

The role of local government in procedures of environmental impact assessment in Croatia

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Abstract

Local government, in the procedures of environmental impact assessment, aims to, within the government, create and maintain awareness of the need to communicate with different groups of users and to provide a constant level of sensitivity to the needs and opinions of customers, based on the principles of sustainable development. In general, local government establishes an understanding of the policies, processes, and activities of government by informing users, replying, where appropriate, to the criticisms of the authorities, establishing and maintaining effective channels of communication with the public available to the authorities. The importance of public participation in the procedures of environmental impact assessment is constantly growing, and local government is increasingly under pressure from the public, economic, and civil sectors in decision-making processes on the assessment of environmental impact studies. This paper presents the results of empirical research of the knowledge and opinion of the concerned public in the Republic of Croatia about the representation of local government in the expert commission for the assessment of all projects and works of local communities on presenting their development plans in order to avoid possible public outcry. Qualitative research on the target sample was conducted using in-depth interviews and participatory observation. In the analysis of the empirical material, the method of grounded theory was used; the quantification of the qualitatively processed encrypted material was calculated by the computer package Statistica Ver.11.00. Most respondents believe that two representatives of the local government are enough in the work of the expert committee evaluating the impact on the environment, which on average has seven or nine members, and they point out that it is important that these representatives are not in some kind of conflict of interest. The respondents completely agree that the local community should do more to present their development plans, in order to eliminate possible public outcry. In particular this applies to the local



community in small towns where some interventions can have a positive impact on the way of life of people, and which would contribute to a better understanding and would definitely have a positive impact on the negative attitude of the public.

Keywords: local government, environmental impact assessment, commission.

1 Introduction

In the last few decades the environmental impact assessment has emerged as one of the main activities regarding the licensing of industrial, energy, agricultural, infrastructural, and major economic projects in general. Its most important document is the environmental impact study, which has become paramount when preparing a project and is basically the only document in which the thoughts, opinions, and interests of all concerned stakeholders in the public, economic, and civil sectors are entwined and synchronised in a single formal procedure. Raising awareness about the necessity of public participation in the decision making process will bring about better legislation in the area in question. Each new regulation expands the right to public participation, which in turn makes public participation in the procedures of environmental impact assessment increasingly important. Environmental management is strongly influenced by the risk perception of the public that emphasises its right to participate in the decision making process. Today, the public is concerned with environmental issues more than ever and the issue of public perception of the risks of environmental protection can be resolved by improving the communication between stakeholders (Malbaša and Jelavić [1]). In line with European standards, the concerned public is consulted as early as the idea phase, which continues throughout the procedure. European rules anticipate the early inclusion of the public in the environmental impact assessment. The goal of the early inclusion and the continuous participation of the public in the procedure is to create the necessary preconditions that will allow the public to have a significant influence on the outcome of the environmental impact assessment (Cox [2]). This is regulated with several regulations that have been amended and supplemented several times since they were drafted. After adopting the Aarhus Convention, the EU also adopted the Public Participation Directive in 2003 as well as amendments made to the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive to comply with the principles of the Aarhus Convention. The Aarhus Convention is based on the idea of environmental democracy. Environmental democracy implies that, besides the authorities and the economic sector, all individuals that might be affected by a certain decision should be included in the process of resolving environmental issues (Ofak [3]). This means that access to environmental information is an integral part of environmental democracy, which enables the concerned members of the public to become active participants in the environmental decision making process. This is important for the application of convention provisions with regard to public participation in decision-making. Details about informing the public, consulting with the considered public and the role in the access to justice are set out separately by each country (Ofak [3]). Local government, in the procedures of environmental impact assessment, aims to, within the government, create and maintain awareness



of the need to communicate with different groups of users and to provide a constant level of sensitivity to the needs and opinions of customers, based on the principles of sustainable development. In general, local government establishes an understanding of the policies, processes, and activities of government by informing users, replying, where appropriate, to the criticisms of the authorities, establishing and maintaining effective channels of communication with the public available to the authorities. The importance of public participation in the procedures of environmental impact assessment is constantly growing, and local government is increasingly under pressure from the public, economic, and civil sectors in decision-making processes on the assessment of environmental impact studies. This paper presents the results of empirical research of the knowledge and opinion of the concerned public in the Republic of Croatia about the representation of local government in the expert commission for the assessment of all projects and works of local communities on presenting their development plans in order to avoid possible public outcry.

