



Central Public Hearing on the Draft Master Urban Plan for Sarajevo Canton

**TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE URBAN
DEVELOPMENT: STRENGTHENING PUBLIC
PARTICIPATION IN SARAJEVO**

Urban Transformation Project Sarajevo

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public participation is a central component of urban planning. Engaging residents and institutional stakeholders in decision-making helps ensure that urban development reflects local needs, builds trust, and strengthens the legitimacy of planning processes. Meaningful participation goes beyond formal consultation, enabling dialogue, negotiation, and builds consensus between residents, institutions, the private sector and other stakeholders. It supports social inclusion, strengthens accountability and reduces the likelihood of delays, grievances and conflict during the delivery of urban development projects. However, in practice, participation is often constrained by limited resources, time pressures, technical language, and low levels of political trust.

In Sarajevo, participation takes place within a complex governance and political environment. While legal frameworks exist, engagement has often remained procedural, with limited feedback loops, uneven outreach and barriers created by technical language and low institutional capacity for facilitation and follow-up. These constraints matter in practice: they can undermine public acceptance of plans and complicate the delivery of large-scale urban projects.

Against this backdrop, the Urban Transformation Project Sarajevo (UTPS) – funded by the Swiss Government – supported the Canton of Sarajevo and municipal partners to strengthen public participation as a more inclusive, structured and useable approach linked to planning practice.

UTPS' work on public participation focused on three areas:

- Improving public engagement during the draft Master Urban Plan (2025–2040) consultation process, expanding participation beyond formal hearings through facilitated sessions, targeted roundtables with civil society, academia and the private sector and developing accessible communication formats.
- Strengthening institutional capacities to design and manage participation, including inclusive outreach, facilitation and conflict de-escalation.
- Developing a practical digital toolkit ([participacija.ba](#)) that provides step-by-step guidance, templates, checklists and plain-language materials to institutionalise participatory approaches beyond a single planning cycle.

Key lessons include:

- Participation delivers the most value when it starts early, continues throughout the planning process and includes credible feedback loops.
- Inclusion requires deliberate outreach and accessible communication using diverse formats and language that non-experts use to reach different groups.
- Institutionalising participation is a change process that requires time, political awareness and willingness, and peer learning with different stakeholders.
- Conflict and tension can signal engagement, that when managed well, could be used as an opportunity to create a constructive dialogue and improve decision-making.

Going forward, future efforts must include strengthening institutional mandates and requirements for public participation, early and transparent engagement, and expanding spaces for participation. These steps are essential for building resilient, inclusive, and collaborative participation processes in Sarajevo's urban planning system.

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1. THE ROLE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Who shapes the city? Whose priorities does the city reflect? How are these priorities translated into plans and projects? Urban development projects are shaped by power relations and competing interests across the built environment, public space, transport networks and the natural environment. They involve a wide range of actors: city authorities, politicians and political parties, land and property owners, economic stakeholders, residents and professional experts. The voices and experiences that are heard shape the vision of the urban future: who sets planning priorities, whose knowledge is considered legitimate, and which interests influence investment and land use. As urban areas grapple with social inequalities, economic challenges, environmental pressures and constant change, planning decisions need to be informed by residents' needs, priorities, and lived experiences, making participation a practical requirement for plan quality, legitimacy and implementation feasibility.

Public participation, then, is more than a formality; it directly improves the quality, legitimacy, and acceptance of planning decisions by connecting policies to local realities.

- It strengthens legitimacy over planning decisions and improves acceptance supporting smoother implementation and reducing the risk of disputes and delays. Opening the process to a broad range of stakeholders builds greater acceptance and ownership, reinforcing the relevance of urban plans.
- It builds trust between citizens and public institutions. Well-organised, transparent, understandable planning processes demonstrate institutional commitment and preparedness. It creates confidence in the planning system.
- It supports consensus building, with a broad range of stakeholders. It is the essential tool for balancing the needs and priorities of diverse groups, from residents to private investors.

Meaningful participation moves beyond consultation towards shared problem definition and structured dialogue, enabling residents and stakeholder to influence priorities, options and trade-offs and not only react to pre-defined plans. This implies that residents, public authorities and other stakeholders work together to define priorities, design solutions, and influence the implementation of plans and policies.

