

# From Research to Participation: An Attempt to Reset the Post-Soviet Southern Cities of Ukraine

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## Abstract

The study analyses the results of the five-month scientific and practical project "South Coast of Ukraine: from research to development" in 2020-2021. The aim is to rethink the development of cities in the Kherson region and find alternative scenarios of spatial transformations that can give impetus to qualitative ecological, socio-economic and socio-cultural changes in cities. The Ukrainian coastal cities of Henichesk and Skadovsk were selected as pilot cities. The study aimed to identify the shortcomings of this project in terms of effective involvement of city residents in project processes and develop proposals for resolving inconsistencies in further work with residents of these and other Ukrainian cities. The study identified the main reasons for the ineffectiveness of the project's impact, among which the main identified the incorrect methodology of participatory work. As a result of the research, it was found that, in the Ukrainian context, it is challenging to conduct participatory work - it turns into imitation. The expert community and entrepreneurship should be the driving forces of change to increase the effectiveness of decisions on urban development; Ukraine's post-Soviet participatory practice needs detailed research, taking into account real political and economic contexts.

## Keywords

Ukraine, urban changes, workshop, coastline, participatory approach

## 1 Introduction

Newly established communities on the Black Sea coast of the Kherson region (Ukraine) have significant recreational potential for tourism business development.

At the same time, the Kherson region currently ranks first among the poorest areas of Ukraine. The business environment in communities suffers from opacity, corruption, and difficulty attracting investment for development.

The Black and Azov Seas tourism sector does not have a clear development strategy. Regional and local councils usually have developed strategy papers, but they play a formal role. Enterprises located in the coastal strip do not participate in the development of goals set by the infrastructure development programs of the region and local communities. Excess funds are invested exclusively in developing their own business, and business goals often contradict regional projects. The de facto lack of strategic development in the region means that young people leave their hometowns in search of better jobs and livelihoods, and the cities themselves slowly disappear.

General shadowing of business processes in districts, namely stable integration of political power interests with

corruption schemes and criminal methods of capital accumulation, monopolistic influence on the state of competition in districts, lack of transparency of public bodies, and public tolerance of corruption in public authorities exacerbates negative trends. Political conditions and hidden economic processes remain the main driving force in decision-making on the development of the Kherson cities.

It should be noted that the process of deploying territorial and administrative reform in Ukraine, which involves expanding the powers of local authorities, increased the interest of the authorities in the loyalty of crucial community players – opinion leaders. The chairmen of the city councils began to demonstratively invite local activists to joint events, to the formats "coffee with the mayor", to conclude public memoranda of cooperation. But in practice, these steps were effective only for specific groups of activists who were either constantly loyal or publicly demonstrated reconciliation. This interaction did not so much influence political decisions and land use decisions with the participation of citizens as help a group of activists gain benefits and intangible bonuses, legitimizing the

current government's political and economic decisions in the eyes of the community.

For example, in 2021 in Kherson, the public council, which included representatives of the most authoritative public organizations and communities, addressed the mayor with a proposal to intensify the process of public consultations and on September 3, 2021, adopted an updated Community Charter. Article 15 of this document formally obliges the city government to hold public consultations, with the procedure determined by the regulation that stipulates that the responsible body of the city council must prepare an annual plan of discussions on issues agreed with the Public Council. It was envisaged that matters of public concern, which had not been submitted by the city authority before, could be added.

However, despite the implemented mechanisms for community participation in decision-making, city structures did not involve the public in Kherson in city development. No relevant unit was created, a draft plan for the following year was not developed, no public process was launched. The only tools to influence the decisions of the city authorities are public themed rallies and protests, which are not always successful.

Considering these processes, it is necessary to be aware that in the cities of the Kherson region, as well as in other Ukrainian cities, there is a low level of urban culture. Residents of post-Soviet cities have little experience implementing urban projects through participatory practices in general. For more than 70 years, the artificial implementation and management of the planned economy have wiped out cultural formats of cooperation between citizens and local authorities, which began to take shape in Ukrainian cities during the pre-Bolshevik period (Solovyova, 2009). Local communities have a low level of awareness of how modern cities are developing globally, the role of urban communities in these processes, and why they should unite to lobby their interests. Ukrainian society is characterized by division, isolation, and unwillingness to change the urban space outside the entrance or fence of its estate, as public territory is widely perceived not as the community's common property but as the property of city authorities.