This paper establishes the following hypotheses: **(H₁)** There are significant differences between the *target groups* and the *sector groups* with regard to the number of representatives of the local government in the expert commission for the assessment of the environmental impact and the acceptability of the procedure. **(H₂)** There are no significant differences between the *target groups* and the *sector groups* with regard to the effort of the local community to present their development plans in order to avoid public outcry.

2 Methods

Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of unconnected methods, always hoping to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand (Denzin and Lincoln [4]). Integrating concurrent data in the data collection procedure in order to elaborate on and expand the findings of one method with another method, while the researcher converges qualitative and quantitative data, offers insight into the comprehensive analysis of the subject matter (Creswell [5]).

The triangulation in the qualitative research uses several methods combined so that the information on the subject matter would be more comprehensive and reliable (Mejovšek [6]). Qualitative research on the target sample was conducted using in-depth interviews and participatory observation. In the analysis of the empirical material, the method of grounded theory was used. Three basic types of code procedures were used: open or initial coding, axial coding and selective coding. Initial coding consisted of the first rearrangement and sorting of data, recognition of similarities and extracting them into the same group of answers. By conducting the final analysis and classification of key terms a conceptual matrix was created containing qualitative empirical material in an integrated theoretical



frame (Holton [7], Charmaz [8]). The inductive and deductive method, analysis and synthesis method, comparative method, classification method and description method were used in the process (Silverman [9]). The research was conducted in 2014. The selection of respondents was conducted based on the target sample of participants in the empirical research who professionally or voluntarily participated in the procedures relevant for this research (Pletikosić [10]). The respondent sample comprised 100 entities, of which 46 were male and 54 were female. The average age of respondents was 52.1. The respondents were divided into 10 subsamples (target groups) qualitatively defined as 10 entities:

1. *STUDY COMPILERS* – persons authorised by the Ministry of Environmental and Nature Protection;
2. *DEVELOPERS* – investors;
3. *MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND NATURE PROTECTION/COMMISSION* – representatives of the managing body in charge of the procedure and members of the commission for the assessment of studies;
4. *CITIES* – employee representatives of the City Administration for Environmental Protection authorised for discussing public debates and representatives of the City Administration for Physical Planning;
5. *COUNTIES* – employee representatives of the County Administration for Environmental Protection authorised for discussing public debates and representatives of the County Administration for Physical Planning;
6. *ASSOCIATIONS* – representatives of non-governmental environmental associations;
7. *CIVIC INITIATIVES* – representatives of non-governmental associations not associated with environmental protection and the civil sector that are involved in the procedure;
8. *TRADE ASSOCIATIONS* – representatives of the Croatian Employers' Association, Croatian Chamber of Commerce and other economic interest groupings;
9. *POLITICAL PARTIES* – representatives of political structures involved in the procedure;
10. *SCIENTISTS/REPORTERS* – representatives of scientific institutions and reporters involved in the procedure.

Three new control sectors (clusters) were classified from the subsamples mentioned above and were, in qualitative terms, defined as:

1. *PUBLIC SECTOR* – 40 target group respondents: *MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND NATURE PROTECTION/COMMISSION, CITIES, COUNTIES, SCIENTISTS/REPORTERS*;
2. *CIVIL SECTOR* – 30 target group respondents: *ASSOCIATIONS, CIVIC INITIATIVES, POLITICAL PARTIES*;
3. *ECONOMIC SECTOR* – 30 target group respondents: *STUDY COMPILERS, DEVELOPERS, TRADE ASSOCIATIONS*.

The research material consisted of 2 dependent (grouping) variables based on the target group and the sector group and of 2 independent variables. The respondents expressed their opinion about the representation of local government

in the expert commission for the assessment of all projects and works of local communities on presenting their development plans in order to avoid possible public outcry. The answers were coded on a scale of 1–3 in both independent variables. The following parameters were calculated: the frequency and the cumulative relative frequency of answers throughout the sample and the predetermined focus and sector groups. The computer package Statistica Ver.11.00 calculated the necessary parameters (Petz *et al.* [11]).

3 Results and discussion

The quantitative processing of the matrix of the 1st variable entity is based on the responses given by asking a qualitatively defined question: *Do you think that the local government is sufficiently represented in the procedure of environmental impact assessment by the expert commission?* The respondents expressed their opinion on the representation of local government in the expert commission. The respondents' responses were classified into three levels:

The *first group* was classified according to the negative response and represents the entities that stated:

No, the local government is not sufficiently represented in the procedure of environmental impact assessment by the expert commission, they are constantly outvoted by members of the expert commission at national level because they only have two representatives, which also serves as an excuse used when addressing the local population. It seems that the local government exists solely to do the Ministry's bidding. No, they are not sufficiently represented and should have the majority of representatives. I also think that, besides the representatives of the local government, a representative of the local population should be added to the commission.