These principles are also being reinterpreted as participation evolves in the digital age. Advances in communication technology have opened new channels for engagement, allowing institutions to reach broader audiences and make planning processes more transparent. Online platforms, social media networks, and participatory mapping tools complement traditional methods such as community meetings and hearings. Experiences with open-source platforms, from Sarajevo, where the [Consul](#) platform was piloted, and from cities using the [Decidim](#) platform, such as Zurich in Switzerland and Sucre in Bolivia, illustrate both the potential and the limitations of digital participation. Digital tools can broaden access and transparency, but they do not substitute for institutional readiness – clear facilitation, inclusive outreach, and credible feedback loops remain essential to sustain trust and accountability.

1.1. SETTING THE STAGE IN SARAJEVO

Sarajevo's urban context

Sarajevo is the capital and largest city of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), with 350 000 residents in the city and around 550 000 in the wider metropolitan area ([World Population Review](#)). In BiH, about 55 percent of the population lives in urban areas (2022), a share expected to rise to 65 percent by 2050 ([Our World in Data](#)). While overall population growth is modest at the moment (annual 0.45 percent), the city is shaped by ongoing challenges in mobility, infrastructure, and air quality, as well as opportunities to improve climate resilience. Sarajevo also contends with the complexities of BiH's federal governance structure, and the historical challenges left by the post-war period.

Sarajevo Canton is one of ten cantons in the Federation of BiH and is further divided into nine municipalities: Stari Grad, Centar, Novo Sarajevo, Novi Grad, Ilidža, Vogošća, Hadžići, Ilijaš, and Trnovo. Urban development requires coordination between the Canton of Sarajevo (which holds policy and strategic planning responsibilities, including preparation of the Master Urban Plan) and the nine municipalities responsible for local implementation and developing detailed plans within the Canton's broader planning framework.

The broader territorial dynamics, such as the proximity to East Sarajevo (part of Republika Srpska), highlight the political complexity that planning must navigate. After the creation of East Sarajevo, following the Dayton agreement,² “there was no single, integrated plan for the reconstruction of Sarajevo. Both Sarajevo and East Sarajevo were divided into a number of municipalities (opštine/općine), with separate councils and planning offices.” (Martin-Diaz 2014).³ Today, the divided jurisdiction and different legal frameworks continue to complicate the establishment of integrated spatial planning and common strategies between the two territories.

At the same time, a significant flow of international capital has supported Sarajevo’s reconstruction and modernization. International financing has supported major infrastructural upgrades (e.g., mobility, energy efficiency and utilities) through, for example, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) projects⁴ or initiatives to improve air quality supported by the World Bank.⁵ In this context, effective stakeholder engagement becomes critical to ensure projects reflect local needs and to manage social risks, grievances and trust deficits that can affect delivery.

A positive aspect on this trend is how initiatives, such as the EU’s Net Zero initiative⁶ are reframing the city not by its administrative boundaries, but as a cohesive Functional Urban Area (FUA). This planning concept, which focuses on integrated systems and common goals offers a con-

structive way to bridge the divided administrative units and achieve sustainable development. However, to ensure these large-scale, often technical, projects address the local needs, participation mechanisms remain essential to help residents and stakeholders understand options, trade-offs and implications.

Sarajevo is also becoming a focal point for broader participation initiatives, positioning the Canton as a ground for more inclusive and transparent forms of urban governance (see [Good Public Participation Practices in Urban Planning](#), a catalogue of local and international examples of public participation relevant to Sarajevo Canton, available in English and [Bosnian](#)). Several municipalities have successfully implemented participation projects. “Re-imagine My Street,”⁶ for instance, encourages residents to co-create ideas for redesigning and improving public spaces in Centar Municipality, leading to greener, and accessible neighbourhood environments. Another example, “Horizon Connecting”, resulted in the creation of an urban garden equipped with sensory elements for children with disabilities. Recognised with several awards, the project illustrates how residents’ proposals, even when not legally binding, can lead to tangible urban transformations when institutions respond constructively.

