

**Territorial intelligence is also networking!**  
**Which strategies could be adopted to create a learning community**  
**regarding a public place?**

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**Abstract:**

Although tools and methods are of major importance for territorial intelligence, each action research begins with the creation of a network of actors and researchers. How to do this? Which strategies are the most efficient and ethically acceptable? The paper analyses how stakeholders of a public place were joined to work together on a new approach of management and use of a certain public place. It compares the different networking strategies used in the five case studies of the Topozym action research.

**Keywords:**

Networking, Public place, Action Research, Community of learning, recruiting participants, territorial intelligence.

The Topozym action research ([www.topozym.be](http://www.topozym.be)) aims at helping develop concepts and practices in projects of management and use of public places and spaces with regard to sustainability. As a part of the Topozym project (2007-2008), the Topozym team followed five running projects in public places in Belgium: Park Spoor Noord (Antwerp), RAVeL (Charleroi), Christmas Village (Liège), Muntstraat (Leuven), Bathing place in the river Ourthe (Noiseux). For each case study an analysis of the sustainability of the project was followed by training sessions led by trainers of the Topozym team. In other words, in order to improve the sustainability of public places and spaces, the Topozym project opted for a methodology combining research, training and action, in which a partnership with stakeholders of five running projects in defined public places was created. The idea was to constitute five learning communities for the five projects in question in order to rethink concepts and practices from a sustainable point of view.

The question of who to include in the partnership and process was of major importance for the success of the Topozym project. Following the stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), the Topozym

research took into account a wide variety of points of view to grasp the complexity of public place. Participants to the trainings, who would ideally become members of a stable learning community, should thus be stakeholders with diverse functions, skills and intelligences (Gardner, 2006). We postulate that sustainable development of public places needs to encompass both a broad series of vocational experts, as well as representatives of users, including those who are usually forgotten or ignored. Going beyond improving group dynamics of existing teams, the Topozym action research bridges (Gittel, Vidal, 1998) people who usually do not work together.

This paper analyses how people were joined and stimulated to work together before and during the training sessions of each case study. It focuses on the balance between research, actions, and training in an action research. It compares the different recruiting strategies used in the Topozym project, from an efficiency, and an ethical point of view. Although tools and methods are of major importance for territorial intelligence, each action research in territorial intelligence begins with networking. Curiously enough finding advice on this crucial question in literature is difficult. The answer to the following question can thus only be answered based on experience: which strategies are the most efficient and ethically acceptable?

The only two incentives offered to the stakeholders to motivate their participation in the learning community were (1) the opportunity to learn a new way of working and (2) taking the time to think about a project with the help of trainers and researchers. A more concrete investment of the Topozym team in the project or public place in question or a specific retribution for each participant would have probably changed the recruitment and the participation in the action research.

As was already discussed in Huelva (Schmitz, De Graef, 2008), we recognize it would have been better to negotiate the research project with the partners when writing the proposition to obtain a grant, but it was difficult to motivate so many partners from different backgrounds to work together on a project without financing or security to get financed. Moreover, it is not usual for actors to candidate research grants.

The Topozym project was a one shot action aiming at small changes of practices. The Topozym action research must be seen as an enzyme that accelerates the awareness of people for another way of working that is more sustainable, and more participative. However, it will be an unexpected success if the work done during this short time by the five groups may have positively influenced the sustainability of their action and if the five groups of participants really became or become a learning community.

## **I. In theory**

An internal discussion within the Topozym team tried to find answers to the question of which strategies of networking are the most efficient and ethically acceptable. When asking Topozym researchers and trainers what the three most relevant issues one has to be aware of when recruiting people to join a group are to them, several issues came up that for different reasons had not at all or not fully been taken into account during the research.

A first group of recommendations that came up during the discussion within the Topozym team deals with the composition of the group. The group has to be varied (representing different skills and intelligences) in order to allow rich exchanges going beyond expert discussions on a specific topic. Nevertheless, the Topozym researchers and trainers underline that the members of the group should share the same aspirations and share the will to engage in the process of finding a way to reach these aspirations together. We prefer focusing on aspirations because they are often easier to share than needs, aims, projects or common history. Focusing on aspirations also seems more effective when trying to find innovative ways to solve problems.

Other recommendations were oriented on practical issues, but appear necessary to make the networking successful: the clarification or negotiation of the work rules, the transparency and easy access of information, the equal opportunity to speech and influence the group. Finally, it seems important to lessen time and space constraints to be able to work in depth, to know and work better together. For instance, making certain choices concerning timing and location of the meetings clearly influences the kind of stakeholders that can and want to participate.

According to the literature on social capital the key features of groups are not only the network of people but especially the confidence between the partners and the sharing of norms (Colemans, 1990). The same line of thought can be found in the two mechanisms pointed out by Ruuskanen (2004) who insists that the increasing of the trust inside the community and the good communication within

the group are the two main ways to empower a community. These theoretical statements were confirmed during the internal discussion based on the Topozym experiences with networking.

