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New synergies for urban mobility and public space policies: engaging local people

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Abstract

Mobility and public space policies affect thoroughly citizens' everyday life and ignoring public has been detrimental for long. The challenge of sustainability calls for knowledge exchange and new synergies between local stakeholders. Serres city in Greece has been gradually engaging local stakeholders in mobility and public space issues, through EU instruments like SUMPs and lately through an URBACT project, "Space for People", participatory processes being a prerequisite. An URBACT Local Group (ULG) was created and performed for three years throughout pandemic restrictions, achieving co-creation with innovative research tools, small-scale actions study and implementation, communication strategy and an Integrated Action Plan. ULG engagement inspired further research involving local students in street surveys, data collection and interviews. Through an innovative protocol for public space experience, useful information was analyzed by local people for local solutions. This paper presents the fruitful path of engaging local people in city planning and assesses their experience.

Key words: *sustainable urban mobility, public space, knowledge synergies, participatory planning, engagement*

1. Introduction

For the last century, urban streets worldwide have been built to accommodate automobiles. Priority to car needs has resulted in street environments admittedly unattractive for pedestrians. Yet, these usually mixed commercial streets, which bisect the compact residential area of cities, are in fact complex urban structures and dynamic socio-spatial entities (Griffiths et al, 2008; Carmona, 2015).

Gehl & Gemzøe (2000) have argued long ago that extreme car dependency in most cities has caused public space decline, traffic and parking gradually usurping pedestrian space, while other impacts like dirt, noise and pollution impoverish urban life. Attitudes towards urban street environment are now changing worldwide, focusing on a human-centered design, considering streets in their wider urban context, both as movement channels and mixed-use places, affecting the city identity. These "user-friendly" approaches bring streets into the forefront of public space discussions. At the same time, given the recent request for cities' climate change adaptation and mitigation, the human-centered approach relates to policies that seek low emissions solutions.

While cities all around Europe share the challenge of sustainability, practices well substantiated and measures implemented by European initiatives call for knowledge exchange and for new synergies between local stakeholders. Urban mobility and public space policies should rejoice public acceptance and participatory practices offer an important potential of public engagement and valuable contribution.

Serres city in Greece is gradually engaging local stakeholders in mobility and public space issues. Departing from an Urban Mobility Study in 2015, passing to a Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan in 2019 that institutionalized a network of stakeholders, Serres faced the challenge of an URBACT III funded project, "Space for People", in which participatory processes were a prerequisite. An URBACT Local Group (ULG) was created, stayed active between 2019-2022 throughout pandemic restrictions and achieved co-creation with innovative research tools, small-scale actions study and implementation, communication strategy and an Integrated Action Plan.

Synergies were woven between carefully selected stakeholders, periodically sought for official exchange, eight being the official requirement for ULG deliberations. However, additional exchange opportunities came up and commitment was enhanced by visiting stakeholders, when pandemic permitted, for face-to-face further feedback and for inspiring them to engage more. In this respect, the Municipality found a precious local ally: involving local academia had a multiplying effect as local students also joined the cause of claiming space for people.

ULG engagement inspired a research project in the Civil Engineering Department of the International Hellenic University. A methodology was conceived incorporating tools developed by the Danish urban design consultants 'Gehl Architects', adapted in Greek and applied for the first time. Street surveys, data collection and interviews, enriched the activity of local stakeholders. Suggesting an innovative protocol for public space experience, the survey gave data on pedestrians' volumes and alternative to car modes use in selected corridors, where interventions were investigated along the ULG meetings.

This work presents a model case of how local participatory actions with the use of joint knowledge tools can lead to integrated and directly implemented local policies for public space and sustainable mobility.

2. Participatory processes for public space and mobility

As stated by Hamilton-Baillie (2008) streets, traditionally, have been a place of interaction between people, hosting social, cultural, and economic life of cities, while in the late 1960s Dutch scientists were pioneers in rearranging streets and integrating traffic into social space (Hass-Klau, 1990).

The parallel and interlinked changes in mobility, urban planning and public space design aiming to reduce travel distances by creating a better mix of functions (residential, work, leisure and public facilities), limiting car use, supporting active mobility and public transport, while also transforming public space to citizens' benefit. For such an approach the overarching concept of "accessibility shift" (Levine et all, 2019) is very important. The idea is that transportation planning, and the transportation dimensions of land-use planning, should be strongly connected, and based on people's ability to reach destinations, rather than on their ability to travel fast.

In recent years, transport planners became aware of the fact that tackling separately each

transport mode, penalized the limited public space (Stepan and Rotaru, 2011) and that there is a need for strengthening the role of the street in terms of social interaction (Hamilton-Baillie, 2008). As cities grow and vehicle traffic continues to increase, cities are trying to regain space for citizens. New policies are acknowledging the significance of urban street life dealing with the concept of "streets as places" (PPS, 2008), or "streets as public spaces and drivers for urban prosperity" (UN HABITAT, 2013) originated in the placemaking theories and approaches. These approaches benefit the new urban economies and place citizens at the heart of city planning (UITP, 2020).

