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The citizen consultation in draft eco-neighborhoods in France: assessment and constructive development in European perspective

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Abstract: Since the '90, the question of citizen participation has been identified as a major challenge for an urban sustainable development. While the number of “eco-neighborhood” projects is increasing in France, gaining more support from the national authorities, one can ask what role has been devoted to citizen concertation¹ in such initiatives? Recent researches on European experiences show evidence of some advanced organizational schemes and systems in place, such as co-production or comanagement approaches. What about our country? By carrying out a constructive assessment of “eco-neighborhood” projects, this research will be an opportunity to realize the first national evaluation of such projects, either being accomplished or in the implementation phase. The central object of this investigation will be the relationship between citizen concertation and environmental concerns. We will analyze the way how such projects may transform the organization and the management of urban planning processes, including the knowledge and the know-how of the professional bodies. In the light of lessons learned from European experiences, this research will question the influence of political, juridical and technical dimensions that frame the urban planning projects and, more generally, of “cultures” and local regulations, on the integration of participative mechanisms in design and briefing processes. Our hypothesis is that the “model of public instruction” and its all-encompassing legitimacy, already identified as particularly important in the field of techno-scientific approaches during the last two centuries, plays a major role in the architectural and urban production in France. However, this field may also be structured by its own aspects, related on one hand to the fact that spatial design engages knowledge and know-how stemmed from artistic disciplines and, on the other hand, on the structural modes of public engineering, based on an important technical division of work and on a sequential approach of planning projects. The results of this research will lead to the proposition of a training and support program for the organization of citizen concertation processes in the production of sustainable urban projects. Owing to the diversity of partners engaged in this research and to their network, this program will reach actors from different “spheres”: political, scientific, technico-administrative and operational, civil society (community-based). The experiment currently driven by the "Institut d'architecture de la Cambre" in Belgium – member of our research team – as a “facilitator service” of “eco-neighborhoods” projects for the Bruxelles Capitale Region will be, in this perspective, especially precious.