-making process across various administration levels (Długosz, Wygnański, 2005: 63-65) local political cultures remains authoritarian and citizens are rarely able to impact decision-making ( few examples exist of

good practice in this field – see Jakubowski, 2001; Andrzejewska *et al.*, 2007). Important obstacles to the implementation of participatory urban governance include the low level of social activity among the citizen base, the general lack of civic experience among the populace, the low level of trust in public institutions and an aversion to self-organisation and to cooperation with others (Sulek, 2009). Another issue is the negative attitude of many local authorities and clerks, who perceive consultation as an unnecessary burden, slowing down the management of local affairs. Of course, they fulfil the required minimum of citizen involvement, but the quality of this process is generally unsatisfactory and often perfunctory at best.

How then, in such circumstances, can the transparency of decision-making processes and active citizen engagement be achieved? How can more effective practical cooperation between the local authorities and citizens be stimulated? To answer these questions we need to note one more aspect of contemporary democracy: the growing importance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), which profoundly transforms the relationship between government and the communities. The emergence of digital democracy (Sisk, 2001) or electronic democracy (Marczewska-Rytko, 2001: 178) in which citizens are offered new, online possibilities of interaction with government, proves that ICT substantially enhances local democracy. Every city today is expected to have a web site, offering services and information directly to its people with easy access and without government 'red tape'. E-mail, discussion groups, Internet forums and Internet databases further improve the channels of communication between the citizens and the local government.

In this article I argue that online surveys may also be a good tool for participatory urban governance. Public consultations held in selected cities in Poland in 2007 illustrate the possibilities of using online surveys as effective mechanisms for co-governance on a local level.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Materials and Methods**

Below I present examples of online surveys carried out in 2007 in Wroclaw and Zielona Gora (Poland). Traditional opinion polls have been carried out in those cities for many years (see Bagiński, 1992, 1998) and have become an important element in the local decision-making process. Online surveys, however, were adopted for the first time in 2007.

The surveys dealt with particular aspects of the future development of each city – some sample questions listed in Table 1. The studies served not only local policy needs but also provoked a discussion about the possibilities of using this kind of research technique in the urban decision-making process. In this article I focus on the methodological issues and therefore the subject and the contents of each survey are referred to only when necessary.

**Table 1. Sample questions from the two online surveys**

Wroclaw	Zielona Gora
<b>Do you like Wroclaw?</b> YES / NO	<b>Do you like Zielona Gora?</b> YES / NO
<b>What associations connected with Wroclaw do you have?</b> (please fill in the window below)	<b>Do you consider moving out from Zielona Gora in the future?</b> YES / NO / I DON'T KNOW
<b>Do you think that Wroclaw:</b> - is an attractive place to live? YES / NO - is an attractive place to work? YES / NO - offers attractive services? YES / NO - is attractive for tourists? YES / NO	<b>What are the main problems of Zielona Gora?</b> (please tick at least one of the answers below) - lack of attractive residential areas - too few shops and services - poor recreation facilities - too few workplaces - poor public transport - low level of public security - other - there are no problems
<b>If you were responsible for the decisions concerning Wroclaw, what would you point as the most urgent for the city?</b> (please fill in the window below)	<b>If you have any suggestions or propositions concerning the future of Zielona Gora, you can express them below.</b> (please fill in the window below)

Online survey offers many clear advantages (see Batorski, Olcoń-Kubicka, 2006). First, it is user-friendly, because each of the respondents may complete the questionnaire any time he or she wants. Second, it gives them a certain freedom of speech because they are not 'influenced' by the presence of a surveyor. Third, results are obtained quickly and may be analysed immediately because the completed questionnaires are recorded automatically as digital files. Fourth, it is relatively cheap because it does not require the employment of surveyors nor of any other staff. Eventually, its results can be easily published and popularised through the Internet. All these features position the online survey as a very good alternative to the traditional tools used in the participation and consultation process (opinion polls, interviews, public meetings).

Of course, the online survey tool undoubtedly has some obvious limitations, of which the most important is the selective and uneven process of drawing the sample: the questionnaire may be completed only by Internet users. In consequence, such survey is not representative of the population in general. This problem is perhaps particularly acute in developing countries such as Poland where, in 2007, (when I conducted this study) only 41% of households had Internet access and most of Internet users were young people, well educated, citizens of big cities and members of affluent households (Loof, Seybert 2009, Batorski, 2009). Nevertheless I argue that online opinion polls may in future become a useful tool for consultation on a local level.