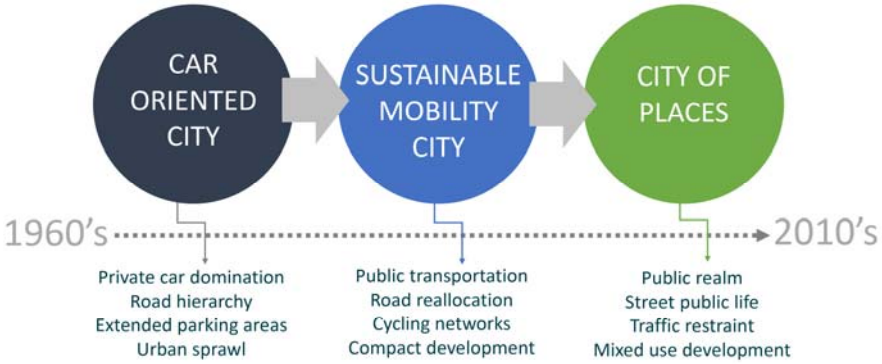

Figure 1: *The evolution of planning approaches 1960's to 2010's (UITP, 2020 and own contribution)*

Recent works in the broader field of sustainable development have emphasized the existence of trade-offs between the three dimensions of sustainability (equity/social justice, economic development, environmental protection), but it has been also argued that achieving sustainability is about managing optimally the ever-evolving contradictions and conflicts identified (Campbell, 1996). Urban sustainability is an evolving concept, reflecting a political process, subject to societal negotiations (Darchen and Searle, 2018), while transferability of sustainable practices is difficult to achieve without negotiation and eventual trade-offs between stakeholders (Bai et al, 2010). Planning solutions are embedded within a specific institutional, political, cultural, and social urban context (Mössner 2016), thus solutions to overcome sustainability challenges are context-specific and these contextual factors involve inevitably the communities concerned. But do these last have an active role in solutions identification and implementation?

Liveability and sustainability of urban settings are matters of growing importance for urban planners, engineers, and designers worldwide. As Hespanhol argues (2018) "contemporary city making has taken a turn towards favoring situated interventions that welcome participation by local communities, addressing their shared concerns, reflecting their values, and promoting social interaction in streets and public spaces" and recent works advocate that engaging local communities in the co-design of urban environments that are meaningful to them, may ensure the long-term endurance of the designed solutions (Morfoulaki et al., 2022; Balaras et al., 2019). Focusing on this procedural side of sustainability, participation can lead in nurturing care about urban places among members of a local community, through their involvement in the participatory design process, content provision and data gathering (Hespanhol, 2018). It is essential that all affected parties are actively involved in all stages of the planning process as

public participation not only improves public policy transparency, but it also helps reach greater public acceptance through a sense of ownership (Balaras et al., 2019).

Engaging local communities, users of public space, into a user-oriented space policy making requires of course their getting familiar with resources to diagnose problems, analyze local context and advanced solutions, given their living experience. A human-centered city making approach has been put forward by Gehl Architects, who developed methodologies and tools for urban space liveability assessment (Gehl Architects, 2022a), one of them summarized in Figure 2:

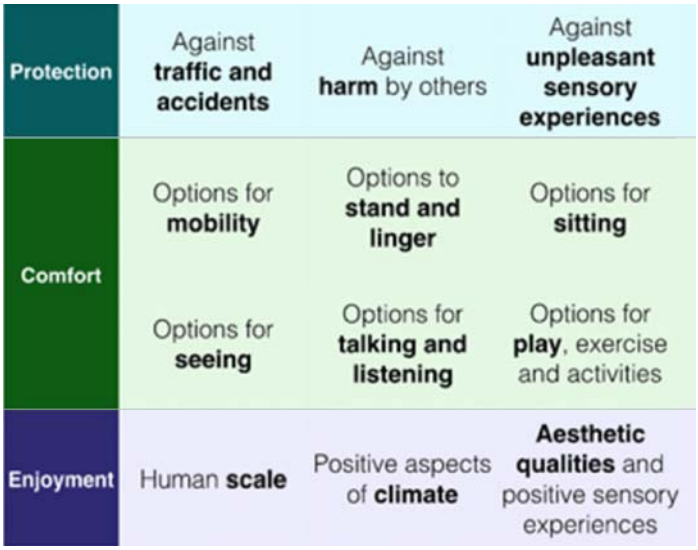

Figure 2: *Gehl's Twelve Quality Criteria for public urban spaces (Gehl Architects, 2022a).*

Derived from Gehl Architect's extensive international experience, those criteria are general and adaptable to different urban spaces. Such tools can be communicated to local actors, willing to get educated and be of valuable contribution in their living environment upgrade. Through interaction, it is possible to forge a collective perception of the public space and a shared identity representative of and co-designed by the people using the space (Hespanhol, 2018).

The importance of public participation is well-discussed in the literature with showing benefits for citizens and for the policymakers, however, it is seen as a challenge for practitioners and of low appeal to citizens. Not only a good stakeholder strategy is required to identify and map stakeholders, to understand their needs, collect data, and work with them to enable exchange, but also a considerable resources investment in continuous stakeholder motivation and mobility, going far beyond just informing and consulting (Interreg Europe, 2020). And this involvement and engagement in the planning process of an intervention of a target group that benefits from or is affected by it, should be from the starting point of the process, making the most of underlying success factors (Morfoulaki et al., 2022).

Getting involved in public space formulation is translated in being active in public life as space hosts life (Daniil, 2007) and coming to sustainable mobility planning, an ideal participatory scheme (optimal synthesis of different perspectives) accompanying the sustainable mobility planning cycle would add to the interventions' success (Morfoulaki et al., 2022).

In the above context, a bottom-up, community-led approach was undertaken with the aim to form collaborative and creative interventions in a medium sized city context, where public space claims appeal and functionality for its users, the target being "Space for people"!