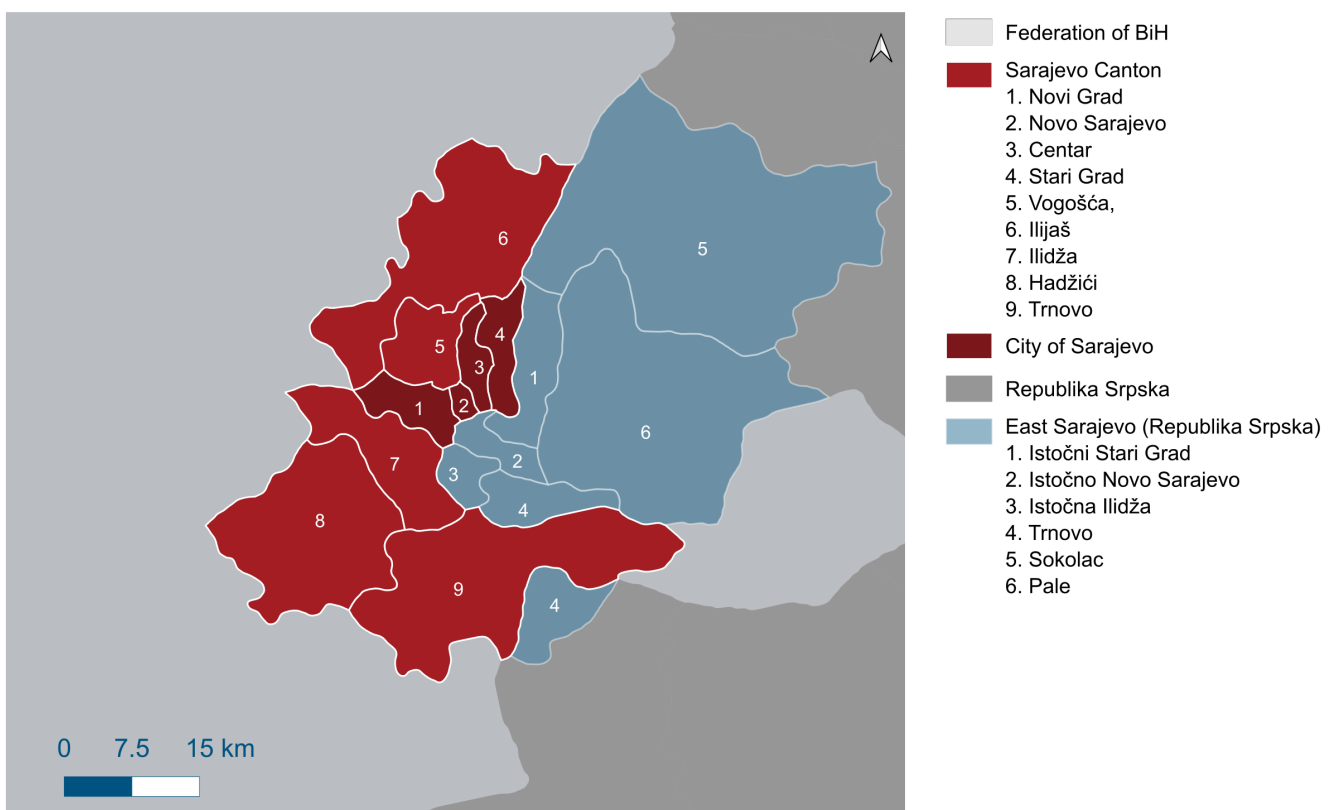


Figure 1. Administrative divisions of the Sarajevo metropolitan area.

Systemic constraints in Sarajevo

Public participation in Sarajevo is shaped by structural constraints – limited institutional capacities, short planning timelines that prioritise urgent issues over long-term engagement, technical communication barriers, complex territorial arrangements, and low political trust – which can weaken inclusiveness and reduce acceptance of planning outcomes. Building on this context, UTPS and local partners examined how these structural constraints translate into practical challenges within existing urban planning and participation processes.

This analysis revealed four key gaps in current participation practices:

- Challenges with communicating technical planning information to the public.
- Inconsistent outreach: a lack of consistent, and tailored strategies to effectively engage different social groups.
- Inconsistent transparency and difficulty for the public in obtaining feedback on planning processes.
- Uneven commitment: inconsistencies in the public's overall interest in participating and uneven involvement among local municipalities.