The research project "Image of Wroclaw" was launched in May 2007 by the Chair of Spatial Planning (Faculty of Architecture, Wroclaw University of Technology). Its main goal was to measure and define the up-to-date perception of the city 10 years after the previous study (Bagiński, 1998). The academic profile of the study, independent of local politics, was designed to provide the advantage of being an expert and autonomous approach to urban affairs. The questionnaire was quite detailed, it dealt with the connotations with Wroclaw, most characteristic features of the city, places liked and disliked, the attractiveness and

necessary changes in the city. Most of the questions (11 of 19) were open-ended, allowing the respondents to freely express their opinion.

The second survey was conducted in Zielona Gora in October 2007 when the local government was formulating its new Development Strategy for the City. The questionnaire covered the following aspects: places visited most frequently, main problems faced by the city and proposals for the future development of the city. It was comprised of 15 closed-ended questions and 5 open-ended questions.

Each of the presented surveys was available in two options: for the citizens and for those living outside the studied cities. As *The New Charter of Athens 2003* states, European cities are used not only by resident citizens, but also by other consumers of their facilities and services on a permanent or a temporary basis: commuters and visitors (ECTP, 2003: 3-4). Consequently, contemporary democratic institutions have to respond to the needs and well-being of all these social groups. However, current systems of urban governance, limited mainly by the votes of permanent residents, are not yet able to respond equitably to these new conditions. Therefore, in this paper I concentrate on the survey dedicated to the citizens as currently only they can participate in the local decision-making processes.

### 3. Results

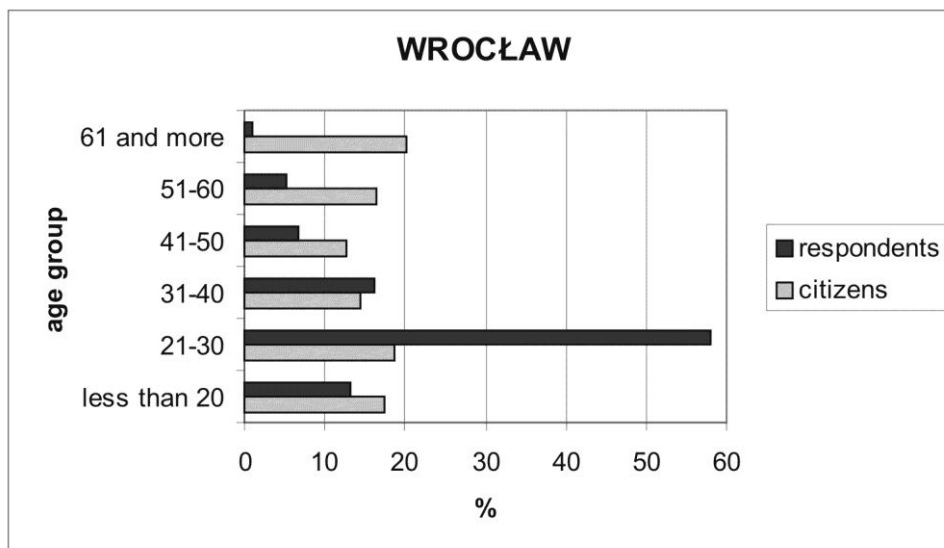
1. The first important aspect of each consultation process is: who actually participates in it? The number of people who take part in a survey depends crucially on the availability of the questionnaire and on the way it is advertised. In the two given instances information about the surveys were published simultaneously by several local media outlets. The “Image of Wrocław” research project was advertised on the radio (*Polskie Radio Wrocław* and *Radio RAM*), in a newspaper (local issue of *Gazeta Wyborcza*) and on the Internet (municipal website, University of Wrocław Website, Wrocław University of Technology website). The survey itself was available on the website of the Chair of Spatial Planning. In Zielona Gora the survey was published on the municipal website and it was promoted on the radio (*Radio Zielona Gora*), in the newspaper (*Gazeta Lubuska*) and on the Internet (municipal website and Zielona Gora University website). In each city, after launching the project, information about it also subsequently appeared on other media outlets, a process which was no longer inspired by the project’s researchers