3. Urban mobility and public space in Serres: a challenge for a new approach

It has been well substantiated that there is a recent turn in contemporary city making towards favoring situated interventions that welcome participation by local communities "*addressing their shared concerns, reflecting their values, and promoting social interaction through casual encounters in streets and public spaces*" (Hespanhol, 2018). On the other hand, the leading EU urban mobility policies, inscribed in Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans – SUMPs, dictate that they should be oriented to and derived by people. The SUMP Guidelines (Rupprect Consult, 2019) emphasize that planning for the future of our cities must take citizens as the focus, imposing their being part of the procedure and of the solution as a prerequisite.

In this context, where not only new tools for sustainable mobility put user in the forefront but also place cooperative practices in the heart of policymaking, there is a need for cities to meet the challenge of a new approach. In addition, city sustainability doctrine imposes tackling in an integrated and synergistic way different users' needs, realizing first, as the first step in achieving sustainability that different objectives are inter-related and action in pursuit of their achievement has to be integrated. Cities priorities can no longer be seen and addressed as separate matters (UNECE, 2020) so public space management should not neglect the multiplicity of users involved.

Given that interactions between different sustainability policies or measures can be synergistic (having potential to positively affect one another), synergies and trade-offs in policy should be well established. Medium sized cities are beginning to get familiar with such processes and in the case of Serres in Northern Greece, a milestone was the interaction taking place within a Local Support Group discussing public space and mobility issues in the framework of an URBACT Action Planning Network. Such stakeholders' groups, fundamental building block of the URBACT program, is about putting in place new synergies between all relevant local stakeholders related to the chosen policy challenge the city wants to tackle (such as space for people), engaging them in participative development and implementation of local urban development policies (Adam et al., 2013).

Serres, a city of 54,461 inhabitants, capital of Serres prefecture with 182,226 inhabitants according to the latest census (2021) is a pole of attraction for the whole Regional Unit and a significant cultural, commercial and industrial center. Apart from recent broad construction projects of urban reform, within which pedestrianizations (Sdoukopoulos et al, 2017) and traffic calming measures changed the city image radically (Sdoukopoulos et al., 2021), public space form and use has undergone a considerable change: new conditions have also been created for cycling using significant funding and infrastructure projects in an effort to integrate existing cycle paths with new axes, installing bicycle parking equipment in various parts of the city, raising awareness, and launching a system of shared bicycles. Public space was revisited, with co-presence of different users and transport means within shared spaces recently created in the city centre (Fig.3), where active ways of walking and cycling are promoted at the same time, coexisting at a common level of movement, in close interaction (Nikiforiadis et al, 2021).

Figure 3: *The city of Serres and its central area (CONSORTIS, 2020)*

All the above, at certain stages, have been achieved through cooperation as, admittedly, the synergy approach is gaining ground in Serres and some local milestones can be defined (Table 1). The elaboration of a Local Action Plan in 2012 (Zisopoulou, 2012) focusing on cycling promotion through synergy within a Local Support Group created for this purpose in the framework of ACTIVE TRAVEL NETWORK, the conduction of Urban Mobility Study in 2015 incorporating partly the rationale of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans-SUMPs as far as stakeholders' involvement was concerned (AKKT, 2015), as well as the realization of the Serres SUMP (CONSORTIS, 2020) through all participatory processes dictated throughout the elaboration cycle by SUMP guidelines (Rupprecht Consult, 2019), prove steps of progress towards new policy making.

Table 1: *Urban mobility and public space key local milestones*

a/a	Milestone	Funding	Public involvement	Year
1	ACTIVE TRAVEL NETWORK	URBACT II programme	Local Support Group	2012
2	Urban Mobility Study	Centre of Renewable Sources - GR	Stakeholders/Public consultations	2015
3	Military Assets as Public Spaces - MAPS	URBACT II programme	Local Support Group	2018
4	Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan - SUMP	Green Fund - GR	Stakeholders Network	2020
5	URBACT project Space4People - S4P	URBACT III programme	Local Support Group	2022
6	Memorandum of Understanding for Public space co-creative planning	-	S4P Local Support Group follow-up	2023

4. *Space4People in Serres: methodology of the approach*

Based on the Space4People Cities Network approach, the key objective for Serres was to improve the city center area by evaluating certain streets and experimenting with innovative paving and signaling solutions, aiming to the improvement of accessibility and the overall experience of the user.

The need was to create a more attractive, accessible and without exclusions public space for the benefit of a city worth living in, following a strategic vision of a city sustainable, inclusive, and accessible for all.

Given that the main demand was the production of an Integrated Action Plan (IAP), the local methodology embraced the URBACT program principles of integration, participation, and action learning in a step-by-step approach (Figure 4).