These findings provided a clear direction for the project in addressing directly these systemic barriers and clarified where interventions were most needed:

1. Improving participation processes during the drafting of the Urban Plans.
2. Capacity development efforts for institutional actors to strengthen communication, facilitation and conflict management.
3. Creating an adaptable digital toolkit to support future engagement and to frame the participation process in easily understandable procedures and steps.



Figure 2. Sarajevo in regional context.

2. STRENGTHENING PLANNING PRACTICES

UTPS, along with local partners, supported the Canton of Sarajevo to strengthen participation as a more inclusive, structured and useable approach linked to planning practice. First, the project used the process of developing the draft Master Urban Plan for 2025–2040 as a practical entry point to improve participation and engage both institutions and citizens. Second, the project focused on communication and facilitation, by strengthening institutional and professional capacities. Third, UTPS engaged with local political realities, acknowledging that urban planning takes place within complex governance structures, competing interests, and existing power relations, and adapted activities according to these political realities.

2.1. NEW AND INNOVATIVE METHODS FOR ENGAGING WITH RESIDENTS AND STAKEHOLDERS

The Sarajevo Master Urban Plan 2025–2040 serves as the city's key development instrument, aiming to guide sustainable urban growth. Its preparation, led by the Government of the Canton of Sarajevo and the Institute for Development and Planning of the Canton of Sarajevo (IDPCS), began in 2016.

In February 2024, the Sarajevo Cantonal Assembly adopted a draft of the Master Urban Plan and launched the public consultation process. UTPS supported the institutions in strengthening these consultation mechanisms and designing a more inclusive process.

Public hearings are a central channel for participation, but technical language and expert-led formats can limit accessibility. The project sought to make the hearings more accessible and focus on facilitation, by using professional facilitators to structure discussions, manage tensions, and improve the quality of dialogue between the public authorities, residents and other stakeholders. Ten hearings were held across the Canton, engaging an estimated 700 and 800 participants in total. Professional facilitators helped maintain constructive exchanges and ensured that concerns were captured in a more structured way. Facilitation also played an important psychological role for the institutions, by allowing them to focus on their responsibilities, while professional moderators managed dynamics such as emotions, tensions, and group interactions. It helped balance the dynamic between experts and residents, allowing for a more equal conversation.

Alongside hearings, UTPS supported the expansion of participation beyond the public hearings. To broaden inclusion, the project supported thematic roundtables and focus groups with students, business representatives, and civil society, enabling more detailed discussion of planning priorities and trade-offs. These sessions, hosted in the Urban Design Studio, a collaborative workspace, allowed for more detailed discussion on key planning themes.



Figure 3. Urban Design Studio, Vrazova. ETH Zurich.



Figure 4. Studio Mobil. ETH Zurich.



Figure 5. Communication material. (Click for campaign video).

Studio Mobil was another non-traditional venue for discussing spatial planning. Developed with ETH Zurich, the Studio Mobil is a mobile laboratory and think-tank where residents could view plans and discuss them with volunteer architecture students from the University of Sarajevo. Studio Mobil travelled to all the public hearings and was there prior to and after each hearing. These informal exchanges complemented formal consultations and helped bridge the gap between technical content and everyday concerns.

Finally, UTPS supported the design and the implementation of a comprehensive communication campaign in partnership with a marketing agency based in Sarajevo. The campaign combined print materials, short videos, radio announcements, media coverage, and social media content to present planning information in a plain and engaging language. By translating technical information into accessible formats, the campaign contributed to making the consultation process more inclusive and transparent.



Figure 6. Urban design studio, Vrazova. ETH Zurich.

2.2. STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS AND EMBEDDING PARTICIPATION

UTPS also focused on strengthening how participation is designed, facilitated, documented and followed-up – supporting the gradual institutionalisation of participatory practice beyond a single planning cycle.

This work combined two complementary approaches: (1) developing the capacities of public authorities through practical training on facilitation and dialogue and (2) creating a digital participation toolkit (participacija.ba) to guide and embed these practices. Together, these interventions aimed to make participation practices in Sarajevo more consistent, and sustainable for institutions over time.