Consequently, the current functioning of government bodies and doubtful agreements with corruption components regarding the directions and forms of development of urban areas are natural and very sustainable. The situational aspect and unpredictability of these decisions lead to a formalization of such global documents as the Strategy of regional / community/city development and all

urban planning documentation - general and detailed plans of territories, historical and reference plans. Regulatory documentation in such formats becomes an unnecessary bureaucratic hurdle that confronts the development opportunities. The situation is usual for the Kherson cities in which, with the newly adopted master plan, city structures begin to struggle, situationally supplement, make changes as to the purpose of certain land plots, and so on.

In the period from December 2020 to March 2021, the initiative group, which brought together scientists from Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa and public activists of Kherson (NGO Urban Re-Public), implemented a scientific and practical project "South Coast of Ukraine: from research to development" (Skadovsk, Genichesk), which aimed to rethink the development of coastal cities of the Kherson region - Genichesk (19424 inhabitants) and Skadovsk (17640 inhabitants). Researchers saw the implementation of this project as an opportunity to temporarily introduce a foreign agent of change, which would reveal different layers of urban problems from a scientific point of view and activate residents to look critically at the usual decision-making procedures for their urban development (Fig. 1).

The project aimed to build cooperation to further unite efforts to increase the tourist and economic potential of the region. It was envisaged that this project would strengthen



Fig. 1 Henichesk and Skadovsk. Current condition (Source: Urban Re-Public, Facebook group, 2021)

public support for local reforms, promote positive economic change, and become a starting point for the development of local development agencies.

As a result of the project, all short-term goals set by the project organizers were achieved, the project was praised among other public initiatives by the regions and cities inhabitants, government officials, donor organizations.

However, the long-term results have not been achieved. Despite further attempts by the team to continue working with local contexts in various formats and forms, by the end of 2021, interest and belief in the project and the team's ability to drive change in cities had been dashed.

The purpose of this study is to identify the shortcomings of a specific project, which provided for the widespread implementation of a participatory approach, and to develop proposals for resolving inconsistencies in future attempts to work with residents of these and other cities.

The materials presented in the article were collected and created in the process of implementing the scientific and practical project "South Coast of Ukraine: from research to development (Skadovsk, Genichesk)", which was implemented with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

## 2 Methodological basis of the study

Participatory practices are one of the proven ways in democratic countries to involve the public in decision-making and are widely used in urban planning practice. These practices have been actively developing since the middle of the last century and involve the coordinated work of all stakeholders (Arnstein, 1969; Healey, 2006; Hester, 1990; Innes and Booher, 2010).

The participatory approach aims to transform citizens into active participants in environmental development. There is a perception that locals can help officials and designers create more sustainable and equitable solutions for the community. Involving citizens in working with urban areas ensures the creation of mechanisms for the participation of all stakeholders in decision-making and the development and implementation of urban development projects. This results in a community of interested citizens who trust each other and participate in developing the project and its implementation (Dyer et al., 2017; Kondratiev et al., 2020; Snigireva, 2020).

In the post-Soviet countries, the participatory idea originated in the late 1970s, the preacher of these practices was Glazychev et al. (1995), who was an active supporter of the environmental approach in a broader interpretation

than in the USSR, when the environment was considered historical and natural, without regard to the needs of specific residents who used and lived in the area. Despite censorship restrictions in the USSR, he made several resonant translations of Western urban classics. Before the collapse of the USSR, Glazychev et al. managed to implement several experimental development programs in Tikhvin, Naberezhnye Chelny and Yelabuga, in which he managed to organize the collaboration of residents and government officials (Glazychev et al., 1995).

Glazychev's activity had a profound theoretical and practical impact on urban practices in post-Soviet countries. They were implemented in the cities of the Russian Federation to a greater extent, but Glazychev's followers, students and like-minded people were also in Ukraine, who began activities aimed at understanding and transforming post-Soviet cities and territories in the late 1990s (Buriak, 2006).

Since 2010, interest in participatory practices and urban planning in Ukraine has shown steadfastness. Relevant departments and disciplines have been opened in the leading architectural universities of the country, and research on changes in post-socialist cities has begun to be developed. For example, in terms of spatial transformations into topologically, functionally and morphologically distinct cities (Antypenko et al., 2022; Bouryak et al., 2017; Meerovich et al., 2018), the regional centre of the industrial region (Hnatiuk, 2017), regional and subregional centers in the rural areas (Melnyk et al., 2017), small monofunctional industrial (Hnatiuk, 2017) and rural (Melnyk et al., 2017), the outskirts of Kyiv (Batychenko, 2016). Recently, special attention has been paid to transforming public spaces in large cities as an integral and dynamic part of the urban environment (Hnatiuk and Kryvets, 2018).