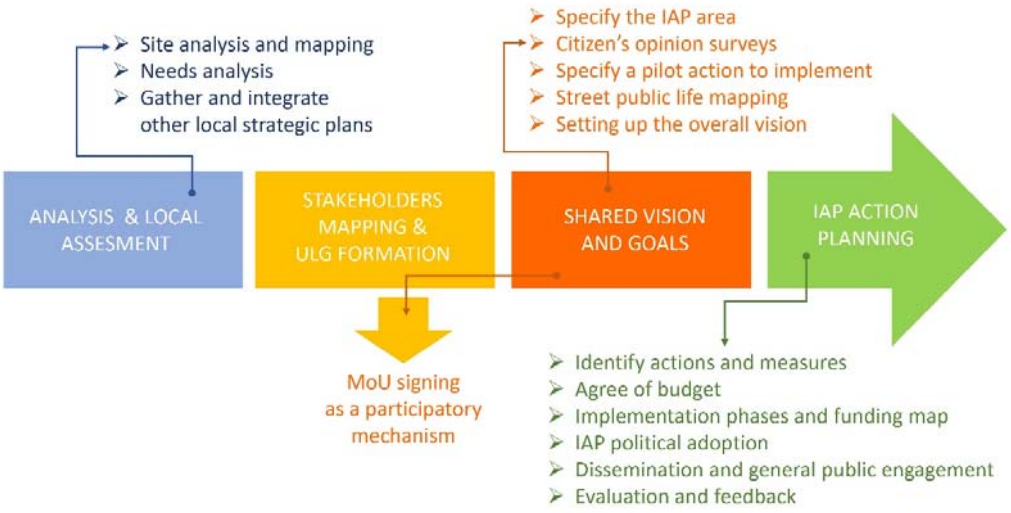

Figure 4: *Serres Space4People action planning - development process*

4.1. Forming and operating a local stakeholders' group

As the participatory process was in main question, relevant guides were consulted, providing insights on how to involve participants suggesting resources and valuable tools to be considered when conducting co-creation activities (URBACT, 2020, Rupprecht Consult, 2016). Moreover, given that "the participatory process must be envisaged as a continuous process, building on consistent methods, tools and groups of stakeholders" (Varlet et al., 2022) a concrete strategy was conceived to develop the whole process transparently, involving local stakeholders who directly or indirectly interact with the mobility system.

Stakeholders mapping entailed an extensive group, including IAP planning authority (Serres Municipality different departments), institutional stakeholders, and other organized structures such as, business organizations, transport operators, and research institutions. The final selected local support group to work together (URBACT Local Group – ULG) was structured by five sub teams, the coordination team, the politician team, the entrepreneurial team, and the research

– education team (Figure 5).

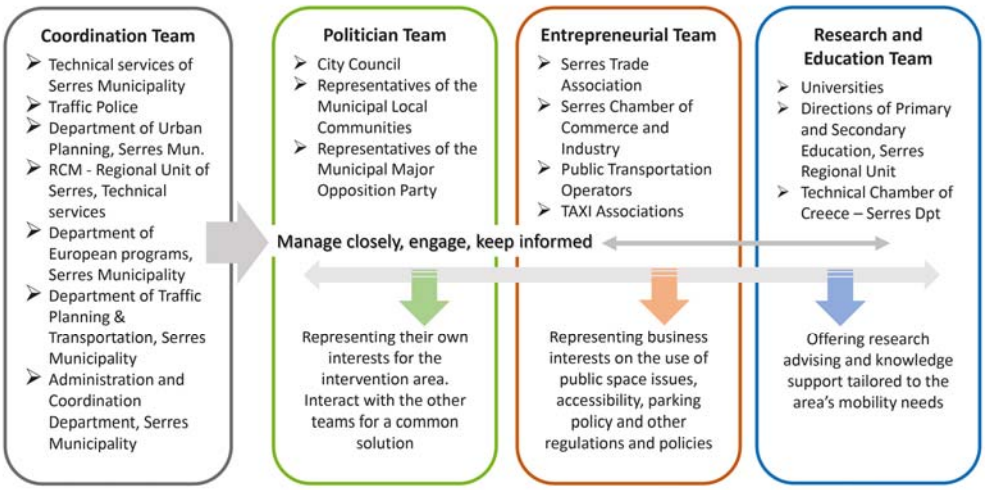

Figure 5: *Serres Space4People – Local Support Group structure*

We must notice that Serres Space4People group of stakeholders does not have a high level of heterogeneity regarding the participation of individual citizens, civil initiatives, or informal ad-hoc groups which are missing from the ULG structure. Even though these groups are crucial stakeholders, it was decided to engage them at later stages using other ways such as surveys and consultations gathering their opinions and increase their acceptance. This methodological approach of phased participation of stakeholders and citizens can bring a couple of benefits such as a more focused and professional development process that draws on diverse sources of specialist knowledge and the establishment of strong cooperation structures with key stakeholders.

Regarding the engagement level, another tool was used, the interest matrix, aimed at identifying and prioritizing stakeholders and thinking about the right approach to take with each of them. It is interesting to notice that two of key stakeholders (University departments and the Serres department of Technical Chamber of Greece) that had been mapped in the 4th grid (high interest – low influence), finally placed and allocated in the 1st grid (high interest – high influence (Figure 6).