The first component focused on how the government institutions design, run and learn from consultations, and aimed to develop these skills to facilitate constructive public dialogue. Training sessions focused on practical skills for managing public dialogue: structuring hearings, moderating group dynamics, conflict de-escalation and recognising drivers of grievances and mistrust. This supports more constructive engagement and reduces the risk that consultations escalate into polarisation.

Exercises such as simulations, role-plays, and case studies (both international and local) helped participants experience different perspectives and participation models. Rather than treating tension solely as a disruption, the approach recognised it as a signal of engagement that – when well facilitated – can improve decision-making and strengthen legitimacy. These interactive methods encouraged reflection on existing practices and experimentation with new ones. The overall goal was to create a safe learning environment where institutional actors could engage more comfortably with residents, even in challenging situations, while gaining tools to manage their own well-being and resilience in their professions.

Figure 8. Participacija.Ba 'what is public participation?'

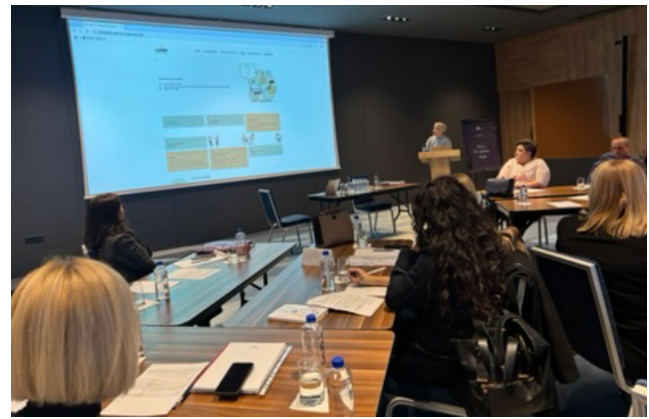
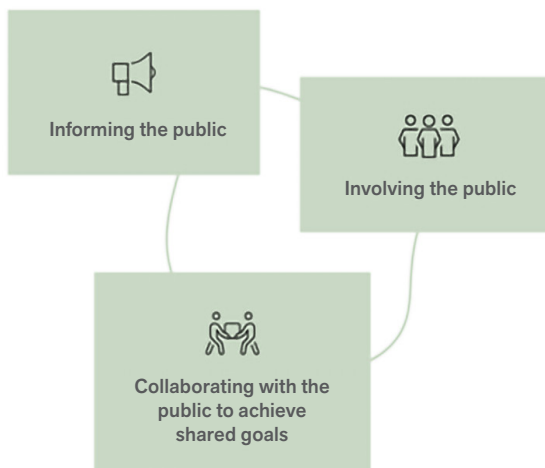


Figure 7. Capacity-Building Workshop on Participacija.ba. Helvetas.

In parallel, UTPS supported the design and launch of a practical digital toolkit, participacija.ba, to guide public planning authorities through participatory processes. The platform brings together key resources in one place, including step-by-step guidance on planning participatory activities, plain-language summaries of procedural steps, checklists for different stages of engagement, and downloadable templates for tasks such as stakeholder mapping, method selection, scheduling, facilitation and post-event documentation. The aim is to make participatory planning easier to follow and use for practitioners. Designed with a user-friendly interface, participacija.ba features short explanations, examples, and visual material so that actors with different technical backgrounds can use. The site also outlines the phases of participatory planning and provides access to tools and models that can be adapted to local contexts.

Taken together, trainings and the digital toolkit aim to build shared understanding and practical capacity around participation. The workshops encourage officials to view participation as part of their professional responsibility, while the digital toolkit provides the concrete tools to implement this view.

There are three levels of public engagement, depending on the circumstances, the community's level of interest, and the intended outcomes



2.3. PARTICIPATION IN COMPLEX POLITICAL STRUCTURES

Sarajevo's multi-level governance structure shapes participation: responsibilities are distributed across institutions with different mandates and capacities, complicating coordination and accountability while also creating multiple entry points for local priorities.