The development processes of the Ukrainian urban movement have been uneven. In cities where vocational education institutions were available (Kyiv, Kharkiv, Lviv, Odesa) – such organizations were more sustainable; in other cities, such as Kherson, the urban movement was slow and had much less impact on spatial change. The strengthening of the urban movement in the Kherson region was the opening in 2018 of the specialist "Architecture and Construction" at Kherson State Agrarian and Economic University three years ago and at Kherson State University for future economists-geographers in 2020, a specialist course that included urban disciplines.

At the same time, practical urban initiatives began to appear en masse in Ukrainian cities, which were aimed at solving problems at various levels and in multiple

spheres of urban life (Demicheva, 2018; Khalepa, 2017; Okuneva, 2018). These initiatives have often been strengthened by including foreign scientists in the team or as experts, which has broadened contexts and helped make more objective professional decisions.

In the Kherson region, a public initiative that would be systematically created to develop cities at the local level has not been formed. The number of local civic activists limits interest in urban issues – the local NGO Urban Re-Public in 2020 conducted a large-scale project to preserve the modernist heritage of Kherson. The public Kherson organization Spilno Hub has been implementing city and regional cycling concepts for several years. Several urban initiatives (mostly objects of tactical urbanism) were implemented with grants from international donors by activists from other cities. Implemented projects are essential for actualizing issues related to preserving modernist heritage and cycling, but they do not provide for extensive systematic work with the urban space (Fig. 2).

At the same time, despite the widespread development of the urban movement in Ukraine, attempts to develop methods for participatory sessions or organizing working meetings with residents, we see a low level of implementation of project solutions developed. This is especially true of large strategic projects aimed at integrated urban development. Most Ukrainian activists work in tactical urbanism with small urban communities but with greater success in implementing their projects.

There is also a negative trend when urban activists accidentally or by conspiracy become an intermediate link between public resistance and the authorities linked to

certain commercial structures in the event of corrupt construction. By engaging in participatory sessions, activists create an artificial sense of security and trust in citizens that the issue can be resolved peacefully. However, as a rule, with minor corrections, construction projects are still implemented.

Implementing participatory practices in Ukraine is complex – it depends on the low level of civic consciousness of citizens, poor living standards, opaque decision-making on spatial development, lack of trust in government, and the degree of criminalization of all political processes. However, the problem of involving citizens in the decision-making process on urban planning is not local.

Modern researchers question that the shift from a rigid technocratic attitude to the cooperation of different stakeholders is a guarantee of fairness and balance (Forester, 1989; Healey, 2006). The search for optimal planning models and mechanisms for direct involvement of citizens in decision-making processes in democracies has been going on for more than 80 years (Albrechts, 2013; Friedmann, 1992; Healey et al., 1997; Sandercock, 1998), the introduction of participatory practices raises theoretical doubts.

Thus, Zetti in his study (Zetti, 2021), considering Tuscan experiences, notes that finding a balance in relationships and decisions between government and ordinary citizens is very difficult, as various reasons encourage planners and politicians to constantly return to technical rationality as an ethical guarantee or a force that levels the importance of working with the community. The responsibility of urban planners to coordinate and make choices cannot but create a "limited, approximate, simplified" model of the

