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Stakeholder Engagement – an essential steppingstone for achieving an integrated vision for sustainability

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cities are complex structures that seek nowadays to achieve in an accelerated rhythm the high level goals for climate change. The “fast-pace” challenge that cities are engaged in, to reach their 2030 targets requires everybody to be on-board. Targets cannot be achieved unless a long-term vision is designed, accepted, and implemented by all those that will be involved – i.e., stakeholders and public. Engaging everybody to build this long-term vision and transition pathway (see SUMP-PLUS Policy Brief 1: Planning a long-term zero carbon transition pathway) requires also to build links across the sectors (see SUMP-PLUS Policy Brief 2: The role of cross-sector collaboration in reducing the need to travel), across different organisational structures – either public or private – and to be sure that the public is also involved.

Cities are investing in engaging a multitude of stakeholders with interest in different areas of the public sector. Agreeing early in the process the high-level goals and working together across sectors to achieve these goals may be a pathway for a successful transition to climate change at local level. Of course, this cannot be achieved unless there is a very strong and well-established governance structure and sufficient capacity (see SUMP-PLUS Policy Brief 3: Building Governance Capacity To Achieve Sustainable Urban Mobility Transitions). Recently, those European cities that have a well-established,

and dynamic structure that could adapt easily to modern threats are in a better position to achieve the sustainability goals. It was observed that this type of dynamism in organizing and re-organizing its own structure is rooted in a long-term experience in working together, communication between different structures, within the city administration, but also between city administration and other public and private entities, and, of course, the public. A second observation is that this type of city while taking advantage of technological advancements, their vision is also people-centered; this means that they put technology to good use, but they also listen, communicate, and involve the end-users in order to define, accept and implement the local vision and its subsequent policies.

SUMP-PLUS was a perfect opportunity for six very diverse cities² to study how different engagement approaches and instruments may bring all those important stakeholders and citizens around the table to discuss and jointly decide the common European and diverse local futures in their local plans. The diversity of cities ranges from different geographical positions and dimensions, local characteristics, culture in engaging with stakeholders and of course, different capacity, skills, and resources. Despite this wide diversity, the cities found the experience of engaging with their stakeholders very rewarding. So, why was stakeholder engagement so important for them?

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2. WHY STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IS IMPORTANT?

A SUMP³ is a very important local strategy that requires support and commitment throughout the process, from design to implementation. They are dynamic, affecting multiple stakeholders and governed sometimes by complex institutional settings. Therefore, stakeholder engagement is fundamental for planning transportation systems, and for avoiding resistance towards plans and mitigating risks that may occur during implementation phase. Traditional top-down planning practices are facing new pressures from civic society, who wish to be involved in the decision-making process and to advance bottom-up ideas for improving the quality of life in cities. The increased attention for user innovation, co-creation, and collaboration with a wide variety of stakeholders may lead to more acceptable mobility plans and smoother implementation.

This “new wave” in engagement also reveals the change in the local authority role: from provider of solutions to facilitator of discussions to adopt a certain solution. In one of the workshops organised during the SUMP-PLUS project, a city representative mentioned how much the role of the city had changed in the last 20 years. By engaging with different stakeholders, usually from different sectors, city authority representatives can learn about new concepts, solutions, and even sometimes a new “language”; this adds to their role as “interpreter” of other stakeholders needs and expectations.

Stakeholder engagement also creates the basis of an effective planning strategy. Discovering the point of consensus or shared motivation helps a group of stakeholders take decisions and invest in a meaningful outcome. The lack of relevant knowledge of how to organize a meaningful engagement process results in organizing formal processes that are aimed only at “ticking a box” to meet the legal requirements for public consultation.

In summary, the stakeholder engagement will contribute to an *improved decision-making base* for the cities and for the implementation of any sustainable mobility innovation. By collecting the most relevant views, needs and expectations of the stakeholders, cities will develop targeted policies, strategies, and projects. The engagement of all relevant stakeholders will help *build consensus* for what is needed and how it could be achieved at local


level. It also develops the sense of *responsibility* and *accountability* for both public authority and stakeholders. This is of utmost importance in creating long-term partnerships. Lastly, the most important aspect of the stakeholder engagement is achieving the *trust and confidence* of all the parties involved in the process; (i) the trust in public officials that their policies, strategies and projects are rooted in the views and expectations of the end-users, and (ii) the confidence of the stakeholders that the local authority it is a very valuable partner, that considers their views and integrates the results of the co-creation and consultation processes in future policies.

3. HOW TO CHOOSE A STAKEHOLDER TOOL? SUMP-PLUS TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

In SUMP-PLUS, EIP provided the cities with a set of engagement instruments to be implemented which are meant to help them achieve their goals within SUMP-PLUS. Each of these instruments has a specific purpose, tackling different subjects and targeting a distinct set of stakeholders. These instruments consist of:

- Mobility Forum** - The establishment of a Mobility Forum in a city attempts to improve institutional collaboration and participation in transport planning. This is done by promoting communication between stakeholders from the public sector, business, and civil society on mobility concerns. Cities could use the Mobility Forum to identify their priority mobility needs, focus their efforts, and build consensus on what is needed to be done at a certain moment. The practical results of the Mobility Forum are recommendations for the local authority to implement. A Mobility Forum helps to establish an urban mobility vision, a pathway to implement it and the building blocks for partnerships and links with other sectors.


