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Guide for successful planning and decision making.

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1. Why do you need to engage stakeholders?

Developing a Local Sustainable Energy Strategy and Action Plan is a complex task, where municipalities play the main role. However, since municipal facilities account for only a small percentage of the resource usage and related emissions, all local actors have to play an active role in reducing energy consumption. Therefore it is essential to inform and involve stakeholders in the process.

Strategies carried out without a participatory planning process, often do not or only to a small extent, materialize. It is because of the followings:

- the strategy / action plan has not been preceded by appropriate data collection, the baseline inventory is not well-assessed;
- because of lack of resources investments have to be cancelled;
- measures of the strategy / action plan do not meet the ideas of the public or certain interest groups, moreover, they might contradict those interests;
- monitoring activities are missing, efficiency and productiveness therefore cannot be evaluated, the impacts of steps and measures cannot be assessed.

International experiences have demonstrated that through stakeholder engagement better and more applicable strategies are produced. This way the chances of putting the strategy into practice are much higher than in case of missing this process.

Further advantage is that the experience, knowledge and expertise of a broad range of stakeholders can be exploited, and their ideas utilized. The mutual information-exchange will result in a better strategy, and the transparent, democratic planning process will increase the willingness to cooperate and implement the strategy.

2. Create political engagement.

Municipality workers are usually overloaded. Municipalities have to handle countless tasks, many of them required by law, thus it should come as no surprise if employees find low interest in making a strategy / action plan. Therefore, it is of utmost interest to create a positive political background, a political will around the topic. The best way of this is a formal decision by the mayor or the city council, for example by joining the Covenant of Mayors. After this, it is easier to allocate time, resources and capacity, and win the key actors within the municipality (energy expert, environmental expert, chief architect, etc.) to the cause.

“After the vice-mayor understood everything, it was much easier to make the steps forward. We had to consult with many experts from the municipality, but we found open doors everywhere.”

When the intention is strong, a project team is developed, which comprises representatives from the municipalities and the actual developer who is entrusted with the construction of the strategy/action plan. The project team is then responsible for defining the scope of the project: working out the project’s aims, objectives, activities, expected outcomes, etc. These details, as a first step, should be presented to the leading decision makers of the municipalities.

Once the project gets support from the main decision makers, it is time to start working on the detailed work plan of the endorsement process. It can be as detailed as possible, but there are required elements, which in all cases have to be included: identification & final determination of key endorsers, schedule and procedure in the endorsement process, description of their decision making mechanisms, examination of (financial) sustainability.

3. Appoint the person responsible for stakeholder involvement.

Even the simplest engagement process will benefit from a person (or even better: a small team, if there is enough capacity) dedicated to this particular part of the project, to ensure that the process planning is taken seriously and programmed into people’s work schedules. It can be the same person who is responsible for delivering the process, or a separate delivery team may be established, in which case very close working relationships need to be established. Whoever is selected to be the responsible person, should be involved as early as possible.

4. Identify stakeholders.

Identifying who should be involved / consulted in the engagement process is one of the most difficult tasks. Finding the right mix of participants, and ensuring that no group is unintentionally (or perhaps, deliberately) excluded, is essential to provide legitimacy and credibility to the engagement process.

In the context of public participation, a stakeholder can be defined as any person, or group, who has an interest in the project or could be potentially affected by its delivery or outputs. It is sensible to identify the broadest pool of stakeholders, so that all affected parties and fields can have a chance to be represented, and later on there can be no accusation of being left out.

Potential stakeholders are:

- energy agencies,
- municipality workers and experts,
- public utilities (electricity, gas, water, waste, sewage works),
- authorities,
- transportation companies,
- civil society organisations,
- energy producers,
- major companies, chambers,
- economic leaders, analysers, experts,
- trading companies,
- public roads administration,
- agricultural experts,
- building associations, architects,
- consumer protection organisations,
- health care organisations,
- educational institutions,
- social institutions,
- journalists, media contacts,
- local residents.

“Focus on a few key stakeholders who have the largest influence on implementation of project activities and could also endorse the project beyond its lifespan.”

5. Identify different interests of stakeholders.

You might encounter opposite interests among stakeholders, like on economic terms, regarding aims and certain measures of the strategy / action plan. Actually, this is a very good reason to conduct stakeholder involvement: if those, who are likely to have opposite interests, are engaged at an early stage in the process, it helps to get these problems, these supposed or existing opposite interests, soon on to the surface, which then can be assessed and tackled.

Examples of different interests were collected in a simulation carried out during the RE-SEETies project:

Mayors:

To be re-elected.

Local economy, tax income, energy security.
Social housing and middle class citizens (who can support and afford to take initiatives).
Avoid conflicts.