The completed questionnaires were checked and verified and eventually 2 925 of them were qualified for further analysis in Wrocław and 645 in Zielona Gora. Compared to the whole population of the two cities, the samples account for about 0.5% of all citizens (0.46% of population of Wrocław and 0.55% of population of Zielona Gora took part in the surveys).<sup>3</sup> This apparent similarity between the two cities is difficult to explain because the number of respondents depends on many essentially un-measurable factors, such as the subject of the survey, the way it is advertised, the perception of the institution in charge, the duration of the survey, the degree of sophistication of the questionnaire and the percentage of Internet users in the whole population among many others. However, irrespective of the factors determining participation rates in the survey, the samples obtained in Wrocław and in Zielona Gora are relatively large. It proves the effectiveness of Internet opinion polls in stimulating participatory urban governance. Receiving such a large number of answers with traditional research techniques would require many organisational endeavours (see Bagiński, 1998: 9-12), would be much more expensive and would take much longer to record.

2. One of the basic rules of good governance set out by Narang and Reutersward is that "all citizens, especially women and the poor, must be enabled and empowered to participate effectively in decision-making processes" (Narang, Reutersward, 2006: 4-5). How was this postulate addressed in the two studied cities?

Each of the presented surveys was confidential and respondents were free to answer or reject them. As a result, the obtained samples, though relatively large, are unrepresentative: the age structure and the sex ratio of the respondents differ from that of the whole populations.

In Wroclaw as well as in Zielona Gora, the age structure of the samples is dominated by young people, aged 21-30 (1696 respondents, that is 57.98% of the surveyed citizens belong to this group in Wroclaw and 262 respondents, that is 40.56% of the surveyed citizens belong to this group in Zielona Gora). The second most numerous age group is 31-40 and third – less than 20 (Figure 1. and 2.).



**Figure 1. Juxtaposition of the age structure of the respondents and of the whole population in the Wroclaw survey (May 2007).**

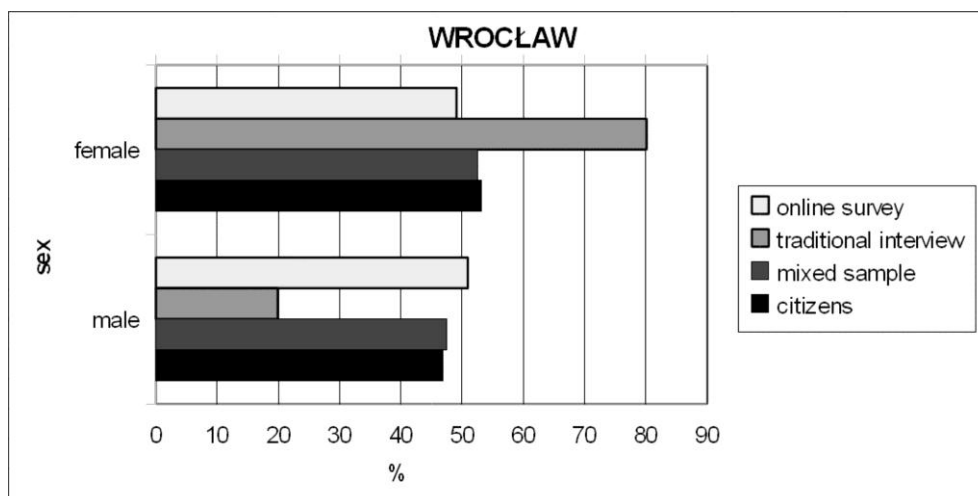
The comparison between the age structure of the samples and of the whole populations shows that there is an evident over-representation of people aged 21-30 (+39.26% in Wroclaw and +22.19% in Zielona Gora) and relatively large under-representation of the age group over 61 (-19.13% in Wroclaw and -13.26% in Zielona Gora). One could say that such a distribution of respondents is a result of the way the surveys were advertised. Indeed, the general approach was to promote the research projects in the most active local media, the media perceived as likely 'public opinion shapers'. Accordingly, the surveys were advertised on the universities' websites, as academic societies play a vital role in Wroclaw and in Zielona Gora. This might be the reason for such a young structure in terms of the respondents. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily the only reason, because the age distribution of respondents reflects the percentage of Internet users in particular age groups in Poland (see Batorski, 2007: 281) and it seems to be typical for all online surveys in recent years.



