

Name of Exercise: Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Jurmala Town Development Plan

Location: Jurmala, Latvia

**Participation Exercise
under which Article?** *Article 7*

Purpose of Participation Exercise:

To invite comments on the Environmental Assessment of the Jurmala Town Development Plan.

Background:

Jurmala is the fifth biggest town of Latvia with 60,000 inhabitants. It is situated in the coastal zone and is rich in natural resources such as dunes, sandy beaches forests, freshwater lakes, mineral waters and medicinal muds. With such unique natural resources, it is important to ensure that environmental considerations are fully incorporated into policy development. In 1991 the first steps in strategic planning in Jurmala municipality were made. Two years later followed the project Development of Jurmala Economic Strategy, which was elaborated by a team of authorities from the municipality, representatives from state services, local politicians and well-known experts.

The Jurmala development plan was created during a transitional period in politics and also in the planning system. Neither officials nor politicians were experienced in the planning procedure or Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and the practice was very limited in Latvia. The Latvian Law on Ecological Expertise demands that different activities receive ecological scrutiny and expert approval from the environmental authorities. Planning regulations (from 1994) regulate the planning process and in some extent the procedure while also obliging them to undertake ecological analysis.

The Development Plan of Jurmala Town is a territorial plan based on an economic development strategy, historical, social and environmental preconditions and is the basis for future land use in the town. It is aimed at three target groups:

- Jurmala municipality and its departments which will use the plan to evaluate proposed projects and their sustainability;
- proponents and investors will use the plan to make their projects conform to the objectives of the development plan;
- landowners will use this plan to evaluate the future development possibilities of their property.

Process and procedural context

At the beginning of the planning process there were no official national plans for different sectors of development in the country, no territorial plans, and no regulations on planning and SEA of different plans and programs. It was evident that without incorporating environmental preconditions in the development plan it would be of low quality and too problematic for implementation. It was decided to make a 'nature framework' for the further development of the plan. It was not called SEA, nor even an environmental assessment, but included many objectives and similar procedures of the SEA. This work was based on the foreign experience of different specialists in Jurmala municipality, contracted experts and engineers.

It was important to make an assessment for the whole area to propose the best land use option. In 1994 the Regulations on Territorial Planning were adopted which established a planning process and procedures which are very similar to those of environmental assessment and they were used for this purpose. The municipal council was responsible for approving the plan and at the same time the plan was developed by the municipal planning department. This was a great disadvantage because there was not full independence in the planning process. But on the other hand such close ties helped to successfully incorporate the ideas of sustainability into the development plan.

Drafting of both the plan and the environmental assessment was closely connected with planning and other environmental activities in neighbouring municipalities in order to co-ordinate mutual interests for the promotion of development (as already mentioned in the period of drafting the Development Plan of Jurmala Town there were no national development plans, sector development plans nor binding policies). Discussions were held with Riga District Council which focused on waste management since this is a serious problem in the region. As a result, a bilateral agreement was signed on co-operation in waste management regarding the location and building of a new solid waste landfill in the region. For Jurmala municipality, this is progress and can be considered as mitigation, the most valuable natural resources, energy and human and other resources will be saved.

At the same time as the Jurmala plan was developed, the Latvian Fund for Nature begun work on planning Kemeru National Park (founded in 1997). As the territories and interests overlap in one part of Jurmala (e.g. Kemeru) there were serious discussions which resulted in some changes in the Kemeru plan. In the future, assessments should be done together with neighbouring municipalities and, on a larger scale, with districts and must cover environmental items which were not covered by the plan and assessment due to limited resources.

Criteria for assessment were chosen according to traditional values of Jurmala (water, forests, balneological resources, recreational resources) and priorities which at the moment dominate environmental protection issues (biodiversity, nature protection). Geographic and natural concerns urged the focusing of interest on waters and forests. Therefore information was collected and processed in the form of "blue" and "green" maps.

Lack of experience and limited resources restricted the possibilities for alternatives. Those that were accepted were not so much for environmental considerations as for technical reasons. Sub-contractors planned traffic and transportation possibilities and offered different versions, but the work of environmentalists and planners was not simultaneous.

In Latvia, local politicians (town council) make the final decisions regarding municipal development plans. The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development and subordinate Regional Environmental Boards are only required to give their formal approval. The environmental assessment of the Jurmala town development plan was prepared by the action proponent, e.g. planners and officials of the municipality.