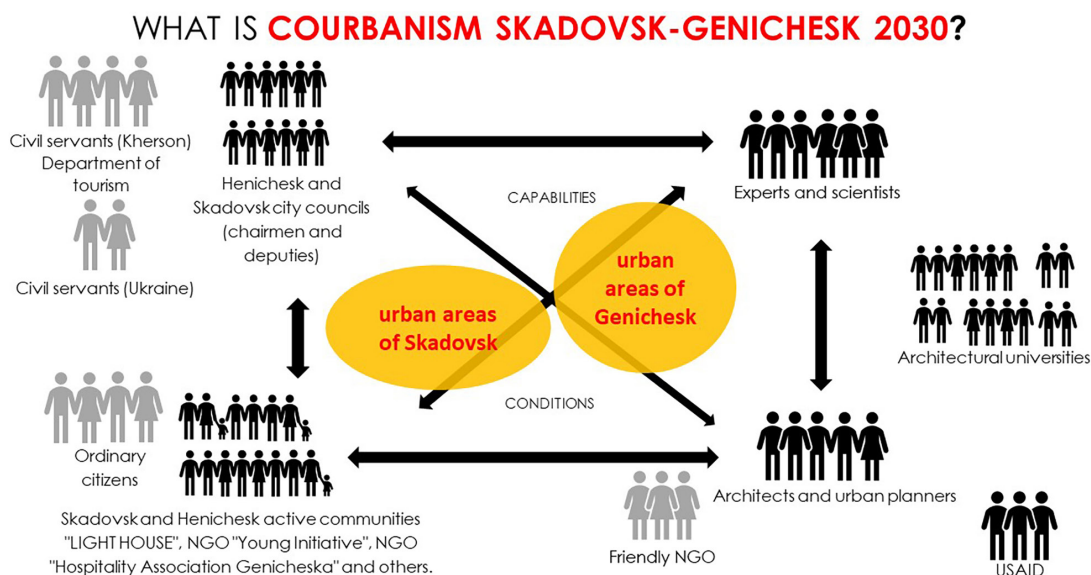


Fig. 2 Organizational structure of the territorial platform CO-URBANISM Genichesk/Skadovsk (Source: Urban Re-Public, Facebook group, 2021)

actual situation, which assumes that planning depends on a formalized methodology, as they cannot unambiguously determine the general interest (Arrow, 1951).

Sandin also raises the issue of justice and "ideal" participation. In her research, she demonstrated by example that participatory practices are often a predictable and manageable process and that local people are exploited to promote professional, political or lucrative decisions (Sandin, 2020).

In the case of the project, "South Coast of Ukraine: from research to development" (Skadovsk, Genichesk), the organizers faced several insurmountable circumstances that arose due to the flawed construction of a methodological approach to participatory participation. Procedural and demonstrative transparency and openness of the project made further development impossible under the established conditions.

### 3 Implementation and analysis of project results

The project was implemented in four stages – preparatory; development of training / preliminary project; project seminar; project presentation and reflection session (Fig. 3).

The first stage of the project included fieldwork. The architects conducted questionnaires, in-depth interviews, round tables with city officials, public meetings with locals, and explored the city. Thanks to this work, the most complicated areas of the city were identified, which can become resetting points for the town.

An expert group of specialists in related specialities was involved in the work and included urban planners, sociologists, economists, geographers, ecologists, and government officials. Teachers and students of Ukrainian architectural universities were invited for high-quality project work, namely: Odesa State Academy of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Kharkiv State University of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Kyiv National University of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Kherson Agrarian and Economic State University; Prydniprovska State

Academy of Civil Engineering and Architecture; leading Ukrainian architects-practitioners, including the Union of Architects (NGO "Method" (Kharkiv), NGO "Union of Architects of Odesa". All the results of the researchers' work were presented in lecture materials, which were broadcast online for two months in the format of open streams for seminar participants and local residents. Anyone interested in the project could ask questions from the experts and get professional advice.

To involve residents of Henichesk and Skadovsk in the process of designing the future of their cities, it was decided to invite as guarantors of dialogue, on the one hand, several local change agents in Henichesk and Skadovsk (both activists and NGOs), and on the other – local authorities. Guarantees of support were also received from the relevant committees of the Kherson Regional State Administration, and questionnaires were distributed on social networks, which could be filled out by anyone wishing to comment or join the project team (about 300 responses were received in each city). There were several separate meetings of local people to tell the designers about their activities, dreams and achievements; such close communication before the project workshop was to help hold the online project workshop in the next stage.

It was assumed that creating a scientific and practical platform in this format would preserve the balance of interests of both members of the public and representatives of political forces, as they were seen as opposition parties. A comprehensive analysis of the potential of cities because of professional expert opinions in sociology, economics, ecology, investment policy, cultural studies, tourism should have kept the discussion and the procedure of joint creation at a high professional level. Design solutions that were developed jointly had to be a sign of feasibility.

