

“PUBLIC FORUM IZGREV”

District Izgrev, Sofia Municipality

Citizen's initiatives for the improvement of the green areas and the spaces between the apartment buildings

FEASIBILITY STUDY

The Public Forum Programme of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation /SDC/ was successfully implemented in the “Izgrev” district of Sofia municipality in the period November 2002 – April 2004.

The Public Forum Programme has been applied in Bulgaria since 2000 and has been implemented in sixteen municipalities so far. The practice is based on Swiss and German cities, and it presents a successful form of citizen's participation effected through discussions held between municipalities, non-profit organizations, and business with the goal of finding solutions to problems of key importance.

Izgrev Forum has been held as a experiment in the capital city, and was launched after the priority issues and the **clearly formulated specific goals** were identified: the problem relating to the decrease in green areas within the Izgrev region, as a result of the intensive construction activity carried out on restituted land, is to be debated and solved by the involvement of all stakeholders and the community.

The tasks of the project were specified and fulfilled under an agreement of 7th April 2003 signed between the Swiss government through SDC, together with Sofia Municipality-District “Izgrev”, and the Agency for Sustainable Development and EU integration “Ecoregions” (ASDE).

The preparation for the inclusion in the program took a six-month period and was effected by the partners to the project with local civic organizations to set the priorities within the region and mobilize citizens' initiative.

Running of the process:

The forum started its work in April 2003. It held debates on the subject-matter specified in advance by the district's residents.

“Citizens' initiatives on the improvement of the conditions of the

green areas and the spaces between the apartment buildings”.

Tasks fulfilled:

- A structure of work was established and coordination between the partners to the project was provided for: Local administration, ASDE – a key partner and coordinator, the “Balkan Assist Association” providing consulting and expertise services.
- Setting the major priorities of stakeholder groups: administration, local NGOs, representatives of the private sector, designers and construction companies, land owners, citizens
- Signing letters of support and drawing up “Memoranda” for the interaction between the groups and organizations
- Preparing and holding discussions in five forum sessions
- Providing support and assistance in the development of recommendations on the part of the forum's participants addressing the institutions and the conception of ideas for projects
- “Izgrev” district administration is to provide for the good conditions to hold the sessions in an appropriate hall with the necessary technical equipment.
- Providing complete and transparent information about the forum's activities, publishing an own bulletin

After holding a preparatory session there were five workshops of the Forum. All sessions manifested the high interest on the part of the citizens /between 90 and 150/ and the responsible representatives of Sofia municipality, ministries, government agencies and other institutions: The Ministry of the Environment and Waters, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, the Ministry of Health, the Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology), the National Association of Municipalities in Bulgaria, The Foundation for Local Government Reform, the Regional Environmental Center, Sofia Municipality: departments “Green system”, General urban plan, representatives of companies and enterprises, officials from

skindergartens and health centers within the district.

Structure of the public forum

A structure of pro-active participants was established to provide for the efficient work of the forum. All participants were grouped along topics around working tables; an operative group was chosen, and key figures - moderator, assistant-moderator and the district's representative. Being an open and transparent process, the Forum provided the opportunity for guests, observers and the mass media to take part.

Nine working tables were established, which represented the interests of various social groups such as:

1. An operative group,
2. Izgrev District administration
3. Local and central government institutions
4. Proprietors, entrepreneurs, designers,
5. Health care, safety, equal access for all,
6. Citizens,
7. Arts, culture representatives,
8. Ecologists, environmentalists
9. Training and education specialists

The participants passed a new **Moral Code**, setting the forum's rules and regulations.

Operative group coordinates the whole activity, participates in drawing up the informational bulletin, and provides for the involvement of experts and the technical equipment.

ASDE takes part as a major partner to the administration and a coordinator of the project.

Dissemination of information

The major information tool of the Izgrev Forum was the own bulletin with a print run of 5000.

This event was reflected in transparencies, posters, radio broadcasts and other mass media events. 250 invitations were sent before the beginning of each session (including the invitations to 30 institutions), the bulletin managed to reach some 4000 mail boxes /25% of the households/.

To contact citizens, two telephone lines and two mail boxes for the recommendations were provided. The sessions were announced on a photo panel as well.