In quantitative terms, these responses have been coded as 0 (zero) for the upcoming statistical data processing.

The *second group* represents the entities that responded positively:

Yes, the local government is sufficiently represented in the procedure of environmental impact assessment by the expert commission, they usually have 2 representatives, which is sufficient because they do not possess the expertise for all procedures, so local politics will not hold sway. It is important that these representatives do not find themselves in some kind of a conflict of interest and that they make suggestions and assessments. Depends on the type of procedure, but when it comes to experience, it depends on the representative of the local government because they always have a seat on the commission.

In quantitative terms, these responses are coded as 2 (two) for the upcoming statistical data processing.

The response to the 1st question is defined in statistical processing with a variable with the code name *local government representation_expert commission*. Table 1 shows the frequency of all entities and the *local government representation_expert commission* 1st variable.

Table 1: Absolute and cumulative relative frequency of the *local government representation_expert commission* variable, N=100.

Responses	Frequency	Cumulative relative frequency
0	39	39.00
1	0	39.00
2	61	100.00

Key: 0 – no; 1 – I don't know, I'm not sure; 2 – yes.

The analysis of frequency in all respondents and the *local government representation_expert commission* 1st variable shows a relative frequency of 39% of the respondents that believe that the representatives of the local government are often outvoted in the commission because there is only two of them and suggest that the commission include a representative of the local population. 61% of the respondents believe that two representatives of the local government are sufficient and point out the importance of avoiding finding themselves in a conflict of interest and that they make suggestions and assessments.

Table 2 shows the frequency of the *local government representation_expert commission* 1st variable within the 10 predetermined *target groups*.

Table 2: Frequency of the *local government representation_expert commission* variable, N=100.

Responses	IS	NZ	MO	GR	ŽU	UD	GI	GU	PS	Z/N	Total
0	1	1	3	5	6	5	7	0	6	5	39
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	9	9	7	5	4	5	3	10	4	5	61

Key: 0 – no; 1 – I don't know, I'm not sure; 2 – yes.

IS – IZRAĐIVAČI STUDIJA (*Study Compilers*) – persons authorised by the Ministry of Environmental and Nature Protection;

NZ – NOSITELJI ZAHVATA – (*Developers*) – investors;

MO – MINISTARSTVO OKOLIŠA/POVJERENSTVO (*Ministry of Environmental and Nature Protection/Commission*) – representatives of the managing body in charge of the procedure and members of the commission for the assessment of studies;

GR – GRADOVI (*Cities*) – employee representatives of the City Administration for Environmental Protection authorised for discussing public debates and representatives of the City Administration for Physical Planning;

ŽU – ŽUPANIJE (*Counties*) – employee representatives of the County Administration for Environmental Protection authorised for discussing public debates and representatives of the County Administration for Physical Planning;

UD – UDRUGE (*Associations*) – representatives of non-governmental environmental associations;

GI – GRAĐANSKE INICIJATIVE (*Civic Initiatives*) – representatives of non-governmental associations not associated with environmental protection and the civil sector that are involved in the procedure;

GU – GOSPODARSKA UDRUŽENJA (*Trade Associations*) – representatives of the Croatian Employers' Association, Croatian Chamber of Commerce and other economic interest groupings;

PS – POLITIČKE STRANKE (*Political Parties*) – representatives of political structures involved in the procedure;

Z/N – ZNANSTVENICI/NOVINARI (*Scientists/Reporters*) – representatives of scientific institutions and reporters involved in the procedure.

Table 2 shows that *TRADE ASSOCIATIONS* – representatives of the Croatian Employers' Association, Croatian Chamber of Commerce and other economic interest groupings, *STUDY COMPILERS* – persons authorised by the Ministry of Environmental and Nature Protection, *DEVELOPERS* – investors and the *MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND NATURE PROTECTION/COMMISSION* – representatives of the managing body in charge of the procedure and members of the commission for the assessment of studies, believe that two representatives of the local government are sufficient and that it is necessary that the representatives avoid finding themselves in a conflict of interest. On the other hand, representatives of the *CIVIC INITIATIVES*, *COUNTIES* and *POLITICAL PARTIES* target groups believe that two representatives of the local government are not sufficient due to them constantly being outvoted.