The main stage of the research seminar, "Skadovsk-Genichesk-2030", was held for seven days remotely in the format of ZOOM-conferences. Representatives of Henichesk

#### WORK STAGES

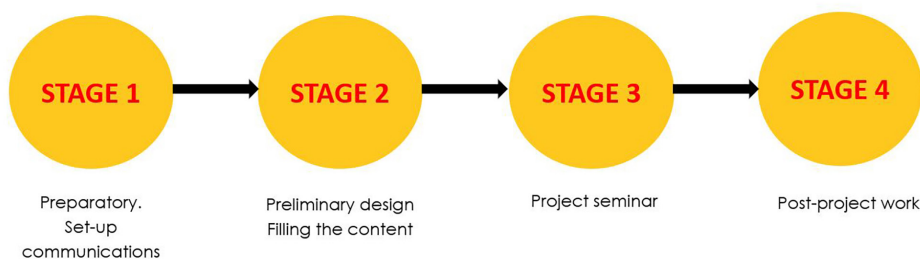


Fig. 3 Stages of the project (Source: Urban Re-Public, Facebook group, 2021)

and Skadovsk, local authorities, experts and architects were involved in the work. The project teams included urban architects and some of the most active local residents.

Based on the project results, project concepts and ideas were developed to form the basis for further roadmaps for city development, new project seminars with narrower topics, writing city programs and projects, and development of design estimates (Figs. 4 and 5).

In Skadovsk, projects for the revitalization of abandoned areas were developed at the level of project concepts. Namely: three visions each for the revitalizing of the port territory, the territory of the cannery, and the former oil depot; four visions for the development of quarter buildings for the formation of a new facade of streets near the shoreline; three concepts of development and functional content of the "Children's Beach". In addition, issues and topics that could be adopted for further development were raised: proposals for the development of the city's project code, the creation of a green framework for the city, rethinking certain urban public spaces. Also research projects requested by the Skadovsk municipality and



Fig. 4 Field research, meetings with citizens and representatives of municipal authorities (Source: Urban Re-Public, Facebook group, 2021)



Fig. 5 Project proposals of the Skadovsk teams (Source: Urban Re-Public, Facebook group, 2021)

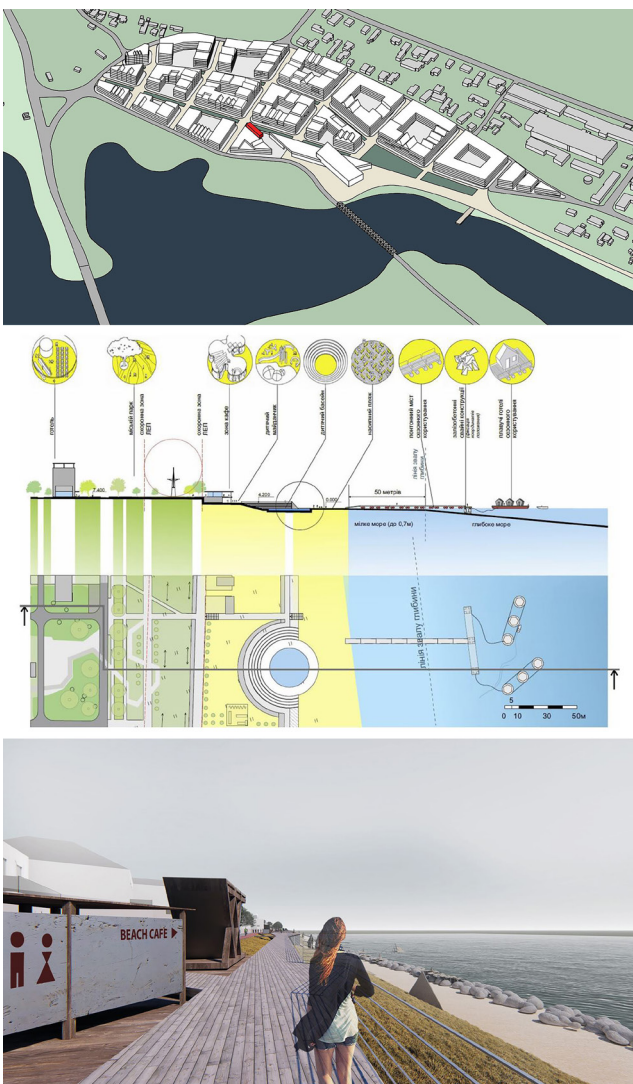
community: a comprehensive study on year-round landscaping in Skadovsk; comprehensive study of the coastline with the development of proposals for coastal measures.

In Henichesk, projects for the revitalization of urban areas were also developed at the level of project concepts: two visions for the development of the "bridge", the idea of creating a thermal complex, three visions for the development of neighborhood buildings to form a new facade of streets near the coast; three concepts of development and new functional content of the continuous coastline of the city (creation of the embankment). Proposals that were discussed and recorded as necessary topics for further development: proposals for developing the city's project code, rethinking urban spaces (including urban cemeteries).