Participation Techniques Used:

The public participation happened according to the procedures of the planning regulations. There was consultation on environmental issues during the conceptual stage of the development plan. Special questionnaires were given to various specialists. The opinions of the inhabitants of the area were also surveyed. Only 76 questionnaires were returned (0.1% of inhabitants). The nature frame map was presented for discussions of a wide range of specialists and public.

Who participated?

The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Planning (MEPRD) and its institutions contributed information and were consulted as a part of the environmental assessment. According to Latvian legislation, final approval is required from the State Environmental Expertise.

Health resort specialists acted as a special interest group as well as environmental authority. At the final stage a new group appeared, local businessmen. In comparison to the Soviet system, the planning and assessment process and its results are no longer confidential. Public participation and information is an essential part. Although we do not have enough experience in such activities, project developers have nevertheless tried to involve the local inhabitants and the different interest groups in the process.

A special consultant with an academic background in the environment was contracted as a full-time consultant for the first stage of the plan. Under his supervision, the basic information was collected and a nature framework was prepared. The results were blue maps (waters), green maps (forests) and soil maps of town, which later formed one nature framework map. This nature framework map was presented for discussions of a wide range of specialists and public.

What information was made available?

Jurmala municipality's valuable natural resources and health resort mean that it was studied by many different scientists, making it possible to obtain a large amount of environmental data. The data mostly covered natural resources (waters, soils, protected plants, forests), geology and geography and it formed the nature framework of the development plan.

Insufficient information data existed about the different types of pollution. Existing information about pollution could not be used and additional processing was needed but was impossible due to financial and time limitations. This led to a lack of alternatives and mitigation.

Collecting and obtaining information for the environmental assessment needs a certain level of finance. As long as the environmental assessment is not regulated by national legislation it will be difficult to convince the developers to make additional investments in time and money. In the Jurmala case, collection of environmental information was based on the awareness and good intentions of the town planners.

Since the assessment was prepared by the proponent and feedback was made through personal communications, there was also a lack of written reviews. These are very important in cases of doubt and also for further work on the development of a new plan (the existing one lasts 10 years).

The information collected and presented in the form of nature framework map was presented to the public (see above).

What was the outcome of the public participation exercise?

The amount of feedback was low and public opinion did not influence the decision-making. The public did not comment on strategic policy but were focused mainly on individual concerns.

During the planning some mitigation measures were incorporated into the plan: zoning of territory (each zone has specific development precondition), green (wildlife) corridors, intentions to promote transit-oriented traffic and provisions for alternative transport (bicycles).

Comments of participants in process:

The planning and assessment team consisted of the municipal officials (urban planners who led the planning process, environmental experts, economists and engineers), consultants and the subcontractors responsible for specific sectors, e.g. transport. Better feedback occurred through personal communications and not from the sending out of documents for consultation or receiving written feedback. Therefore, pressure from politicians on municipal officials to some extent influenced the materials prepared for the decision. Environmental information was collected and some specific nature framework plans were finished before the drafting of the land use plan. This was a mistake. The work of planners and environmentalists must be simultaneous. If this is not the case, the only ones who will decide on final versions will be the planning officials.

Further, the need for additional environmental information may arise during drafting, especially for inexperienced planners. This is very difficult to incorporate into an already completed plan. In the Jurmala case some problems appeared when a need for information on pollution from industries arose. This is one of the items kept out of the existing plan and therefore excluded in mitigation. A simultaneous start means having a broad representation of sectors and experts at the early stages, allowing them to decide which issues should be included in the environmental assessment.

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REC view on participation exercise:

The Jurmala case was the first city development plan including principles and notions of sustainable development in Latvia, and was one of the first municipalities to begin the Local Agenda 21 process. It received an EU Blue Flag certificate in 1999. The public hearings held in connection with the development plan were among the first in Latvia, and were not carried out under legal requirements existing at the time.

In the Jurmala case, there was no strong effort made to involve public in the decision-making. There was no public notice, no deadline announced for commenting, and no public hearings were organised. The method of survey of opinion could not bring in enough input from the public. The nature frame was presented for discussions of a wide range of specialists and the public, but the commenting only concerned individual concerns. At this time, the public in Latvia was not used to participating in such procedures, and exhibited a relative lack of sophistication. According to Latvian authorities, the situation has improved a great deal since this time, as more specific procedures are in place. Consequently, the public is much better informed and participates more actively.