Table 3 shows the quantitative analysis of frequency of the *local government representation_expert commission* variable according to the *sector group*.

Table 3: Frequency of the *local government representation_expert commission* variable according to the *sector group*, N=100.

Responses	Public Sector	Civil Sector	Economic Sector	Total
0	19	18	2	39
1	0	0	0	0
2	21	12	28	61
Total	40	30	30	100

Key: 0 – no; 1 – I don't know, I'm not sure; 2 – yes.

Public sector – *MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND NATURE PROTECTION/ COMMISSION, CITIES, COUNTIES, SCIENTISTS/REPORTERS*;

Civil sector – *ASSOCIATIONS, CIVIC INITIATIVES, POLITICAL PARTIES*;

Economic sector – *STUDY COMPILERS, DEVELOPERS, TRADE ASSOCIATIONS*.

A total of 53% of the representatives from the *public sector* (21 entities) and 93% of the respondents from the *economic sector* (28 entities) believe that two representatives of the local government in the commission are sufficient. However, the majority of representatives from the *civil sector* (60%) disagree because they often get outvoted in the commission, which also serves as an excuse when addressing the local population and they believe that the local government exists solely to do the Ministry's bidding.

The quantitative processing of the matrix of the 2nd variable entity is based on the responses given by asking the qualitatively defined question 2nd question of the interview: *Do you think that the local government should spend more time presenting their development plans in order to eliminate possible public outcry?* The respondents expressed their opinion whether the local government should spend more time presenting their development plans in order to eliminate possible public outcry. The respondents' responses were classified into three levels. The *first group* was classified according to the negative response and represents the entities that stated:

No, because they are not doing a good job and are biased when it comes to their political projects. The main issue is the lack of experts in the local community, decentralisation has given them greater authority and they have managed to further politicize their activities. The biggest problem is that they haven't adequately informed the public about the development projects of the local government and that is why the public doesn't see how this concerns them.

In quantitative terms, these responses are coded as 0 (zero) for the upcoming statistical data processing.

The *second group* responded that there was not enough information available, that they did not know or that they were not sure how to respond, they were indecisive and said the following:

I'm not sure, I haven't been given enough information. It depends on how the local community is defined, but it should definitely be better and communication should be continuous, transparent and mutual.

In quantitative terms, these responses are coded as 1 (one) for the upcoming statistical data processing.

The *third group* was classified according to the positive response and said the following:

Yes, as with the public, the local community should become more involved, especially in small towns where some interventions can have a positive impact on the way of life of people, and which would contribute to a better understanding and would definitely have a positive impact on the negative attitude of the public.

In quantitative terms, these responses are coded as 2 (two) for the upcoming statistical data processing. The response to the 2nd question is defined in statistical processing with a variable with the code name *local community_development plans*.

Table 4 shows the frequency of all entities and the *local community_development plans* 2nd variable.

Table 4: Absolute and cumulative relative frequency of the *local community_development plans*, N=100.

Responses	Frequency	Cumulative relative frequency
0	1	1.00
1	1	2.00
2	98	100.00

Key: 0 – no; 1 – I don't know, I'm not sure; 2 – yes.

The respondents almost unanimously agree (98%) that the local government should spend more time presenting their development plans, in order to eliminate possible public outcry. In particular this applies to the local community in small towns where some interventions can have a positive impact on the way of life of people, and which would contribute to a better understanding and would definitely have a positive impact on the negative attitude of the public.

Table 5 shows the quantitative analysis of frequency of the *local government representation_expert commission* variable according to the *sector group*.

Table 5: Frequency of the *local community_development plans* variable according to the *target group*, N=100.

Responses	IS	NZ	MO	GR	ŽU	UD	GI	GU	PS	Z/N	Total
0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
2	10	10	10	10	10	9	10	9	10	10	98

Key: 0 – no; 1 – I don't know, I'm not sure; 2 – yes.