Preliminary plans for research projects have been formulated: a comprehensive study on the typical selection

of plant species for year-round landscaping of Genichesk; a comprehensive survey of the coastline and proposing a set of coastal measures, and a comprehensive study of the geothermal potential of the region (Fig. 6).

Creating a local city development agency was considered a possible tool for project implementation in the future. It was envisaged that this institution could be a guarantor of future change. During the project seminar, discussions were held with active citizens on establishing city development agencies. The resources available in the cities are analyzed: who can take responsibility and head such an institution (human resources); what functions will be performed by the agency; what are its competencies; what should be the organizational and legal form; how to solve personnel issues; ways to involve experts and managers in outsourcing; opportunities for learning and skills development.



**Fig. 6** Project proposals of the Genichesk teams Genichesk/Skadovsk  
 (Source: Urban Re-Public, Facebook group, 2021)

However, the openness to all that the project promoted proved to be a major issue, questioning the objectivity of the results.

In the course of the work, it turned out that the selected groups of key activists, both in Henichesk and in Skadovsk, had some political influence in the community and had agreements in their areas of activity with the city authorities. The plots proposed for consideration and further design by the mayors were supported by activists who, although positioning themselves as independent and in some ways opposition players, sought to maintain a balance of their relationship with the city authorities. Those random participants who did not have an agreement and interest in the loyalty of the authorities dropped out of the circle of close acquaintances of key activists, gradually dropped out of the project, or, despite the organizers' efforts, remained unheard by other participants.

Such work, when the main energy of all players was aimed at balancing and maintaining local rules of the game, made it impossible. On the one hand, the authorities took the initiative - because the existing city procedures did not have mechanisms for the implementation of projects, but they wanted to get them, this was beneficial for the image of the city government. On the other hand, the city authorities hampered the initiatives promoted by the public, since the creation of a local territorial development agency threatened the stability of hidden corrupt mechanisms of interaction, undermined the private relations of individual citizens with the authorities.

Another factor not considered when developing the workshop's methodology was the low level of trust in professional knowledge. Scientific information, which experts gradually presented, was not always beneficial to certain locals, as they supported certain myths and ideas for private peace or benefit. After implementing the project, it became apparent that building understanding between the specialist and the non-specialist required more effort in terms of general educational activities.

Following the end of the project, a month-long work was carried out with the project participants – local activists to understand the project's results and develop a program of further action. However, this initiative did not find a logical continuation, and the meetings gradually stopped.

At the same time, the team tried to understand the attitude of city councils to the prospects for further cooperation. Despite the good positive attitude of both chairmen of city councils to the organizers and the team, acceptance of the decision to continue and deepen work within urban

areas was hampered by political and economic factors. Investing budget funds in the development of project proposals and long-term research was politically unprofitable and would not enhance the authority of community leaders in the context of existing urban problems.

#### 4 Results of the research

As a result of the analysis of the project and post-project work:

1. It was found that in the context of Ukrainian political culture and established decision-making practices on territorial development, the choice of such support people as government officials and members of the active public is not a guarantee of justice and balance in participatory practices. In this format, participatory work becomes an imitation of participation, excludes participants from work unfavorable to both parties, does not allow for further decision-making, as it threatens the sustainability of the system of governance and interaction with the community.
2. It is determined that the participation and inclusion of residents of Ukrainian cities in decision-making processes on territorial development require detailed research in terms of their theoretical and practical principles. Understanding the experience will allow us to build optimal models for building relationships between stakeholders regarding "justice" and balance of influence. Research should take into account the problems of shadowing political and economic processes inherent in Ukrainian urban planning.
3. It was found that the expert community of Ukraine can be a driving force for positive change, but a low level of trust is a deterrent. It is necessary to develop mechanisms for effective educational work that will increase and strengthen the authority of the scientific community.

4. It is assumed that the key stakeholders around whom further experimental participatory work can be developed maybe a circle of local entrepreneurs. They can build relationships with city officials and are not in opposition as social activists, they also have clear commercial intentions and are interested in developing their business as a scalable system. There is a need to implement a pilot project aimed at stimulating the development of the hospitality industry along with the coastal areas of the Kherson region by increasing the level of business competencies and skills of entrepreneurs and creating conditions for merging individual businesses into a tourism cluster to protect common interests.

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