## II. In Practice

The way we recruited the different persons to participate in the training, differed for many reasons from our own theoretical recommendations. The five projects were so diverse that adaptations were necessary. The researchers did use a common protocol in order to be able to compare the different case studies. The main reason for the divergence between theory and practice was the difficulty to combine research, training and action objectives (see Schmitz, De Graef, 2008). Due to the research background of the project and the time constraints, the researchers hurried to find partners and wanted to impose their timing to the community of stakeholders. For instance in the Muntstraat, the economic relevance of the realization of the renovation works influenced the projects' timing in that way that it no longer allowed a real training phase. In the case of Park Spoor Noord the project was highly influenced by important switches of the staff, that led to a necessary renegotiation of the collaboration with the Topozym team.

Reflecting on networking also raises the discussion of the need for an indicator to evaluate the networking process. What is "good networking"? Is the number of participants that important? Is it the diversity or the representativeness of the different stakeholders that counts? Does one has to look forward and acknowledge that the progress made by the group is more significant than the groups composition? Or does one has to focus on the results in the projects actions? Of course, we believe that the means need to be in accordance with the goal and that the different levels – from the personal to the global one – have to be taken into account in the evolution of the action research.

The protocol used by the researchers to recruit participants advised starting with a key stakeholder, asking him or her who the other stakeholders were, and who – from his point of view – had to take part in the action research. Based on a snowballing process, a core group was thus constituted. Concurrently, on the basis of the analysis of the project and of visits to the place by the researchers, the researchers defined the missing stakeholders and asked them to join the group. This second path aimed at enriching the core group constituted via the snowballing process. In addition, two different strategies were tested for the different case studies, in the Topozym research: individual interviews before a synchronisation meeting with all the potential participants or a synchronisation meeting without preceding interviews..

Based on the protocol and the Topozym experience, three main issues need to be addressed. Who to choose as a key person to begin the snowballing process? Is it right to include people from outside the snowballing process? Is it better to start with a plenary meeting or to take off with personal interviews before the first meeting?

## III. Results and discussion

According to the five Topozym case studies, it appears to be important that the key person is relatively stable in his position, works close to or in the field, shares the aspirations of the project and is not too high in the hierarchy. For instance, in one case in a rural area, the Mayor was involved to soon and several other participants felt obliged to take part in the group. This situation was difficult to manage during the training sessions. We learned from the case studies – including the aborted ones – that it is very important to obtain the agreement of the hierarchy, especially the agreement of the public authority responsible for the public place in question, as soon as possible.

In all the cases we chose to include people selected from outside the snowballing process. The idea was to enrich the group with new people, new points of view and new skills. These inclusions were not easy and requested a specific attention from the part of the trainer. We have to confess that we did not clarify as clearly as we could have to the group how the participants were recruited and who decided to invite these particular persons. This was particularly problematic in the scenario where no preceding interviews had had place and people were joined immediately for a synchronisation meeting. In Noiseux, several people invited directly to a synchronisation meeting did not understand the reason of their presence. Some of them made a mixture between the Topozym research and the local project that Topozym proposed to follow. Due to this lack of explanation on the Topozym goal, some of the participants were irritated and reacted strongly against the Topozym initiative.

Another problem was the difference in aspirations between the participants. Some stakeholders really invested in the place in question, but they did not have the same aspirations as the core group.

This was, for example, the case for the Christmas village of Liege. The key persons were the organisers of the event, who were perceived as private actors organising a private event on the central public square. They wanted to balance the economic, the environmental and the social pillars. However, the public square is relevant for the other stakeholders too, who we tried to include in the process. These stakeholders felt out of scope because the Christmas village was “not their project”. The presence of the organisers as key persons was also problematic because the training process strengthened their central position within the group.

Starting the process with a synchronisation meeting appears interesting from an ethical point of view, because everyone receives the same information and may decide to continue after a first meeting with the group. However, it demands moderators with high skills in group dynamics and a huge effort of communication in accordance with the diversity of the public. The moderator has to put everyone on the same level and has to be attentive to the distribution of power amongst the group. Beginning with a face to face meeting may be more personal and more motivating, because the future participants are given the opportunity to explain their motivations and their fears individually. This process needs more time and investment from the researchers and trainers of course. However, in the Topozym experience it seemed to be of importance especially because of the few meeting sessions that would later on be organised and because the people were not used to the tools and methods used during the training.

## Conclusion

Recruiting people to work together is always a challenge. When this work concerns public places within a participative approach, this challenge is even bigger, because the process has to be opened up to a wide variety of stakeholders. The elaboration of the network needs to take into account the diversity of stakeholders, in particular the diversity of their needs and aspirations. A protocol is useful but needs to be adapted to the local context. As the Topozym experience suggests: researchers and trainers need to experiment with a new path each time. A key principle seems to be finding a way to project the stakeholders in the future, and to focus on their aspirations instead to get bogged down in the diversity of present needs.

The second issue we underlined seems trivial, but experience teaches us that it cannot be emphasised enough: partnerships require time. The duration of the Topozym research was too short to really establish strong learning communities. Because establishing a community is more than join people, it is as well a work on the truth and the circulation of information within the group. Nevertheless, some members of the network constituted in the Topozym action research are still working together and have adopted small changes in their way of working.

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