**Figure 2. Juxtaposition of the age structure of the respondents and of the whole population in the Zielona Gora survey (October 2007).**

As regards the sex structure of the two analysed samples, men are over-represented and women are under-represented (+/-4.12% for each gender in Wrocław and +/-7.78% in Zielona Gora). The higher percentage of men taking part in online surveys also complies with global trends and proves that there are more Internet users among men than among women (Batorski, 2007: 280).

Thus, unfortunately, the results of the online surveys described above are not representative and cannot be generalised for the whole populations. In this case the methodologists (Batorski, Olcoń-Kubicka, 2006: 112) recommend doing a parallel survey with traditional methods (not on the Internet). Following this suggestion, both in Wrocław and in Zielona Gora standard opinion polls were conducted (interviews and mail questionnaires), giving an additional 364 respondents in Wrocław and 100 in Zielona Gora. These traditional surveys are necessary to verify the answers from online surveys and to give more reliable results.



**Figure 3. Juxtaposition of the sex structure of the respondents taking part in the online survey, in traditional interviews, of the mixed sample and of the whole population in the Wrocław survey (May 2007)**



For example the Wroclaw interviews were carried out with the parents of teenagers from selected schools. Of course, the age and sex structure of such respondents was very different from the online sample: the sample obtained in the traditional survey was dominated by women and middle-aged people. Their answers to the questionnaire were more critical about the city and more placid, but the sample itself was also not representative. Fortunately, the mixed sample (combining respondents from the online survey and from traditional interviews) more closely resembled the population of the whole city, at least in terms of the sex structure (Figure 3), and therefore such an approach was adopted in the further study (Bagiński and Damurski, 2009). This example shows that only simultaneous usage of traditional and online surveys are likely to give representative outcomes.

3. Some respondents showed a special interest in the studied issues by answering the optional questions. There was one such question in the Wroclaw questionnaire (“If you wish to further share your personal opinion about Wroclaw, please use the space provided below”) and two such questions in Zielona Gora (“If you want, you can briefly describe the main problems of Zielona Gora below” and “If you have any suggestions or propositions concerning the future of Zielona Gora, you can express them below”). In this case the results obtained in Wroclaw and in Zielona Gora differ considerably. In Wroclaw only 38.46% of respondents answered the optional questions whereas in Zielona Gora 77.44% (on average) did. Such an apparent discrepancy is probably connected with the form of each questionnaire. Respondents in Wroclaw were obliged to answer many open-ended questions and had many opportunities to freely express their opinions. On the contrary, the Zielona Gora survey included only few open-ended questions and probably for this reason respondents were more keen on answering them.

Another piece of evidence in terms of citizens’ involvement is the number of answers given to the last question of each survey. The question encouraged respondents to type their e-mail addresses if they wish to receive the report from the survey. This optional offer served as a form of gratitude to the respondents for completing the questionnaire and aimed to invite more people to take part in the survey (see Batorski and Olcoń-Kubicka, 2006: 114). Most of the surveyed citizens (2 136 people, 73.03% of respondents in Wroclaw and 375 people, 58.05% of respondents in Zielona Gora) wrote their e-mail addresses which means that they were interested in the common affairs of the city.

Publication of the report of the survey may draw a challenging response from the respondents and will give a further opportunity for the development of their civic attitudes in the studied cities. This process is currently ongoing and may produce interesting results in the future.

4. Finally, it is necessary to discuss the practical value and use of the results of the surveys. The online opinion poll tool is easy and fast to use as stated above: immediate results enable immediate implementation and this represents a significant advantage in terms of this kind of study.

In Zielona Gora the online survey was helpful in establishing the priority goals in the Development Strategy for the City in accordance with the citizens’ stated needs. Respondents highlighted the most important problems of the city: creating new workplaces, building new shopping centres and sports facilities etc. The Development Strategy addressed those issues by setting the following main targets: “Prosperous City” and “Green Zielona Gora”. The first included the creation of attractive spaces for the private sector and the development of

shopping centres, while the latter included the regeneration of existing but derelict green areas in order to create new recreation opportunities within the city (Damurski *et al.*, 2008).