Sarajevo's urban transformation cannot be understood only as a contemporary phenomenon. It continues to be influenced by the legacies of war and by arrangements shaped during the peace-building period. The administrative separation between the Canton of Sarajevo and East Sarajevo, established through the Dayton Agreement, highlights the political and territorial complexities that urban planning must navigate, as the different legal frameworks and political agendas complicate the establishment of integrated spatial planning, common strategies, and policies. Post-war governance arrangements and divided jurisdictions continue to affect integrated planning, coordination, and shared strategies. These structural realities influence what is politically feasible and how participation can build acceptance across institutions and communities.

At the same time, emerging forms of coordination offer space for collaboration. Initiatives, such as the [EU's Net Zero Cities agenda](#), also encourage a more integrated view of Sarajevo as a functional urban area with shared environmental and development goals. These dynamics suggest that while multi-level governance remains complex, it also provides potential for cooperation.

In this context, public consultation is essential not only for gathering citizen input, but also for creating the legitimacy needed for plan approval. For the Master Urban Plan, consultations were a prerequisite for adoption and a practical mechanism to build legitimacy and implementation feasibility. Without credible engagement, plans can face resistance that undermines approval and delivery.

Working in this environment requires political awareness: understanding who holds influence, what incentives shape their decisions, and where institutional constraints limit responsiveness. This helps design participation that is not only inclusive, but also realistic and effective in supporting plan acceptance. UTPS designed its interventions by carrying out an initial Political Economy Analysis and then embedding this approach into project updates and amending activities in accordance with the political situation and what was politically feasible.

It is essential for designing participatory processes that are not only inclusive but also politically effective. In a context where political coordination is challenging, participation helps create legitimacy, strengthens acceptance of planning decisions, and supports alignment across institutions.

3. OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Meaningful participation in Sarajevo requires addressing political timing constraints, institutional capacity gaps, and communication barriers that affect inclusion, trust, and follow-up. Through collaboration with local actors, UTPS supported efforts to identify and address these constraints, to make participation more accessible and constructive.

1. The political reality of urban planning is that setting up planning processes takes a long time, and critical political decisions often delay participation.

Opportunities for participation emerged relatively late in the planning process in Sarajevo. When consultations begin only after a draft plan has already been prepared, the scope for meaningful participation is limited. Delaying participation narrows the space for public dialogue and building local legitimacy of the plan. Earlier engagement improves problem definition, reduces contestation, and strengthens acceptance of outcomes.

UTPS insight: The project strengthened hearings into more structured spaces for discussion and expanded pre-hearing information through accessible communication tools. Where possible, it also encouraged clearer documentation of inputs and follow-up communication – an important step towards credible feedback loops. The use of diverse formats, including a podcast, short videos and the Studio Mobil, significantly increased the visibility of the process, ensuring it was widely known and approved. Professional facilitation maintained constructive discussions. Ultimately, bridging the gap between technical work and public dialogue requires a shift in mindset: seeing participation as an integral part of planning decisions, not just a communication procedure. Pre-hearing information, such as those enabled by the communication campaign and the roundtables, can significantly improve the quality of discussions by providing citizens with accessible information for more informed and meaningful engagement.

2. Participation processes often reveal internal struggles where institutional actors lack the mandate, incentives, or capacities to design and facilitate participatory processes (including outreach, communication, facilitation, and follow-up) in a consistent way.

At the same time, on the residents' side, there is the challenge of uneven representation, where certain groups are more active while others remain excluded. For residents, inclusivity requires deliberate outreach to underrepresented groups and adapting meeting formats to their needs. For institutional actors, it requires interacting with communication and public relation teams, as well as building bridges between planning departments and other colleagues.

Whether it is residents in hearings, or institutional actors in facilitation trainings, participation reveals imbalances in who engages. Actors with direct interests will come, but they may understand the planning stakes in a narrow sense, with attention focused on individual land plots or immediate neighbourhood concerns. In practice, many planning processes operate at a more strategic level, making it difficult to mobilise residents around longer term or interconnected planning issues. Ensuring inclusivity therefore requires deliberate outreach to underrepresented groups, as well as communication methods and meeting formats adapted to different capacities, interests, and levels of familiarity with planning processes.

UTPS insight: The use of moderators, clearer rules of procedure, and a more systematic communication campaign provided examples that municipalities could adapt to their own hearings.

Training created space for public authority actors to reflect on practice, learn across municipalities, and test new approaches. Participants also recognised shared interests between residents and institutions – an important foundation for constructive dialogue.