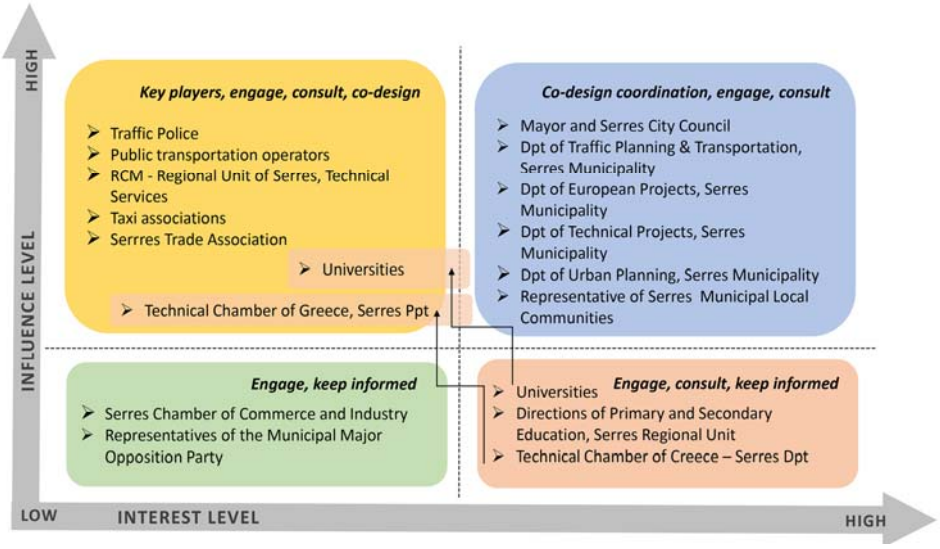

Figure 6: *Stakeholders' interest mapping – engagement level*

4.2. Involving youth in data collection and planning

The starting point of every urban planning process is marked by a detailed analysis and scoping of the regarded space. Aiming to make the most of the local support group, there was an encouragement to engage more people from the entities the group members represented. In this direction, one ULG member representing local academia, contributed in a generative way, involving more local people in the participatory process. This was possible in the data collection step, through a small scale "public space audit" exercise for young scientists-to-be but currently active citizens: 10 undergraduate students from different Departments of the International Hellenic University (IHU) – Serres Campus.

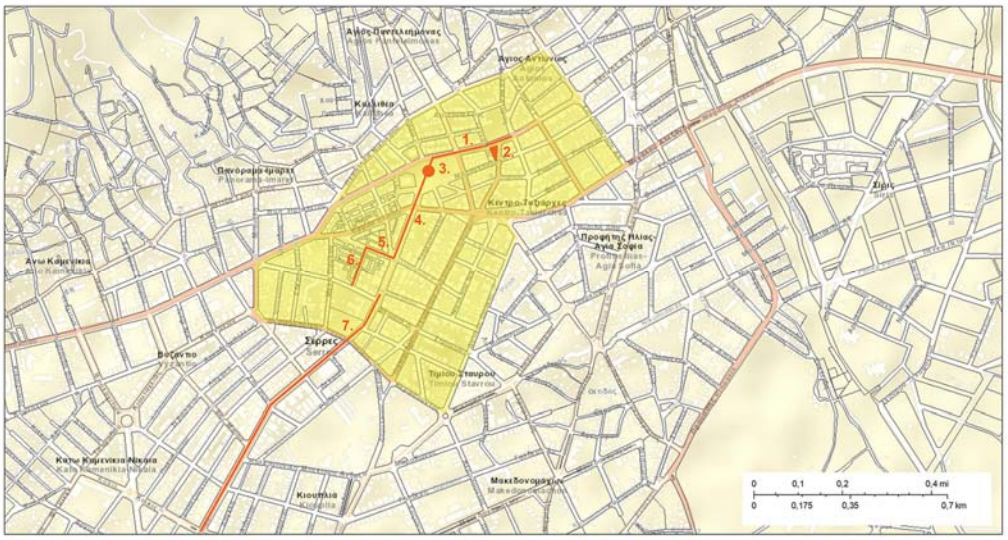

Figure 7: *Space4People IAP area and research focus* (1) Ethnikis Antistasis str., (2) Small green space (Misyrli memorial park), (3) Liberty Square, (4) *K. Karamanli pedestrian street, (5) Tsaldari pedestrian street, (6) Chadziiakovou pedestrian street, (7) Merarchias Street*

The field research, conducted in May 2022 at Serres, aimed at the mapping of the people activity and the recording of the degree of satisfaction of pedestrians and users in certain streets of Serres IAP area. Ten students from the International Hellenic University formed the field research group, while the research project was planned and coordinated by the authors of the present paper - members of the ULG (Figure 8). The research sought for characteristics that would improve the relationship between the users of urban public space and the city itself, focusing on central axes and areas where public life takes place (Daniil, 2007). Pedestrian streets, low speed-limit roads, central axes, and resting areas such as small squares came to the spotlight. The research was designed with reference to the methodology tools developed by the Danish architect-urban planner Jan Gehl. In the context of his theory on Public Life and City Planning, with the aim of developing *"Cities for People"* (Gehl, 2010) and in order to support research worldwide, Gehl provides open access to mapping templates and tools counting quantitative and qualitative features of urban public space (Gehl Architects, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Pedersen, 2017). Thus, three of these tools were adopted, translated, and applied in the 2022 field research in Serres.

The 1st tool is a questionnaire seeking the opinion of public space users regarding "12 Quality Criteria" classified around 3 main concepts: "protection – comfort – enjoyment". In the Serres research, parts of pedestrian streets with different functional characteristics, a part of a main urban axis with a bike-lane and a part of a central axis of hyper-local importance, were examined. This questionnaire revolves around the triptych 'protection – comfort – enjoyment' since these spatial qualities are of primary importance for urban public space (Gehl Architects, 2022a; Daniil, 2011). In Serres survey, 62 completed questionnaires were finally collected, giving valuable measurable quantitative and qualitative data concerning central public areas of the city – this data will be furthermore used in research. The 2nd tool is a mapping tool that 'snapshoots' people's static activity within a designated urban area, aiming, progressively, at its stimulation and revitalization: *"By evaluating what is already happening in a place, we can begin to identify potential enhancements to public life"* (Gehl, 2020b).

