

Joost PLATJE
Opole University, Poland

ACCESS TO ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION IN THE OPOLE REGION¹

1. Introduction

This paper presents the first results of a research project on access to environmental information. Making information available on, for example, the state of the environment or the impact of investments on the environment is supposed to be a task for various levels of government. However, access to environmental information does not only mean that the government should inform citizens, but also that citizens may undertake actions to obtain information themselves. The research presented here focuses on how easy or difficult it is for citizens or organisations to obtain information on environmental matters by telephone, mail and e-mail. The research was carried out in the Opole region in Poland between February and April 2003, and should be used as a basis for further research on this topic.

2. The research – access to information by telephone, mail and e-mail

The region in which this research on access to environmental information was carried out is the Opole region (*województwo Opolskie*), also called Opole Silesia. It is one of the smallest of the 16 Polish provinces with regard to area (9,412 square km, less than 3% of Polish territory),

¹I am indebted to the students of the Student Academic Circle on Sustainable Development at the Faculty of Economics of Opole University, for their help in carrying out the research.

and has one of the smallest populations (1,084,700 in 2000) [GUS, 2001]. The Opole region consists of 82 administrative units – 1 provincial, 11 districts (*powiat*) and 70 municipalities (*gmina*). Those administrative units whose telephone number, address or e-mail address was available on www.slaskopolski.pl, a web-site with information on administrative units in the Opole province, were contacted for information.

2.1. Request for Information by Telephone

A telephone number was available for 66 municipalities. The research was conducted by students of the Student Scientific Circle on Sustainable Development at the Faculty of Economics of Opole University, who wanted to obtain information regarding the following questions: Does a municipality have a spatial development plan? If such a plan exists, how can it be obtained?

54 of the 66 municipalities approached (81.8%) answered the phone (a maximum of 3 calls were made to a municipality). Of those 54 municipalities, 45 possess a spatial development plan, while 9 municipalities do not possess such a plan. In almost all of the cases where a spatial development plan exists (43 out of 45), information can be obtained on the premises of the administrative unit. Two of these municipalities have information available in another way. One municipality indicated that information can be obtained in another way, while one municipality did not answer the question.

The average length of a telephone call to administrative units that answered the phone ($N = 54$) was 3 1/4 minutes. The distribution of the length of phone calls is given in Table 1. The number of times a call was transferred to another person in the administrative unit is presented in Table 2. In most of the cases the telephone was transferred once or twice. The number of telephone calls made before a connection was obtained with the administrative unit is shown in Table 3. In most of the cases (39) one call was enough. In 12 cases 2 calls were needed, while in 3 cases someone picked up the phone at the third attempt. However, in 12 cases, after 3 attempts, no connection was obtained.

After each telephone call a subjective mark was given for the quality of the service by the administrative unit, ranging from 1 (very bad) to 5 (very good). Data are presented in Table 4. The service was considered to be unsatisfactory in only 2 cases, while in more than 50% of the cases the service was considered to be good or very good. The average mark was 3.89, which suggests that the service was considered to be rather good.

Table 1. Length of telephone calls to administrative units that answered the phone

Length of telephone call	Number of administrative units
1 minute	2
2 minutes	13
3 minutes	21
4 minutes	9
5 minutes	7
6 minutes	1
7 minutes	1
Average length: 3 1/4 minutes	54

Source: Author's own research.

Table 2. Number of times a call was transferred to another person in the administrative unit

Number of call transfers	Number of administrative units
0	8
1	28
2	14
3	4
	54

Source: Author's own research.

Table 3. Number of telephone calls made before a connection was obtained with an administrative unit

Number of telephone calls	Number of administrative units
1	39
2	12
3	3
no connection	12
	66

Source: Author's own research.

Table 4. Quality of service from an administrative unit

Mark for quality of service	Number of administrative units
1.0 (very bad)	0
1.5	0
2.0 (bad)	1
2.5	1
3.0 (satisfactory)	9
3.5	14
4.0 (good)	11
4.5	9
5.0 (very good)	9
Average mark: 3.89	54

Source: Author's own research.

2.2. Request for Information by Mail

A letter was sent to all 82 administrative units in the Opole province on 10 February 2003 by a secondary school pupil, who wanted to obtain information on types of protected trees and endangered and extinct animals in the area of an administrative unit for educational purposes. It was asked whether an administrative unit can provide information and, if not, how the information can be obtained.

Only 28 of the 82 administrative units (34.1%) responded. 20 responses were obtained within 7 days, 5 after 8–14 days and in 3 cases the answer came after more than 14 days. In 17 cases the response came by normal mail (of which 4 by registered letter), 9 by e-mail and 2 by telephone. The quality of the answer was considered to be questionable in only one case. In the rest of the cases the answer was considered to be of good quality (20) or very good quality (7). The data on the availability of information are shown in Table 5. There was no information available in only 7 cases. More than half of the administrative units answered that information is available on their premises, while 19 answered that information could be found somewhere else (e.g. in the provincial library). There were 2 very positive exceptions. In one case a complete answer was sent (the municipality of Brzeg), while in another case the complete documentation on the topic was sent.

