

# Science for Environment Policy

## Public participation in land use planning in Romania

**Approximately 1000 km<sup>2</sup> of agricultural or natural land is lost every year in the EU due to land-use change.** When this occurs close to residential areas, it can lead to conflicts with local people. This study explored the views of local people in Romania, and compared them to experts. The authors discuss similarities and differences, and say that participation, where both locals and experts communicate, is key to developing effective land use policies.

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1. Directive 2003/35/EC. See: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32003L0035>

2. Directive 2001/42/EC. See: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1449234105074&uri=CELEX:32001L0042>

3. Directive 2000/60/EC. See: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32000L0060>

**Changes to land use can lead to conflicts between neighbouring lands.** For example, when industrial facilities are developed close to residential areas, it can generate environmental and social impacts, from noise and odour to health risks and ecological degradation.

As such, the adjacency of non-residential land uses to residential land has become an important planning issue, and regulations have been developed to minimise its impact on environment, aesthetics and safety in many countries. These include restrictions on certain land uses, minimum distances between sites, or strict operating schedules.

In some cases these regulations have proven to be inadequate, often due to lack of public involvement with the planning process. The public offers a perspective that experts cannot – one that is practical, derived from experience and strongly connected to the local landscape.

Low levels of public involvement can result if opportunities for public participation are not widely available or known. Individuals may also hold back due to personal reasons. They may doubt their communication skills, their knowledge about the issues under concern, have low interest in the issue, or mistrust that their participation will contribute to important outcomes.

To improve planning outcomes, several EU policies actively encourage public involvement in decision making, most notably the Public Participation Directive<sup>1</sup>, as well as environmental assessment directives, in particular the Strategic Environmental Directive<sup>2</sup> and Water Framework Directive<sup>3</sup>.

Romania is characterised by a top-down political infrastructure which prioritises economic development and minimises environmental aspects, the authors assert. Furthermore, decisions on land-use regulations tend to be made using experts, usually from a remote workplace, and only occasionally are the public involved.

This study investigated similarities and differences between public and expert views of adjacent land use. The authors assessed the problems caused by six non-residential land types: industry, commercial, transport infrastructure, landfill, medical and recreational. Eight problems were assessed: noise, insecurity, odour, waste disposal, unwanted animals, health risk, visual discomfort (unmaintained and unattractive land) and unorganised trade (illegal sale of merchandise).

The authors collected data using two types of survey. Face-to-face surveys were conducted with 235 local people from 33 different settlements in Romania, and an online survey was administered to 97 experts in areas spanning geography, planning, environmental science, architecture, biology and engineering. The survey asked participants which problems they associated with each land-use association.

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*(continued)*

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Analysis revealed differences and similarities between the two groups. Local people had a more positive attitude towards potentially harmful land uses (specifically industrial, commercial and transport uses) than experts. The authors suggest this may be due to a lack of awareness of the problems they can cause, or prioritising economic gains over environmental threats.

However, both groups were positive about the proximity of medical and recreational facilities, such as hospitals and urban parks, which are generally positively perceived by Europeans because of their functionality, recent studies show. The only association that was negatively assessed by both was landfill, the impacts of which include odour, noise, littering, groundwater contamination and health risks.

This study shows that discussions with local people during the planning process can help to highlight potential problems and identify acceptable land-use associations. In Romania, the study showed that concern about some less obvious environmental threats was of low priority for the local community, which is facing financial challenges. This contrasts with many Western European countries, where citizens place greater importance on environmental benefits than economic returns, say the authors. They recommend that experts help to educate local people about the problems of adjacent land use.

Local people in Romania may also lack awareness due to their limited involvement in decisions about their landscape. Romania lacks well-developed participatory approaches, such as those in the Netherlands, for example, where the public is involved in land-use planning from the early stages. The authors also suggest low public participation is influenced by the legacy of a communist past, where public manifestation was restricted and individuals may have withheld opinions for fear of negative impact on their own wellbeing.

The authors say their findings could help to better implement existing territorial planning regulations in Romania. They say the location of non-residential land uses should in the future be regulated based on environmental expertise *and* citizen demands. Although the transition to collaborative planning in Romania may be difficult in the current political system, the authors say progress is possible, and efforts to empower people to participate in local decisions are important.

More broadly, the authors say citizens are critical to the planning process for effective land-use policies. Although expert knowledge is also important, decisions that take both into account are more likely to achieve the best uses of land.

