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Children's participation in the planning process

Environmental Impact Assessment, EIA, is implemented in Swedish planning since more than 25 years. In recent years the consequences for children's life, movements, and possibilities for activities has been in focus and Swedish planners launched Children's EIA. Since the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) will become Law in Sweden 2020 it is even more urgent to explore how we can fulfill the Convention's expectations as architects and planners.

A number of Articles in UNCRC were significant in this work and they are very important for all planners to take into account.

- **Article 2** about non-discrimination. The Convention applies to every child without discrimination, whatever their ethnicity, sex, religion, language, abilities or any other status, whatever they think or say, whatever their family background.
- **Article 3** about the best interests of the child. The best interest of the child must be a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children.
- **Article 6** about life, survival and development. Every child has the right to life. Governments must do all they can to ensure that children survive and develop to their full potential.
- **Article 12** about respect for the views of the child. Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times, for example during immigration proceedings, housing decisions or the child's day-to-day home life.
- **Article 31** about leisure, play and culture. Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities.

One important part of the Children's EIA is that the Children get the opportunity to participate in the planning process, Article 12 in the UNCRC. For that reason Stockholm's planning office started a new planning process called Integrated Environmental Assessment for Children. The process has four stages and starts with a dialogue with local children living in the area that is to be changed. The dialogue is often implemented with focus groups and questionnaires. The planning process is after that followed by a "Children's consultant" that makes evaluations step by step during the process according to consequences for children. But the children are not participants after the initial consultation, they get feedback but no more impact.

In one particular plan the planners let the children participate in a more direct way. A researcher consultant have done five Walk Through Evaluations together with totally 100

schoolchildren, grade 2 and 5 (age 8 and 11 years old) in the beginning of the planning process in springtime 2018. Bringing the result back to the planners with a lecture and a documentation for the planners to use. And when the plan was exhibited one year later, in spring 2019, a group of 60, of the same schoolchildren (now grade 6 and 12 years old) got the opportunity to write their own comments on the planning proposal in the formal consultation process. The planning process was in autumn 2019 continuing with changes as result of the consultation process. A new version will be reviewed in springtime 2020 and the hope of the planners is that it can be determined by the city planning authority by the end of 2020.

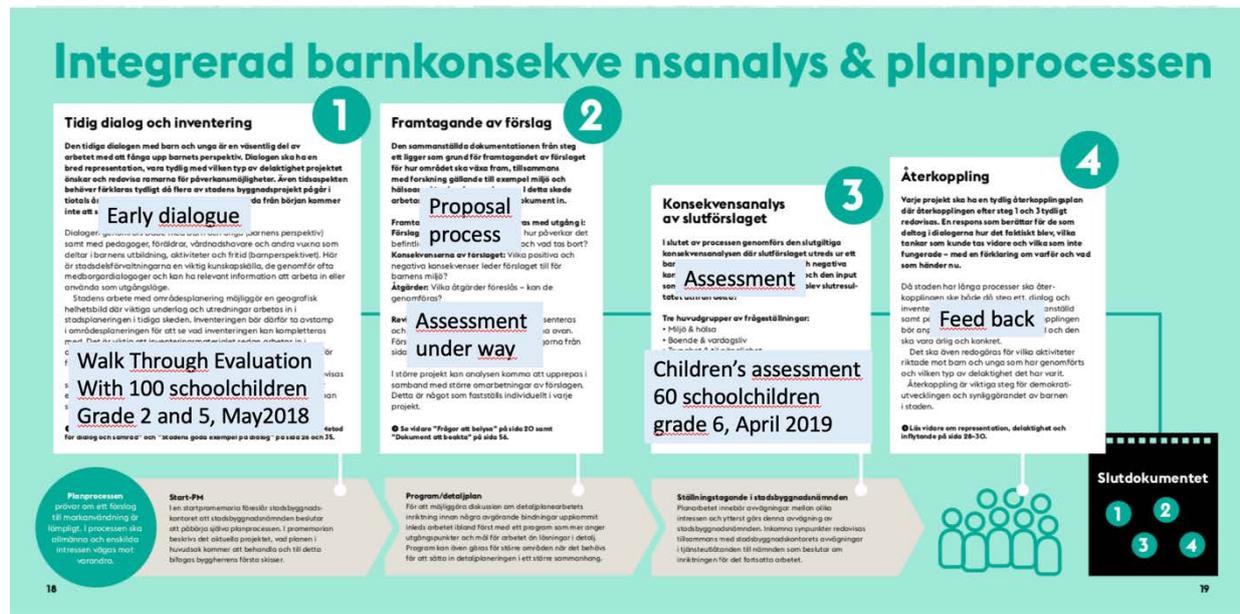


Figure 1. The planning process described in a publication from City Planning Office in Stockholm with four stages, 1 Early dialogue, 2 Proposal process, 3 Assessment, 4 Feed back.

The plan area and the plan

The plan area is situated in a suburb called Vårberg in Skärholmen, a classic modern habitation area from the “Miljonprogrammet” (1 million new dwellings in ten years 1965–1975). It is situated approximately 16 kilometers southwest of Stockholm city center and the intention is to densify the built area with more high rise buildings making the area look more like a city than a suburb. Vårberg has got a subway station and a small center with shops. There is a school and approximately four kindergartens. Vårberg has today 9000 inhabitants and the actual plan “Stångholmsbacken” will produce 685 new dwellings (could result in 1000–2000 more inhabitants) There is a website describing the plan

<https://vaxer.stockholm/projekt/stangholmsbacken/>



Figure 2. The plan area with all new buildings in white along the street. The marked areas were especially interesting for the children. 1. is a park that will be refurbished with new playground equipment. 2. is a central area that will be totally changed with a square and new playground equipment. An underground pedestrian passage will be taken away. 3. is now a playground and a garage that will be transformed into a pure habitation area. The playground will be replaced or compensated by the playgrounds in 2 and 1. The playground is called the Garage Park.