The subject matter of the debates:

The conditions and problems of the green areas between the apartment buildings:

- Legal and regulatory framework: - legislation, decrees and local government resolutions, opportunities for citizens' participation with the decision-making process;
- Conflicts of interests: - the viewpoints of proprietors, entrepreneurs, construction firms, ecologists, environmentalists;
- Construction and maintenance: - participation and control in planning, designing, construction and maintenance of green spaces.

Environment and health:

- Green areas – playgrounds for children, sports and recreation sites
- Waste management – places for collection of waste, transportation and preservation of cleanliness of the shared areas, selective collection of waste.
- Homeless dogs – the attitudes of the different groups towards them, alternative solutions to the problem, obligations of the administration.

Social issues:

- Aesthetic development of the areas in question – cleaning, maintenance, urban design and small architectural forms, participation of the citizens in the development of the surroundings;
- The street as a place for social contacts – entrepreneurs, designers, construction companies, ecologists, environmentalists, users;
- Areas between apartment buildings – parking lots; improvement of the infrastructure; partnership between the residents and the rest of the users thereof;

Citizens' participation:

- Equal access for all – providing for the access of marginalized people, manifesting tolerance and mutual respect, observing the public interest;
- Infrastructure for creative activity, specific peculiarities and requirements, educational and training effect, the role of schools and kindergartens.
- Participation in planning, a dialogue between the

administration and the citizens, respecting the interests of the different groups, the role of the young people.

CITIZENS' INITIATIVES AND DECISIONS OF THE "FORUM":

The results

The specific proposals and ideas debated during the forum were grouped along these trends:

- ***6 recommendations, addressing the institutions and bodies held responsible for the solution of all problems, related to the regulatory framework, new organizational structures and specific actions to be taken as solution to the existing problems of the urban environment***
- ***11 ideas for projects and citizens' initiatives to improve the conditions of the green spaces, the streets and the spaces between the apartment buildings.***
- ***Establishment and registration of new NGO "Public Forum Izgrev-Sofia" /august 2004/***
- ***One project, after successful competition, is under realization in the complex "Balkan", Sofia.***

All citizens' initiatives were developed as projects and they were graded along the following criteria:

- ***Relevant impact on the community***
 - ***The project's relevance with respect to the social and economic development of the community***
 - ***The prospects for establishing partnerships***
 - ***Sustainability of the results***
1. Development of routes and sites with an equal access to everybody, including the disabled.
 2. Construction of bicycle paths and zones for children and adults.
 3. Renovation of the spaces between the residential blocks, creating facilities for children's and sports playgrounds - 12 sites in the housing estates of Dianabad, Iztok, and Izgrev.
 4. The establishment of a "Children's environmental club" at schools and kindergartens.
 - 5 The construction of a playground and a stage for holding different events

of a public nature behind "Dobri Chintulov" community center.

6. The aesthetic development and ecological protection of the urban environment in the properties Balkan
- 7 A program developed, projects drawn up and measures taken to solve the problem with homeless dogs.
8. Designing a bridge spanning over Novatchitza River in Roussalya Street of Izgrev district in Sofia.
9. A pilot project for local waste management – models of selective collection
- 10 The district's residents – hosting part of the Borrisov Garden park.
- 11 An aesthetic land shaft of spaces surrounding the apartment buildings in the residential area of Dianabad, blocks No.43, 45, 47, 53, 54.

The Izgrev Forum continues

The extraordinary VI feedback session was held on 11 March 2004 at which the form of Association of the Public Forum within the district was specified.

Favorable opportunities for the implementation of all high-ranking ideas and projects under various programs and donors providing financial aid.

Meetings with various organizations for the establishment of partnerships have been held, with a view to applying for the protection and renovation of green spaces between apartment buildings.

ASDE made the Municipal Council well aware of the ideas of the Izgrev Forum program, so that budget funds are allotted and thus create favorable conditions for the **implementation** of some of the projects, to the effect that such a forum maintains its usefulness and citizens are confident about their own capability.

THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE RESULTS OF THE FORUM

The most reliable guarantee for the sustainability of the results of the Forum's work is its very existence, maintained by the district administration and the Sofia community.

ASDE "Ecoregions" is determined to continue its work not in the capacity of a coordinator, but also as a body to monitor the fulfillment of the resolutions passed, and contribute to

the implementation of the projects set
as priorities.



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