



Why Participation Matters in Post-Conflict Cities

Unit 1: Introduction



Co-funded by
the European Union

What Is a 'Post-Conflict City'?

Scholars in urban peace and conflict studies note that cities are often seen as places with real potential to transcend social divisions — spaces where diverse populations mix in everyday life. But a post-war city can also be contested by different actors who use, regulate, and symbolize space in ways that sustain polarized communities and preserve wartime gains. Such cities are sometimes called divided cities - not fully at war, but not fully at peace either, caught in an unfinished transition (Haider, 2020). Sarajevo, like Mostar, Belfast, and Nicosia, is frequently studied in this literature as exactly this kind of city (Björkdahl & Strömbom, 2015).

Citizen participation is not merely a democratic ideal; it matters greatly in cities recovering from conflict. This presentation walks through five reasons why the stakes and the risks are higher here than in stable democracies.



1. Trust Is Already Damaged

- Post-conflict societies carry deep institutional mistrust. Armed conflict measurably reduces institutional trust (De Juan & Pierskalla, 2016). Unlike citizens in stable democracies, people in post-conflict societies haven't yet settled their beliefs about institutions — they're still deciding whether to trust them (Wong, 2016).
- That means every participatory process does double duty: it doesn't just gather input; it builds or breaks trust in real time.
- Pseudo-participation deepens that mistrust further — every time citizens are “consulted” and their voice changes nothing, it confirms the sense that institutions don't deserve trust. This makes every future attempt at engagement harder, even a genuine one.



2. The Stakes Are Higher

- Decisions about public space in post-conflict cities — squares, monuments, neighborhood boundaries — are often tied to identity, territory, and memory of the conflict. (Bădescu, 2015).
- When residents are treated as passive recipients of reconstruction rather than participants, it fails to address the war's effects on communities — a missed opportunity to rebuild trust, not just buildings (Bădescu, 2015).
- When such decisions are imposed under the guise of participation, they can reopen the very divisions that led to conflict in the first place.



3. Legal Frameworks Create False Security

- Legal requirements for public participation are common worldwide — but research across very different legal systems shows they're often treated as a procedural formality, not a substantive contribution (Olsen & Feeney, 2022).
- In Novo Sarajevo, public hearings before budget adoption are a legal requirement, yet the municipality itself describes citizen involvement as limited to public presentations of already-finished plans, acknowledging it relies heavily on top-down methods (Tatlić, 2024).
- The lesson generalizes: a legal mandate for participation guarantees that a process happens — it doesn't tell you where on Arnstein's Ladder that process will actually land.



4. Fragmented Governance Opens Space for Manipulation

- BiH's power is split across state, entity, and cantonal levels, leaving the state genuinely weak relative to entity administrations (Fagan & Sircar, 2010).
- Research on BiH shows formal compliance with legal procedures doesn't guarantee real governance behind it — the same gap seen in the legal-mandate point, here rooted in BiH's structure.
- This fragmentation opens space to pick up, ignore, or override participation results depending on which level of government is asked — with no one body clearly accountable.



5. Reconciliation Requires a Real Voice

- Peace deals are often negotiated at the top by political leaders, international mediators, and elites, while the people actually living with the consequences have little say in shaping them. Peacebuilding scholars argue this is a weakness, not a strength: lasting reconciliation depends on ordinary people having genuine ownership over their own future, not just watching leaders decide it for them (Lederach, 1997).
- If the goal is genuine ownership over the future, pseudo-participation works against it. It repeats the pattern of exclusion that helped cause the conflict in the first place.



Next: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