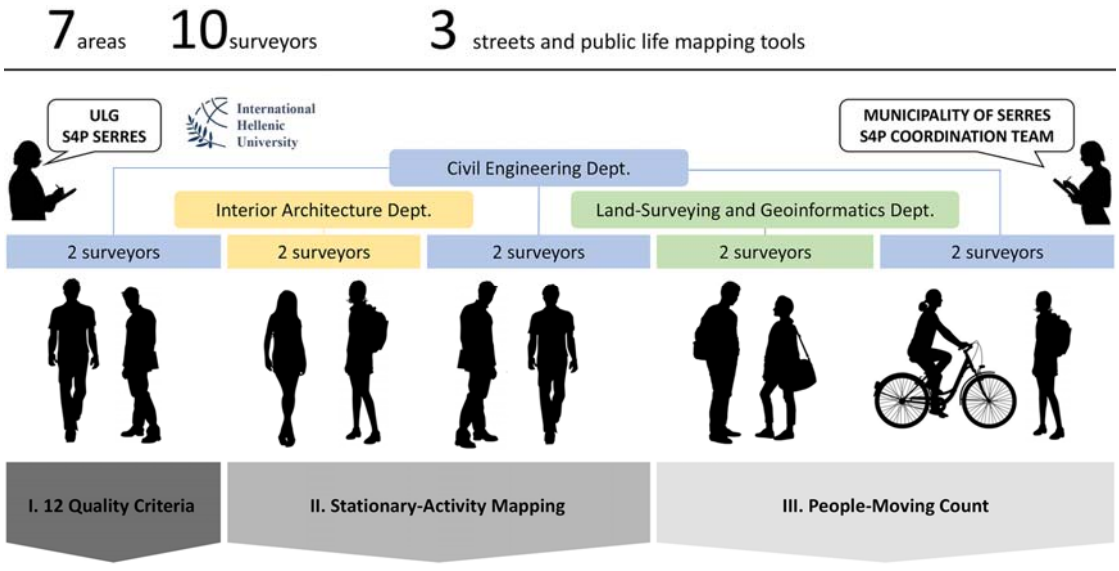

Figure 8: *Space4People Serres, 2022 field research: the team structure.*

In the Serres research, where static activity was mapped within 8 small central areas, 104 completed forms of the "Stationary-Activity Mapping" tool were collected. On the opposite side, the 3rd tool measures *moving* people and their *ways of moving*. It focuses on flows of passing pedestrians and those who use bicycles, or micromobility vehicles (e-bikes, skateboards etc.), as well as on people who move with strollers, who are disabled, etc. When recorded, this information gives a sense of how 'alive' a place is at different instants during the day and the week, how accessible it is, how many and which modes of pedestrian mobility it can support. Increasing pedestrian mobility can be productive, according to Gehl (2020c), with multiple benefits, not only for the city residents, but also for social stakeholders or civic bodies (i.e. Municipality, Urban Transport, etc.). In the Serres field research pedestrian flows were measured in 8 different parts of the central district and 116 forms of the "People-Moving Count" tool were filled out – the collected data will contribute to further research.

4.3. Shared vision and action planning as a local policy dimension

The overall and shared vision of the Serres Space4People Integrated Action Plan is to support the creation of a city center sustainable, inclusive, and accessible for all. The vision is a step forward to specify the Serres' SUMP strategic logic (CONSORTIS, 2020). To maintain an integrated planning approach, a multidimensional analysis has been elaborated, considering the existing policy framework and its various sectoral approaches, while also considered horizontal local policies to ensure the collaboration between multiple municipal services and local agencies.

To succeed with this approach, the Serres IAP is constructed under five (5) main actions of interventions as follows: The street as a common place for all (Action A), Parking management. From Park-and-Ride to Park-and-Walk (Action B), Functional and aesthetic improvement of the pedestrian walking routes and stationary activities (Action C), Regain small and remaining public spaces (Action D) and Use of innovative ways to provide information accessible all (Action E).

Serres Space4People action planning process aimed to highlight a local policy making dimension based on targeted, concrete, and effective action plans that brings together diverse stakeholders and local communities in a shared vision representing a desired future state for the city. Particularly with mobility projects, a common understanding narrative is a decisive factor to transform the public space and create quality innovation (Tosics et.al, 2022).

5. Process assessment, findings, and local impact

This work doesn't limit itself to presenting solely another case of mapping stakeholders and of getting them into action, it goes further, assessing the whole experience of people taking part in this participatory journey.

5.1. Assessment of stakeholders' engagement

In May 2023, a year after the "Space4People" (S4P) project completion, a post-evaluation survey was conducted to examine the *participation experience* of S4P ULG members, as well as of IHU students involved in S4P field data collection in May 2022. Both ULG members and collaborating students actively participated in participatory planning actions, with the aim of

creating an accessible and friendly to everyone urban environment, main objective of S4P. Therefore, all S4P members of the ULG (approximately 15 entities with loyal participants and back-up representatives) and all students-interviewers (10 individuals) were addressed a survey questionnaire through 'Google Forms', with 14 closed-ended and 4 open-ended questions. The survey, being voluntary and anonymous, aimed at evaluating the *experience* of participatory planning in relation to the potential benefits of the topic in question, urban public space and its enhancement. The "participation experience" was analyzed in detail and the perception of all respondents, regarding the final outcomes of S4P, was also reflected. The feedback was 20 completed questionnaires from a random sample of ULG members and IHU students, quantitatively representative as it corresponds to approximately 66% of the targeted group of people. Furthermore, it is also considered qualitatively representative based on its demographic characteristics, as demonstrated in Table 2.