Companies:

Gain bigger share in the market.
Large, long term contacts.
Introduce new products in the market, pilot projects.
Communicate with people in order to find eventual buyers

School teachers:

Involve children, let them contribute.
Know more about the specific relation between school and energy, and the particular areas regarding schools that will be developed in the framework of the strategy.
Avoid parents giving wrong messages to children

Environmental associations:

Protection of the environment with social welfare
Promote sustainability in matters of efficient use of resources, economic means, energy efficiency
Participatory approach/consultations

Bank:

Selling money for a reasonable profit.
New jobs, more people deposit their money in the bank.
Investments.
Citizens become shareholders in the project with 10 euro share.
Avoid micropolitical interference.
Bonus for new technologies

Local citizens:

Better quality of life.
Do not want investments which damage the environment and health.
Do not want heavy traffic and pollution.
Less waste.
Green public space.
To know how the family can have economic benefit through energy measures, reduce fuel costs
Transparency in public spendings
Efficient use of municipal resources
Don't want to pay more for anything.
Continuity of projects.

Research institute/university

Researchers should be involved in the first phase of the strategy building process.

6. Define the target and scope.

It is important to try to include all relevant stakeholders, however, it has to be emphasized that, as a rule, everyone does not have to be involved in everything. Not all the stakeholders are equally interested in and affected by the project. Therefore it is not necessary to include them to the same extent. Depends on whether you would like to get information/data, technical or professional

assistance, or to provide the opportunity to express their concerns (which is usually the case with local residents).

The purpose of such a process can be manifold. The municipality should have a clear view on what it wants to achieve with it, what the main driving force is for them.

Potential objectives are:

- to investigate issues from several aspects,
- to collect and share ideas and best practices,
- to network,
- to inform stakeholders about future plans,
- to understand local needs,
- to better understand and monitor community perceptions,
- to establish more open communication channels and gain trust.

“Identify the priority issues of the city. Although there might be a wide range of issues that need attention, no project initiative is likely to be successful if it tries to work on everything at once. Therefore targeting one or two areas of need to start with can increase the chances of achieving good results.”

7. Define steps and methods.

The various steps and decisions are greatly interlinked and take place in parallel. Therefore, it will always be an iterative process, allowing a number of feedback points in the course of progression.

Engaging stakeholders often starts with organizing meetings, platforms. Besides the stakeholder platform meetings, targeted forums with focus groups can be organized as well. During strategy making, at certain points, it makes sense to organize forums on specific topics, to specific groups of stakeholders, the so called focus groups. Such can be an expert forum, discussing particular topics, themes and questions in a structured way.

During the RE-SEETies project, the non-formal environment, face-to-face meetings, dialogues and brainstorming sessions proved to be the most effective methods for involving and engaging decision makers.

“The only communication method used was face to face discussion. In our experience it is the best way to communicate what you want: you can be sure that your message was understood and when you can be seen, your credibility is higher. First it was really hard to make them understand what’s in this for them, but after a few discussions they were able to see the benefits.”

It is also a good idea to organize a meeting for civil society organisations. They often prove to be valuable partners, possessing constructive views and ideas. Also, they have their own channels and forums to advertise the strategy making project and the stakeholder engagement process.

You can use questionnaires, surveys as well. This method requires less organization and enables access to large samples of individuals. However, questions to be asked must carefully be considered, preferably put together with the help of a survey expert. Questions can target different fields, ranging from general public knowledge about resource efficiency, through attitudes to taking actions, to such specific issues as what kind of developments and investments they would like to see in the municipality and which direction of (sustainable) development they would like their city to follow. For the general public, local residents, prepare a shorter questionnaire. Experience shows that the longer it takes to fill out a form, the fewer questionnaires arrive back. These questionnaires should usually target general knowledge, attitude towards the subject, and willingness to make actions. The drawback of questionnaires is that they provide little opportunity for dialogue, resulting in possible misinterpretations.

8. Let's do it!

Spend sufficient time on preparation.

Organizing a forum takes at least 6 weeks. Time is needed for finding suitable venue and date, reaching all stakeholders, compiling and disseminating materials. It is advantageous, if the main discussion points of the event are circulated among stakeholders in advance, so that they can be prepared with questions and comments.

Be flexible.

There will always be people who cannot be reached or disregard the invitation, even if their presence would be important. They have to be approached by several means, contacting them only by e-mail is not sufficient. Methods like regular mail, mailing lists and the internet have to be used. The most effective ways are personal communication and telephone calls.

Use a facilitator.

If the skills do not exist within the municipality or the project team to deliver the engagement process, then professionals such as facilitators can provide valuable contribution, especially if the issue is likely to be controversial or when the independence of the facilitation could be an issue. They know and can apply several methods to keep the discussion focused, to serve the aim of decision making. This way no comments will be "lost", the participants will keep to the topic and conflicts can be managed more easily.

Use existing resources.

If there are structures, organizations, initiations, working groups, etc. in the municipality related to the subject, involve them not only as stakeholders, but as supporters in the process of stakeholder

endorsement. They have connections to many other possible stakeholders, their communication channels can also be used for disseminating information (such as mailing lists, newsletters).