The case of Wroclaw is more complicated. The online survey provided up-to-date knowledge about the contemporary perception of the city. In general the image of Wroclaw is overwhelmingly positive with some negative aspects, such as congested traffic, derelict pre-war residential areas and post-socialist blocks of flats. Such knowledge might be important in formulating the current urban policy. Unfortunately, the academic profile of the study, independent from local politics, made it inapplicable. The lack of day-to-day communication between the local government and the research centres results in wasted efforts on both sides and resulted in the loss of the precious voice of the urban community as expressed through the online survey.

## 4. Conclusions

The participation of local communities in local decision-making processes is a necessary condition for the sustainable economic, social and spatial development of urban areas. Local authorities in Poland officially approve of this view though there are still few good examples of participatory urban governance in evidence.

In this article I presented two cases of public consultation held by means of an online survey in Wroclaw and Zielona Gora in 2007. These two research projects prove that the samples obtained in online surveys are not representative of the whole population. Respondents are dominated by young men and such distribution does not correspond with the age structure and sex ratio of whole populations which means that the Internet alone cannot become the medium of participatory urban governance. Or at least not yet.

Nevertheless I perceive the online survey as a valuable source of information about citizens' opinions and needs. A relatively high participation rate (around 0.5% of the population) and a high percentage (over 50%) of respondents interested in the survey results show the true potential of the online survey as a tool in participatory governance. It seems that the main problems concerning the development of online democracy in Poland, namely, the low level of ICT equipment in the municipalities, the lack of appropriate funding and the relatively low percentage of citizens having access to the Internet will however, albeit gradually, subside.<sup>4</sup> The accessibility of ICT has been growing very fast in the recent years: in 2006 only 36% of households in Poland had Internet access whereas in 2009 this number had already risen to 59% (Loof, Seibert, 2009). And the more people that use the Internet, the more *representative* online surveys will become. As a consequence, *e*-consultations will in time become more effective and reliable.

Of course, we need to remember that online communication may not be a panacea for strengthening democracy. The problems of "digital exclusion" and "digital division" (see Batorski 2009, p. 300-301) still exist, which means that some groups of people have access to the Internet and the skills appropriate to use it while others simply do not.<sup>5</sup> But - after Sisk (Sisk, 2001) - we also have to admit that ICT has radically transformed opportunities for direct citizen involvement in governance issues.

The most important conclusion is that one of the main obstacles of citizen participation in Poland, namely, the aversion of clerks and local governments to public consultation, can now

be overcome given the ongoing developments recorded here in digital democracy. Compared to other available tools the online survey seems to be an easy, cheap and fast way of encouraging participation in local decision-making processes. In Zielona Gora the local government would not be able to (and probably would not like to) conduct a similar research effort with only traditional techniques available to it. The case of Wrocław reveals another important aspect of digital democracy: insufficient appreciation of innovative communication tools by the local authorities. As one of the respondents wrote (the original is in Polish), “municipal clerks should hold public consultation such as this survey. Unfortunately the clerks have a very limited knowledge of many issues they decide. And such questionnaires, forums, discussions could really bridge the gap between local authorities and the citizens”

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> It is not only *The New Charter of Athens* (2003) which deals with participatory urban planning. A large number of international declarations and agreements have been adopted in this field over the last twenty years, most notably Agenda 21 (1992), the Habitat Agenda (1996), the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access To Justice In Environmental Matters (1998), Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (2002).

<sup>2</sup> This paper contributes to the discussion led recently in the Polish sociological literature on using the Internet as a medium of communication between the local authorities and the citizens (see Przybylska 2007; Damurski 2008).

<sup>3</sup> The population of Wrocław in May 2007 was 633 950 and the population of Zielona Góra in October 2007 was 118 013. Data from the Central Statistical Office in Poland (GUS).

<sup>4</sup> The relevant document here (no author) is: Stopień informatyzacji urzędów w Polsce. Raport generalny z badań ilościowych dla Ministerstwa Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji [Level of ICT development in public offices in Poland. General Report from the quantitative research of the Inner Affairs and Administration Ministry - in Polish] (2005) Warsaw: ARC Rynek i Opnia. Warsaw (<http://www.mswia.gov.pl/download.php?s=1&id=2295>; Accessed 23.03.2009).

<sup>5</sup> One of the potential solutions to this problem might be providing public Internet access points with qualified training staff in poorer urban areas.