Dialogue with Walk Through Evaluation

A Walk Through Evaluation is a method where participants walk in the actual setting. They stop at some chosen places and write down their personal observations. They have three questions to answer: What is good? What is bad? Suggestions to improve the place? During the walk och directly afterwards you have a dialogue with the group of participants about their notations. The dialogue is recorded and the participants written notations are collected. The whole Walkthrough is documented in a memorandum illustrated with photos from the event.

The 100 schoolchildren that participated in the Walkthroughs were all pupils in the nearby school, and most of them live in the area that will be exploited with new dwellings. We did two Walkthroughs with children in grade 2, 40 children and three Walkthroughs with children in grade 5, 60 children.

Two planners participated in two of the five Walkthroughs. The planners had the opportunity to explain why this plan was going to be realized. The children expressed their thoughts and asked well-grounded questions. Unfortunately we could not have planners in all Walkthroughs. I as project leader and leader of the Walkthroughs had to act as representative for the planners and explain what the plan was about, the planning process and the time plan for the future. The children were asked to imagine being ten years older and maybe they would like to live in one of the new dwellings. The children seized the opportunity to ask all kinds of questions and they had a lot of suggestions for to improve the environment.



Figure 3. Project leader meeting the schoolchildren. Answering to the question: Why do you want to build houses here?

Children's participation in the formal planning process

One year after the Walkthroughs, in spring 2019, the formal planning proposal was exhibited and 60 of the children, all the children now in grade 6, were invited to give comments on the proposal. First they had a lecture when the project leader planner presented the plan and the time table for the plan, showing pictures, maps and other background material to explain the plan. After the presentation the students could study a big built model of the entire planned new habitation and the surrounding environment. Standing around the model, the students could ask questions to two participating planners. The planners also presented the model and explained what they could see in the model. The students were separated in three groups of approximately 20 students. So there were three similar presentations during one day.



Figure 4. The planner presents the plan proposal to the students.

The days after I visited the three school classes and they were asked to give their opinions about the proposed plan. All planning material, maps, perspective images, descriptions and investigations was presented to them in the classroom. The schoolchildren worked in groups of two or three and wrote down their opinions. All their notes were collected and sent to the City Planning Office as formal referral responses.



Figure 5. The schoolchildren studying the proposal and writing down their comments.

What did the schoolchildren think about the plan?

The children expressed during the Walkthroughs 2018 very clearly that they liked the playground that was to be taken away, the Garage Park. They liked the playground and especially the swings. The playground is situated very near the school so they can go there on longer breaks. They had a lot of suggestions for to improve the playground, since it is really not a well-kept area.

When the children in grade 6 (2019) wrote their own opinions about the plan proposal we had the following result:

- All the school children had understood that there will be a change
- 52% thought that the area will be too crowded with new buildings
- 27% did not like the design of the new buildings
- 37% were positive about the plan and gave positive suggestions
- 33% wanted the Garage Park to be kept as playground
- 42% liked the new parks/playgrounds and gave creative suggestions for the parks: swings, climbing frame, cableway etc.
- Suggestions for the area: cafe, fast food restaurant, swimming, sports center
- Some of the pupils thought that it will take too long time before the plan is realized

What was the result of this Integrated Children's EIA?

The result is first of all an acknowledgement that the schoolchildren are stakeholders, since they live in the area and go to school in the area, and they were consulted in the planning process. They were consulted on the same conditions as other stakeholders. They participated in full scale and wrote down their opinions of the plan proposal. The children had their say, and perhaps their comments will be used by the planners. They will at least be considered. Level 3 in Harry Shier's five levels of participation:

1. Children are listened to.
2. Children are supported in expressing their views.
3. Children's views are taken into account.
4. Children are involved in decision-making processes.
5. Children share power and responsibility for decision-making.

Shier states that level 3 of his model is the minimum practice needed to meet the requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12. (Shier, 2001)

The Walkthrough-comments from all 100 children the year before was properly presented to all planners during the planning process and became part of the basis for the plan proposal.

My role as a "Children's consultant" during the planning process was also crucial for the final result. I participated in a number of planning meetings where we discussed where to place s future kindergarten and how the refurbished respective new built square with playground equipment should be designed. I also criticized the solutions for traffic and for children's safe way to school and traffic questions for the playgrounds. So the children's perspective was taken into account during the design process as well. Finally I made a statement in a document called Integrated Children's Environmental Impact Assessment, where I commented the whole plan from the perspective of children's use of the area.

Another important result of this process was that the schoolchildren were learning about how society works. They were presented what a planning process is and how you can participate. They also learnt about how the planning process is connected to the political system. They learnt that they can participate but not decide for themselves. They can give their opinion and then the politicians make the decision.

In this process the schoolchildren were meeting professionals as planners, project leaders and architect/researcher and they also heard about many other professions that had made different investigations as basis for the plan proposal. They were presented architectural 3D presentations presenting the future environment. They can also follow the formal planning process via City of Stockholm's website. During the lesson in the classroom they were presented the website and the documentation of the Walkthroughs the year before.

Another outcome of presenting planning proposal to schoolchildren is that you can reach their parents as well. The children were all given a small brochure about the plan, to bring home to their parents and were asked to tell at home about this event and to invite their parents to the plan exhibition in the local library.

References

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