Social Dimensions of Urban Waterfront Planning

Finnish researchers have identified four categories of social aspects of urban waterfront regeneration that should be considered in the social impact assessments of urban waterfront development projects and land-use plans.

The major goal of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy is to ensure that all development actions are economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and socially equitable. By addressing social, economic, and environmental impacts of individual projects, plans, programmes, and policies, the impact assessments play a major role in achieving this goal.

Reflecting the historic alterations of land and water uses, the waterfront areas have been the target of numerous, often opposing, urban development interventions during the last centuries. Since 1970s, the development trend has mainly been guided by the shift from industrial to commercial, residential, cultural, and recreational uses of waterfront areas. Consequently, in many cities, efforts are currently being made for urban waterfront regeneration.

Environmental issues have widely been addressed through environmental impact assessments (EIA) and strategic environmental assessments (SEA) of waterfront redevelopment interventions. Although the social dimension of urban waterfront regeneration plans have become increasingly important in urban policies, the social impact assessments (SIA) of waterfront regeneration interventions has been a much more weakly developed area.

In a recent research project, Finnish researchers have identified the social dimensions of urban waterfront regeneration that could be used for identifying and analysing the social impacts of urban waterfront plans and projects. On the basis of earlier conducted SIA-studies and urban waterfront studies, the authors propose that the social dimension of urban waterfront regeneration can be divided into four categories: resources and identity, social status, access and activities, and waterfront experience. This last one can be analysed by asking the following questions to various local actors:

1. Resources and identity - What are the main characteristics of the waterfront area? Which resources can be considered as strengths in the area and which resources contribute to the image of an area? What are the environmental, cultural, or historical values of a specific area?
2. Social status - For whom (social, age, or ethnic groups) are the housing and service areas planned and built? What is the role of social/private housing?
3. Access and activities - Are the waterfront areas accessible to the public? What kinds of activities are possible? Easy or difficult approach to waterfront?
4. Waterfront experience - Presence of water (sea, lake, river, etc.)? Restorative experiences, importance of visual messages?

According to the authors, the proposed typology of impact categories can be applied generally to social impact analysis of urban waterfront development projects and land-use plans. However, what would still need to be analysed in a proper SIA-process (and which has not been done here) is the differentiation of impacts according to various social, age, and ethnical groups.

The results of such SIA could be used by decision-makers in order to improve strategic management and land-use planning practices of urban waterfront areas, as well as the management of urban natural resources in general. Furthermore, if properly integrated with EIA and SEA, the proposed SIA could provide an efficient tool for improving the overall sustainability of land-use plans and regeneration projects at the EU level.

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