***Table** 2: Assessing S4P local groups participation experience (2023 survey) – demographic data*

a/a		**Respondents' Demographics** (20 individuals in total)							
1	**Group Category**	IHU Students:		9 individuals (45%)		ULG members:		11 individuals (55%)	
2	**Gender**	Male:		8 (40%)		Female:		12 (60%)	
3	**Age Group**	20-30 years old:		9 (45%)		40-65 years old:		11 (55%)	
4	**Education**	High-school graduates:	9 (45%)	University graduates:	2 (10%)	MSc holders:	5 (25%)	PhD holders:	4 (20%)
5	**Place of Residence**	Permanently living in Serres:	11 (55%)	Temporarily living (studying / working) in Serres:	7 (35%)	Weekly traveling (studying / working) to Serres:		2 (10%)	

For 70% of respondents, it was a first-time experience in a participatory planning process and the overall impressions are particularly positive. This is supported by the vast majority replying that they "would do it again" (95%). Regarding the reasons of agreement to get involved, "scientific or personal interest" as a motivation came first (55%), 35% considered it "a duty to represent their (employing) Institution", while 10% participated simply "without a specific reason". Approximately half of the respondents express a *desire* for participation in similar actions, groups, or collective projects - this is worth noting, considering that similar opportunities (for participatory planning) should be offered more frequently in Serres. At the same time, there are relatively fewer references (20%) to the importance of the legacy left by the S4P project itself (see Table 3).

Although ULG members were randomly selected, they ultimately collaborated harmoniously, or -at least- this is the post-perception of the majority, a year later. The degree of collaboration is rated 'positively' and 'rather positively' and 85% of the respondents characterize it as "quite fruitful" and "very fruitful" (35% and 50% accordingly). Among those who found collaboration to be 'moderately fruitful', there are people who seem to have a passive or rather negative attitude towards the project (S4P), its processes, and its results, in general. However, despite questioning the results of the S4P project itself, significance is still attributed to the participation/collaboration process (see Table 3). Therefore, it is speculated that to some extent, there is a correlation between participants' perception of the quality of collaboration within their

working group and their perception of the project's results and impact. Moreover, in our opinion, the early understanding of the teams' work objectives, enhanced the feeling of 'good collaboration' and 'productivity of the participatory process' among the team members, while on the other hand, it also reveals the organizational success of the project, to be granted to its hosts (Serres Municipality & External Expert Coordination Team).

Overall, 60% of respondents appear with a "high frequency" of presence in their working group and this regular attendance by the majority strengthens the view that most respondents shared and made the most out of participatory planning tools offered to them by this project (the S4P). This, most likely, gives greater credibility to their answers in our survey. Trying to delve deeper into the analysis of the evaluation of the "participation experience", everybody places importance in representing their employing Institution (for 45% it is quite important and for 55% very important), the reasons being "feeling pride of own contribution" (25%), "happy to be part of a collective effort" (15%), having their Institution's voice heard (10%) and lastly, "generating the beginning for future similar collective-research actions", as mentioned by IHU students who call for more similar initiatives. Finally, 5% of the respondents highly value the importance of representing their Institution in the S4P groups since they themselves gained "knowledge and information about urban issues", while at the same time, they were in these groups to provide, conversely, knowledge and support (see Table 3).

Moving on to the impact of the S4P project itself and its results, as reflected in the responses of the survey participants (ULG members & IHU students), things may not be as clearly defined as they are regarding the process of participatory planning itself. Negative views regarding the outcome of S4P are related to the size of the examined area, without other reasons (for those who see it as a small "failure") being revealed, possibly due to insufficient information provided to the project's group-participants after its completion, regarding its outcome and results. In other words, a problem in the dissemination process of the project's results seems to emerge here, particularly towards the groups that worked on it. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the majority of two-thirds of the participants believes that the S4P project produced substantial results (Table 3), and this overall 'positive' view is also linked, as mentioned before, to the sense of good collaboration among the S4P group members.

Recording of sense of personal contribution reveals modest answers, 60% replying "yes" and 40% "don't know", ultimately representing a rather negative but significant position, which seems to reinforce the interpretation provided earlier, regarding insufficient information and/or ineffectiveness in disseminating the S4P project's results, particularly to the members of the groups involved (Table 3). On the other hand, those who respond positively express specific ways and areas in which their personal participation contributed, often delving into the details of the project's stages. Thus, it becomes evident that actively participating group members, in similar cases of participatory planning projects, need to be well informed about the project's outcomes, given that they largely consider the results attributable to their *own* individual participation and contribution.

***Table** 3: Assessing S4P local groups participation experience (2023 survey) – indicative questions (Qs) and responses*

Q1*: Intention to participate in future working groups, based on 'S4P' participation experience			
#	**Responses**	**Percentage (%)**	**Individuals**
1	'No, I would not participate again'	0	0
2	'Maybe / depends' on	5	1
3	'Yes, I would participate again'	95	19
Q2*: Reasons for participating in 'S4P' Working Groups			
1	'Felt obliged to participate'	0	0
2	'Out of curiosity/ without specific reason'	10	2
3	'Felt I should represent my Institution	35	7
4	'Out of a scientific or personal interest'	55	11
5	'Other reason'	0	0
Q3*: Assessment of the Participatory Process-Collaboration between members in 'S4P' Working Groups			
1	'Not at all' fruitful process-collaboration	0	0
2	'Slightly' fruitful process-collaboration	0	0
3	'Moderately' fruitful process-collaboration	15	3
4	'Very' fruitful process-collaboration	35	7
5	'Extremely' fruitful process-collaboration	50	10
Q4*: Assessment of representing one's (employing) Institution through participation in the 'S4P' activities			
1	'Not at all' important	0	0
2	'Slightly' important	0	0
3	'Rather' important	45	9
4	'Very' important	55	11
*Type of question: Closed-ended		Respondents in total: 20 individuals (100%)	
Q5**: Reasoning for assessing 'rather/very important' representing one's Institution in the S4P activities			
1	Excellence of personal contribution to the common good.	25	5
2	Enthusiasm for participating in a collective effort.	15	3
3	Opportunity for the voice of my city-group to be heard.	10	2
4	Personal contribution for my Institution to be engaged in similar research/ participatory initiatives in the future.	10	2
5	Opportunity for self-education/ knowledge acquisition on issues of common interest and of collective benefit.	5	1
**Type of question: Open-ended		Respondents in total: 13 individuals (65%)	
Q6*: "Do you believe that the 'S4P' project produced substantial results with benefits for the city?"			
1	'No/ Not really'	15	3
2	'I don't know'	10	2
3	'Yes, it did'	75	15
Q7*: "Do you believe that your participation in the S4P ultimately influenced the project's outcomes?"			
1	'No/ Not really'	0	0
2	'I don't know'	40	8
3	'Yes, it did'	60	12
*Type of question: Closed-ended		Respondents in total: 20 individuals (100%)	