IS – IZRAĐIVAČI STUDIJA (*Study Compilers*) – persons authorised by the Ministry of Environmental and Nature Protection;

NZ – NOSITELJI ZAHVATA – (*Developers*) – investors;

MO – MINISTARSTVO OKOLIŠA/POVJERENSTVO (*Ministry of Environmental and Nature Protection/Commission*) – representatives of the managing body in charge of the procedure and members of the commission for the assessment of studies;

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ŽU – ŽUPANIJE (*Counties*) – employee representatives of the County Administration for Environmental Protection authorised for discussing public debates and representatives of the County Administration for Physical Planning;

UD – UDRUGE (*Associations*) – representatives of non-governmental environmental associations;

GI – GRAĐANSKE INICIJATIVE (*Civic Initiatives*) – representatives of non-governmental associations not associated with environmental protection and the civil sector that are involved in the procedure;

GU – GOSPODARSKA UDRUŽENJA (*Trade Associations*) – representatives of the Croatian Employers' Association, Croatian Chamber of Commerce and other economic interest groupings;

PS – POLITIČKE STRANKE (*Political Parties*) – representatives of political structures involved in the procedure;

Z/N – ZNANSTVENICI/NOVINARI (*Scientists/Reporters*) – representatives of scientific institutions and reporters involved in the procedure.

The analysis of Table 5 clearly indicates that the representatives of *target groups* are almost unanimous in their opinion of the *local community_development plans* variable. With a quantitative participation of 98%, all representatives of the 10 target groups agreed for the first time and expressed their opinion that the local community should spend more time presenting their development plans, in order to eliminate possible public outcry and emphasise the importance of transparent and two-way communication.

Table 6 shows the quantitative analysis of frequency of the *local community_development plan* variable according to the *sector group*.

All representatives (100% of the *public sector*, 97% of the *civil sector* and 97% *economic sector*) expressed the same opinion that the local community needs to spend more time presenting their development plans, in order to eliminate possible public outcry.

The hypotheses established by this research and based on the results of the target and sector group are as follows: (**H₁**) There is a significant difference between the *target groups* and the *sector groups* with regard to the number of representatives of the local government in the expert commission for the assessment of the environmental impact and the acceptability of the procedure; (**H₂**) There are no significant differences between the *target groups* and the *sector*

Table 6: Frequency of the *local community_development plan* according to the sector group, N=100.

Responses	Public Sector	Civil Sector	Economic Sector	Total
0	0	1	1	2
1	0	0	0	0
2	40	29	29	98
Total	40	30	30	100

Key: 0 – no; 1 – I don't know, I'm not sure; 2 – yes.

Public sector – MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND NATURE PROTECTION/COMMISSION, CITIES, COUNTIES, SCIENTISTS/REPORTERS;

Civil sector – ASSOCIATIONS, CIVIC INITIATIVES, POLITICAL PARTIES;

Economic sector – STUDY COMPILERS, DEVELOPERS, TRADE ASSOCIATIONS.

groups with regard to the effort of the local community to present their development plans in order to avoid public outcry; are completely confirmed and accepted.

4 Conclusions

This paper presents the results of empirical research of the knowledge and opinion of the concerned public in the Republic of Croatia about the representation of local government in the expert commission for the assessment of all projects and works of local communities, on presenting their development plans in order to avoid possible public outcry. The analysis of frequency in all respondents and the local government representation expert commission 1st variable shows a relative frequency of 39% of the respondents that believe that the representatives of the local government are often outvoted in the commission because there is only two of them and suggest that the commission include a representative of the local population. 61% of the respondents believe that two representatives of the local government are sufficient and point out the importance of avoiding finding themselves in a conflict of interest and that they make suggestions and assessments. A total of 53% representatives from the *public sector* (21 entities) and 93% of the respondents from the *economic sector* (28 entities) believe that two representatives of the local government in the commission are sufficient. However, the majority of representatives from the *civil sector* (60%) disagree because they often get outvoted in the commission, which also serves as an excuse when addressing the local population and they believe that the local government exists solely to do the Ministry's bidding.

The analysis of frequency results of all respondents and the 2nd variable shows that the respondents almost unanimously agree (98%) that the local government should spend more time presenting their development plans, in order to eliminate possible public outcry. In particular this applies to the local community in small towns where some interventions can have a positive impact on the way of life of people, and which would contribute to a better understanding and would definitely have a positive impact on the negative attitude of the public. All representatives

(100% of the *public sector*, 97% of the *civil sector* and 97% *economic sector*) expressed the same opinion that the local community needs to spend more time presenting their development plans, in order to eliminate possible public outcry. The representatives of the public, economic, and civil sectors are divided in their opinion and have different views on the role of key stakeholders in the information system and public participation in procedures of environmental impact assessment, which makes the conducting of the procedure and the decision-making more difficult. Mutual trust between sectors can be regained by improving mutual communication, providing more information and involving the public in the procedures. All representatives have recognised the growing role of the public and the concerned public in procedures of environmental impact assessment, but they have also noticed insufficient participation by the local community in the presentation of their development plans, in order to eliminate possible public outcry.

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