3. Hesitancy to innovate is reinforced by a lack of resources and institutional culture where technical expertise is privileged over dialogue.

Many institutions still rely on formal and minimal consultation methods, such as newspaper notices, which satisfy legal requirements but fail to engage residents meaningfully. Encouraging innovation requires changing mindsets and recognising facilitation and communication as professional skills, not just administrative tasks.

UTPS insight: The launch of the [participacija.ba](#) platform provided a concrete, sustainable resource for structuring participation. Its accessible design and guidance make it easier for institutions to understand and apply participatory methods. The platform also democratises access to planning information, making documents easier to navigate.

A toolkit like [participacija.ba](#) provides institutions a framework for reaching out, coordinating, and sustaining participatory practices over time. By clarifying steps, roles, and methods, this toolkit provides a framework for continued participation, embedding these practices into everyday planning work. This makes it easier for institutions to engage the public meaningfully and consistently.

Over time, this kind of structured support can strengthen institutional ownership of participation. It helps create continuity and builds confidence that participatory approaches add value.

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR PARTICIPATORY URBAN PLANNING

UTPS demonstrates that public participation can be strengthened through practical improvements – professional facilitation, accessible communication, and usable tools – helping bridge technical planning and public dialogue in a complex governance context. These efforts showed that participation can strengthen legitimacy, trust, and collaboration across a complex political landscape.

At the same time, UTPS revealed how deeply institutional routines, timing constraints, and communication gaps shape what participation can realistically achieve. To consolidate this first step, future efforts can focus on several transitions over time:

First, participation becomes more consistent when responsibilities, minimum standards, and routines are clearly defined. Strengthening institutional mandates and requirements can help institutionalise participation across planning cycles and across municipalities.

Second, participation should begin early and continue throughout the planning process but also requires a realistic and clearly defined frame. When participation is too broad or insufficiently defined, it can raise expectations among residents and other actors that cannot be met. Without regular feedback and updates on how decisions were influenced by the participation process, trust quickly fades. Expanding communication tools and creating spaces for residents to initiate input are critical to moving beyond formal consultation.

Finally, conflict and tension should be treated as signals of engagement. With clear rules, facilitation, and responsiveness, disagreement can be channelled into constructive dialogue that improves decisions and strengthens legitimacy. Participation – even when marked by tension or conflict – is an opportunity, not a barrier. Increasingly vocal residents signal a growing demand to shape their city. The key task for institutions is to channel this energy into constructive dialogue and collaboration between residents and government.

Institutional change takes time, and UTPS represents an important step towards a more inclusive and collaborative planning culture. Sustaining momentum will require continued capacity support, stronger feedback mechanisms and policy dialogue so that participation becomes a reliable feature of Sarajevo's planning system and supports the delivery of complex urban development projects.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Bosnia and Herzegovina is composed of two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, as well as the self-governing Brčko District. The country's territory is divided between the two entities, with approximately 51% belonging to the Federation and 49% to Republika Srpska. While a limited number of competencies are exercised at the state level, most responsibilities lie with the entities. Sarajevo is the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina (the state) and of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Banja Luka serves as the administrative centre of Republika Srpska.
- ² The Dayton Peace Agreement (1995) is the peace accord reached in Dayton, Ohio, that ended the Bosnian War (1992–1995), establishing Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state composed of two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska. ([OSCE Mission to BiH](#))
- ³ Martín-Díaz, J. (2014). Urban restructuring in post-war contexts: The case of Sarajevo. *Hungarian Geographical Bulletin*, 63(3), 303–317. <https://doi.org/10.15201/hungeobull.63.3.5>
- ⁴ EBRD investment activities and portfolio in Bosnia and Herzegovina: <https://www.ebrd.com/home/what-we-do/where-we-invest/bosnia-herzegovina.html>
- ⁵ World Bank Air Quality Improvement Project details: <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P176040>
- ⁶ Sarajevo Functional Urban Area finalises Climate City Contract in partnership with EU | EEAS
- ⁷ Started in 2021, implemented by the Municipality of Centar Sarajevo, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP in BiH), the City of Sarajevo and the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Sarajevo, this project aimed to renovate a street based on the residents' input.