5.2. Policy, governance and new synergies

The overall procedure of the Space4People action planning for Serres and the participation in an URBACT network, following the previous city's experience had important impact on local policy making and governance. Here are some key aspects to consider:

Stakeholder engagement to support a more participatory and decentralized local governance: Further than the overall participatory procedure used in action planning process, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been signed between the Municipality of Serres and the local stakeholders, members of S4P ULG and new ones, civil associations and individual experts. The S4P MoU was set up as an ongoing mechanism to monitor the implementation procedure of the Action Plan.

Ensuring the political will: A shared vision that represents local inclusiveness on the one hand, and a well-structured action plan on the other, are two crucial factors that can arise a strong political commitment for the action plan implementation. Policymakers are aware that keeping to these goals means making decisions. As they are different perspectives on the city's priorities, well-structured, well-discussed, and thought-out and shared visions are always a factor in ensuring the political will.

New Synergies: the overall procedure arise new synergies and cooperation between local players (vertical integration), across different policy areas and municipal departments (horizontal integration) and promote resources integration between "hard" (physical) and "soft" (social) investments (URBACT, 2020).

Capitalization of knowledge gained: The participation of Serres once more in an URBACT Cities Network and the participation process of the Integrated Action Plan development created knowledge corpus useful not only for the municipal services but also for the participating stakeholders. Some members of the ULG attended the network's webinars where the knowledge tools and methodologies were in deep explained. The Covid-19 situation was catalytic for this extent online knowledge sharing. Furthermore, the S4P coordination team gathered, recorded, and translated the knowledge corpus, tools and methodologies, to be available for subsequent planning procedures.

6. Conclusions

The overall previous analysis confirms that the URBACT approach of integrated urban planning should not typically be understood or assessed as an investment-ready plan production. By adopting integrated action planning as a local policy dimension, local authorities and communities can promote collaboration, coordination, and holistic approaches to mobility and public space problem-solving. This helps to address complex challenges in a more comprehensive and sustainable manner, considering the diverse needs and perspectives of the local context.

A high acceptance of the participatory planning process is recorded as the whole Space4People experiment was well received by the groups involved. People seem to ask for similar opportunities to be given more often in the city of Serres. To some extent, there is a correlation between participants' sense of the quality of collaboration within the participatory planning teams and their sense of the results and positive impact of the project. The timely understanding of the work objectives enhances the feeling of good cooperation, revealing also that Hosts (Municipality & Contractor of S4P) efforts to conduct the participatory process procedures entailed success.

We are facing the birth of a stakeholder's ecosystem where they interact, give birth to ideas and co-create solutions, while living the added value of their respective input to the overall cause. Summing up individual benefits from participatory planning we would highlight satisfaction from individual contribution to the common good, enthusiasm for participating in a collective effort, the opportunity for the voice of a city-group to be heard, and the occasion for an Institution to be engaged in subsequent similar research/participatory initiatives; also the opportunity for knowledge acquisition on matters of common interest. All the above seem to be the significant impact of the 'perfect opportunity' of participatory planning, which, in the case of Space4People, aimed at the upgrading of the public space in Serres. These opportunities provided by the processes are given independently of the (any) results of the project itself. Engaging local people in local governance proves to be a fruitful and meaningful experience, highly valued by the involved individuals. Moreover, our 2023 survey showed that recording pedestrians' behaviors in city streets, their public space living experience, provided a clear reflection of people's *interest* in something that rarely happens in this city and, on the other hand, the skepticism of part of them towards unprecedented practices. The above, in conjunction with the "enthusiasm" expressed for participation in the working groups, testify the need for more similar initiatives at the level of city and citizens, in the case of Serres.

It should be noticed that the whole Space4People procedure was inscribed within the project's lifecycle, where time and budget restrictions dictated largely choices made, and this could hypothetically function as a kind reply to some negative criticism received, related to the extent of the public space studied and the limited number of small-scale actions examined. Another drawback was that there seems to be a problem in the process of disseminating the results of the project, especially to the ones that worked on it. Thus, a harder effort should be made in future projects in this direction, given the fact that to a large extent group members consider the results to be due -also- to their own individual contribution when it comes to similar participatory planning projects.

To conclude, urban planning, including public space and mobility issues, affect a wide community of citizens and a multiplicity of stakeholders, whose engagement is instrumental. Therefore, it is essential to involve all affected parties in all stages of the process of identifying and implementing initiatives that affect them. Empowering local people regularly and engaging them meaningfully contributes in transparent local governance and enhances active citizenship. However, a lesson learnt by this participatory path we undertook was that, to achieve a greater public acceptance through a sense of ownership for the solutions implemented, requires more investment in communicating the results of individual participation and contribution.

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