- City Integrator** - Transport is the derived demand of other sectors. Meeting sustainability goals in transport (such as the reduction of carbon emissions) depends on decisions made in those sectors. The City

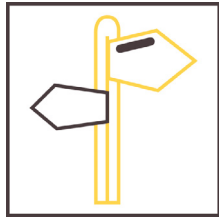


³ SUMP - Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan is a strategic plan designed to satisfy the mobility needs of people and businesses in cities and their surroundings for a better quality of life. It builds on existing planning practices and takes due consideration of participation, and evaluation principles. <https://www.eltis.org/mobility-plans/sump-process>

Integrator acts as a platform for the exchange of ideas and information as well as cross sector planning among decision-makers who represent many sectors in a city. Health, education, tourism, and retail are just a few relevant industries for cross-planning with transport, but they are not the only ones. The City Integrator could also support the collaboration between different departments within city administrations that traditionally do not collaborate.

- **Citizen Engagement Platform**

- The Citizen Engagement Platform serves as a tool for cities to "take the pulse" of their citizens about mobility issues and, at the same time, to promote the citizens' direct access to the decision-making process on mobility issues. The platform is a tool that cities will use to involve the community in the decision-making process. In the context of a SUMP design, approval and implementation, citizens should be involved more than only within mandatory phases of legal consultation. Their views will contribute to establish the pathway to sustainable mobility implementation, the priorities of the strategy implementation etc



These instruments have been developed and implemented according to local needs and activities, to create better awareness and commitment for sustainable mobility among institutional stakeholders, private businesses, and citizens, as well as to help in building momentum for some of the core measures that cities plan to undertake, or to generate new solutions and partnerships.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A BETTER STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Nowadays, when climate change is a major threat for us all, cities are in the front line of fighting its negative consequences. The tools they have are limited; technology is limited in how it can efficiently be used and accepted. The most important instrument that cities have is their ability to communicate and bring stakeholders and public to work together for achieving the same goal. The recent COVID 19 pandemic showed why the communication is extremely important; it also showed how some cities have been innovative in creating new ways to communicate and to develop projects for the benefit of their citizens. The pandemic period offered the possibility to certain cities to eliminate the fear to meaningfully engage with their

stakeholders. While the meetings and in-person gatherings are extremely important for co-creation activities, the use of technology helped cities to reach some target groups that usually do not engage with them. One of the results of SUMP-PLUS shows how cities will continue to mix the methods and tools for engagement to ensure that nobody is left behind in the engagement process.

The fear of engagement manifested in many cities across Europe is rooted in the previous experiences and practices; in cities **incapacity to invest in different skills** needed for communication and engagement with stakeholders. This has been sometimes due to the **lack of funds**, but sometimes due to the **lack of knowledge** of what should be done and how to start a meaningful stakeholder exercise. SUMP-PLUS cities such as Antwerp and Manchester developed in time strong multi-disciplinary teams that are interacting with stakeholders and the public. This has proved extremely important in influencing behaviour change towards sustainability. It was also very important in creating links with other sectors that usually or traditionally do not communicate, such as health, tourism, education.

The dimension and the importance of a certain problem – such as logistics – creates difficulty in understanding a common starting point that can bring all relevant stakeholders together on the issue. This was the case of Lucca who, despite good experience in understanding their stakeholder needs, had no platform for discussion formalised at local and regional level to jointly create plans and solutions. In SUMP-PLUS, Lucca brought together the most relevant actors around the table and created new links/ways to collaborate with different stakeholders at local and regional level. In Lucca, the political support provided to this process was very important to achieve this goal.

The lack of knowledge or capacity in public administration to develop a meaningful stakeholder engagement process has been addressed in SUMP-PLUS, by providing cities with a clear set of activities and instruments to engage with their stakeholders. Although experiencing difficulties at the beginning of the process, both Klaipeda and Alba Iulia have persevered in engaging with stakeholders, tailoring the approach to local conditions and in finding the best ways to discuss with them. The major achievement for both cities in engagement was the recognition they received from the stakeholders for the efforts they had made to involve them in developing local transport projects. Going forward, their recommendation for similar cities is to persevere to

look beyond the “traditional” stakeholders; to try to understand the needs and expectations of a larger set of stakeholders that are interested in a particular project.

The complexity of a city that has a large tourism sector adds to the complexity of achieving a meaningful interaction with the stakeholders and the public. For this type of city different types of stakeholders and public (visitors, tourists, etc) are added, which makes the process of engagement more complex; not necessarily in methods, but in the complexity of the projects that the stakeholders must agree upon. Platania, as an important tourist destination in Crete, recognised the need to invest in sustainable mobility and developed an extensive and comprehensive plan for engaging not only the stakeholders from different sectors and with the public, but also with the tourists.

Political support is extremely important in developing a meaningful stakeholder engagement plan. A SUMP is a very important local strategy that requires high-level political support and commitment throughout the process, from design to implementation. Moreover, the integration of the SUMP with the local high-level vision is very important and it could be done only with political vision and support. SUMP-PLUS has tried to research, co-create, and implement ideas that could facilitate a better implementation of a SUMP now and in the future.

The role of politicians has evolved; successful local politicians nowadays act as local dialogue facilitators. In this capacity, they rely more on the evidence produced from the data available and they transform data in strong storylines that allow stakeholders and citizens to accept their strategies. These storylines, anchored in empirical evidence, are the key to success for politicians because they bring on board all those that need to change and to accept that a change is imperative to tackle the current pressures.

Engagement activities have been always at the core of the EU policy-makers agenda; new policies to tackle the climate change and to support cities in advancing their projects to reach the high-level goals should be discussed and agreed with wider stakeholders and public. EU policymakers should also ensure that their activities will include all representants of society helping thus to fulfil the desired goal of “leaving nobody behind”.

In conclusion, SUMP-PLUS engagement activities proved that stakeholder and public engagement is an essential steppingstone for achieving the local vision for sustainable mobility. The major recommendation for cities across Europe and beyond is to incorporate engagement activities in their planning practice. Engagement is not a subsidiary activity, but a central one in any decision-making and implementation processes.



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