Table 5. Availability of information on types of protected trees and endangered and extinct animals in the area of an administrative unit (more than one answer could be provided)

Availability of information	Number of administrative units
No information available	7
Information available at the administrative unit	15
Information available somewhere else	19
Complete answer provided	1
Complete documentation sent	1

Source: Author's own research.

2.3. Request for information by e-mail

An e-mail was sent to districts and municipalities by a student of the Faculty of Economics of Opole University at the beginning of April 2003 concerning whether a system of waste segregation exists in the municipality or district. If yes, what effects does the system bring? If no, are there plans to introduce one in the near future? An e-mail address was available for 71 of the 81 districts and municipalities. 27 administrative units answered the e-mail (38%, 4 districts and 23 municipalities). 23 answers were sent by e-mail and 4 by normal mail (municipalities). The districts answered that information on this subject is available from municipalities. For this reason only the answers of the municipalities are analysed.

Almost 38% of the municipalities (23 out of 61) answered the e-mail. 15 responses arrived within 7 days, 4 responses after 8–14 days and 4 responses after more than 14 days. Waste segregation existed in most of the municipalities answering the e-mail (17). Only 3 of these municipalities indicated a source where information on this topic can be found, while 13 provided information on the subject in the e-mail/letter. Of the 6 municipalities that do not have a waste segregation system yet, 2 indicated that they have no plans to introduce one in the near future (e.g. due to a lack of money for buying special containers), while the other 4 plan to introduce such a system in the near future (e.g. one municipality answered that they are forced to by regulation).

With respect to the question of what effects the waste segregation system brings, 5 out of the 17 municipalities that have such a system did not answer this question. One municipality did not see any effects, while another municipality wrote that the system had not functioned long enough, in order to give a proper assessment. The other 10 municipali-

ties described some effects and results. In most of the cases this was a description of the waste management system they possess, and /or data about the amount of separated waste collected. A more comprehensive answer was provided by the Kędzierzyn-Koźle municipality, which is described below.

Kędzierzyn-Koźle is a municipality with about 70,000 inhabitants. In 1999 the first steps were taken in the field of waste segregation with the purchase of 20 containers for construction waste. Furthermore, 40 sets of 3 containers for paper, glass and plastic were installed in different parts of the town. In 2000 and 2001 another 130 sets of containers were bought. In 2003 containers were bought to separate white glass from coloured glass bottles. Along with the increase in the amount of containers, the amount of segregated waste collected increased from 83 tonnes in 1999 (of which 47 tonnes of glass), to 168 tonnes in 2000 (106 tonnes of glass), 292 tonnes in 2001 (175 tonnes of glass), and 320 tonnes in 2002 (191 tonnes of glass). An estimated 25,000 tonnes of waste is produced annually. Thus, although the amount of segregated waste is increasing, it only makes up about 1.3% of total waste.

3. Concluding remarks

The focus of the research presented in this paper was on the effectiveness of different means of communication used by citizens or organisations to obtain environmental information from administrative units in the Opole region. Table 6 summarises the effectiveness of the different means of communication.

Table 6. Effectiveness of different means of communication in obtaining environmental information from administrative units

Means of communication	Total administrative units approached	Administrative units for which address/telephone number was available	Number of administrative units that answered the request for information	Answers as% of total	Answer as% of administrative units approached
Telephone	70 municipalities	66	54	77.1	81.8
Mail	82 (all)	82	28	34.1	34.1
E-mail	81 (districts and municipalities)	71	27	33.3	38.0

Source: Author's own research.

When a citizen or organisation wants to obtain information on environmental matters from administrative units, a telephone call is most effective compared to e-mail and normal mail. In the research carried out there was not much difference between the response rate to e-mails or normal letters – respectively 38% and 34.6%. It might be expected that the response to e-mails would be higher, as an e-mail is cheaper and can be sent relatively quickly. However, it may be that the use of e-mail is not so common yet, due to a lack of computers, lack of habit, or lack of skills among civil servants. The fact that 4 answers to an e-mail sent to an administrative unit came by normal mail may be an indication of this. This is a point for further research.

Another problem is that not all e-mail addresses and telephone numbers are easily available, and many citizens do not have access to the Internet. The response rate of about 80% to telephone calls may seem high, but implies that in 20% of the cases there is no answer. This may imply that even by this means of communication, which is easily accessible, citizens and organisations have problems in gaining access to environmental information, as they have to try again. Of course, in small communities this may not be such a big problem, as a citizen may go to the administrative unit itself. Furthermore, in most of the cases effort must be undertaken to obtain more detailed information, as in almost all of the cases it is only available at the site of the administrative unit itself, and not on the internet. In some cases detailed information may be sent by mail, but a fee has to be paid for this. In the case of mail and e-mail the problem seems to be much greater, as in more than 60% of the cases administrative units do not supply information. More research is needed to find out the reasons for this and possible ways of improving the situation, for which a comparative study considering other regions may be useful.

Literature

GUS (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Central Office of Statistics), *Rocznik Statystyczny Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*. Warszawa, 2001.
www.slaskopolski.pl, accessed in February 2003.