Be formal.

Invitation for platforms should arrive from the mayor, or a high position decision maker. This gives earnestness and commitment to the issue. Decision makers, experts and administrators of the municipality should attend these forums.

Be personal.

Besides being formal, and providing the earnestness, there should be opportunity (a long coffee break, for instance) for being personal: to make contacts, exchange information. Meetings such as stakeholder platforms are good occasions for evolving partnerships and networks, which later will be of good service for the cause.

Be professional.

Invite people who possess practical knowledge, like field workers, constructors, technicians. They represent crucial elements of the actual implementation of the strategy/plan, their experience is priceless.

Plan the communication.

Depending on your budget, you can organize media activity, compile brochures, leaflets, newsletters, maintain websites, write articles, etc. Local media (newspaper, radio, television) are invaluable sources, through which local public can be informed. Information on the website of the project and the municipality has to be kept up-to-date. The issue of strategy making should appear at other popular public events. The source of information has to be greatly publicized, let it be a particular contact person who can be asked, or even an office where all related information and documents can be found (see chapter on communication).

Be efficient.

Depending on the size of the municipality, it is worth limiting the number of participants to 30-50 people, as a larger group of people cannot work together efficiently. If there is greater interest, consider forming working groups.

Draw attention.

Find the advantages, the messages which make stakeholders really interested. It is important to make them see why and how they are affected and how they can benefit from participating.

Take the time.

One way of ensuring stakeholders about the earnestness of the process is that there is enough time for discussion. Ideally the platform meetings should last a couple of hours (2-3). Presentations and providing information should not take up much more time than the discussion part.

Listen to participants.

Ask them about the organization and logistics of the platform as well. Learn about what they expect, what they would change. One method for this is asking them to fill out an evaluation form.

Record and consider remarks.

After each stakeholder platform meeting, a report should be prepared. It is beneficial if, besides taking written notes, the whole meeting is recorded (an audio or a video record is made). This would prove useful when details need to be taken into consideration.

9. Don't forget communication.

Internal communication

Slow and erratic internal communication, or even the lack of it, can be a problem. It is difficult to reach people, information gets stuck within the office, or the system is too bureaucratic. This can be remedied by using more channels of communication, however, it is a fact that in this case more energy and time is required from the stakeholder manager.

In the RE-SEEties project, a mentoring programme was implemented in order to inform and involve thematic experts in municipalities that are in charge of preparing decision-making processes related to resource efficiency. The mentoring was implemented by stakeholder managers.

„The most significant achievements of the mentoring programme was having placed different municipal officers that didn't usually have the opportunity to exchange opinions and define common working sessions, at the same table of discussion.“

„The message should be kept simple, direct and consistent: it is better to have a few key points well delivered than a lot of information in which the important message gets lost. A message that is positive about future benefits and links the issue to the concerns of the targeted audience through practical examples and lessons learned is more likely to be persuasive than a message that is critical about current problems.“

External communication

Low rate of participation, small attendance can be avoided by efficient promotion, where the local media can be of good use. Personal contacts are invaluable, major societal actors should be addressed through their own individual interests, each group in a different, specialized way. Further catalysts can be local civil organizations, who can be good allies of the stakeholder platform manager.

At each and every document, invitation, meeting and event it has to be presented and underlined why that particular topic is important for the public, or for the specific interest groups, how their work and everyday life is affected by that matter. It is always worth to indicate what results their participation has yielded so far, how their remarks, comments and recommendations have been taken into account, used and built in the document. If it is needed, anonymity has to be guaranteed.

Attend relevant conferences, workshops, invite international experts to your events, consult with observers, experts and other national level stakeholders.

Although civil society has usually some idea about why resource efficiency is important, it is not widely known what particular impacts it can have. Therefore a Local Strategy and Action Plan could be one of the most important documents of the municipality – in case it gets adopted, implemented and publicized. Therefore it is worth putting effort in making a communication plan, even as early as in the preparatory phase, which will also help in engaging citizens into the strategy planning process. After the strategy/plan is accepted, the public has to be informed about its expected aims, measures and impacts.

Municipality actors, decision makers, and especially the mayor have to be given a great role in communication. They are the ones whom the media always listen to. Also, local civil organisations can keep the topic in mind with their actions.

Imaginary stakeholders sent messages and ideas to imaginary mayors during a simulation game in the RE-SEETies project. Hear their voices and let them inspire you!

- Have a new view of local development.
- Make the strategy building process participatory, open – ideas can come from outside.
- Inform stakeholders about the economic benefits of saving energy.
- Get children involved / informed.
- Use local knowledge (experts, NGOs, universities etc.)
- Avoid bureaucratic procedures.
- Make a rigid business plan.
- Build bike roads in order to stay healthy and save money.
- Create a citizens' funding scheme where citizens have a share in the investment (i.e. biomass plant.)
- Continue the projects you implement.