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PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING AS A PRESSING ISSUE OF URBAN SOCIOLOGY

Introduction

Public participation is about the "public" becoming involved in the whole planning process, actively taking part in the process by which plans and development proposals are created. This involvement can start from the beginning of plan making and can extend through to implementation and can involve all aspects of planning, environmental issues, housing, transport and others and take into account the implications of Aarhus Convention. Many planners have become actively involved in the plan making and implementation process.

In planning theory and practice, politicians and planners are increasingly aware of the failure of the rational planning model, consisting in a logically structured cycle of decisions. The plea in planning theory for an interactive approach in planning, replacing the rational problem-solving linear approaches, is accompanied by a plea for extensive attention to the representation of the diversity of stakeholders in the policy issues under concern. It is clear that the arguments to pay attention to the representation of all relevant stakeholders, to their possibilities of building up social capital through their representation and active involvement in the 'interactive and 'political' decision-making processes', is based equally on normative arguments, enhancing equity through the institutionalisation of a more equally spread access to policy making, as it is based on arguments like increased efficiency of, effectiveness of, and support for policies developed.

Public participation in planning is a process in which the opinions and standpoints of all stakeholders - citizens, civic associations and initiatives, NGOs, business units, regional and local governments, professionals - are integrated in the decision-making process. They all can get involved in community planning and actively take a part in the process by which plans and development proposals are created.

The process of public participation is focused on meeting the wishes, visions, needs and requirements of the stakeholders and as such contributes to fulfilling of social needs and social dimension of sustainable spatial development. In the process of public participation various interests are confronted and consensus for acceptable solution is sought. The involvement can start from the beginning of plan making and can extend to implementation and can involve all aspects of planning, environmental issues, social issues, housing, transport and others.

Participation of citizens in planning and decision-making processes is also one of the basic parts of democratic constitutions and is witnessing an increasing presence on the political agenda. Participation is relevant to the principles of subsidiarity, sustainable development, public welfare and the representation of minorities. A well-conceived and well-implemented public involvement program can bring major benefits to the policy process and lead to better decision outcomes. Chapter 28 of the Agenda 21 states:

'Each local authority should enter into a dialogue with its citizens, local organisations and private enterprises and adopt "a Local Agenda 21". Through consultation and consensus building, local authorities would learn from citizens and from local, civic, community, business and industrial organisations, and acquire the information needed for formulating the best strategies. The process of consultation would increase household awareness of sustainable development issues. Local authority programmes, policies, laws and regulations to achieve Agenda 21 objectives would be assessed and modified, based on local programmes adopted. Strategies could also be used in supporting proposals for local, national, regional and international funding' (article 28.3).

The importance of Community planning

The idea of public participation in community planning started to become more important in Europe after the WW 2, as an effort to overcome the gap between the state power and individualism, under which traditional communities were pulling apart. Participative planning and informal instruments of decision-making evolved over the last 50 years to the point where it has become a cornerstone of most national spatial planning systems. It enabled the citizens and other stakeholders to participate in all phases of creating the settlements and improved the process of construction and refurbishment in the west European countries.

In the past planning was creation of a plan by a team of professionals (planners and others), to meet the identified needs of the community. More formally it has been expressed as the Survey-Analysis-Plan method. This expert led, rational approach has generally been discredited in most countries and replaced by 'bottom-up' planning; plans created in partnership with the community. The rational approach failed not least because the planners could not really identify the community's needs and the community and many stakeholders saw the plan as being imposed on them. The common result was that the implementation of the plan was obstructed and resisted, and very commonly, it was not implemented. By comparison bottom-up or community planning should produce plans, which are 'owned' by the community and accepted and supported.

Community planning of course implies public participation and it is for this reason that many planners have become actively involved in getting the public organised into groups which can effectively represent themselves as the stakeholders in the plan making and implementation process. Modern planning takes the view that the plans belong to the community, not the planners or other public officials. A successful plan in this context is therefore one that meets the wishes of the stakeholders.

The stakeholders are people or organisations who have a real interest in the particular issue being considered, either because they could be directly affected by a planning decision or because they, (an organisation), has been created (partly at least) for the purpose of influencing these types of decisions. The former are clearly the local residents, workers businesses etc, while the later includes organisations, which want to protect the environment, or associations of house-builders, or retailers.

For example it would now be unusual for the residents not to be a residents organisation in an established housing area. These have often been created by the officials of the local housing authority though they will then try to get the residents to take over the management of them. Equally planners and others have been actively involved in organising local environmental groups who then are encouraged to support their local environment through tree planting, pollution control and other activities. It is even possible that the leaders of the local groups will receive training in organisation and management issues so that they can become more professional. In some areas of practice, especially in social housing locations, local people not only participate in the planning of new schemes but may even be able to control the implementation. This can mean taking responsibility for the spending of large sums of public money. In such circumstances a lot of help is provided by local professionals but the key decisions are left to the local people. These types of organisations are very prevalent in most west European countries and they form an important part of 'civic society'.

The basis for successful public participation is information of the citizens and other stakeholders, consultations and communication with the public, which leads to motivating, and involving of the public. We cannot expect an involved and responsible opinion or standpoint from the citizens in case they are not informed about the alternatives and anticipated impacts of the solutions. The most important instrument to get public involved is to start as early as possible, inform truly and introduce a full and unbiased picture of the planned development.

An important part of the process of public participation is bilateral communication with the public, consultation of the problems, identification of the views, needs, wishes and requirements of various social groups of the citizens on the issues concerning particular plan or development proposal, solution and change of which leads to active participation and consensus with the citizens.

The figure below illustrates the development of ñinvolvement of the public, based on feedback:
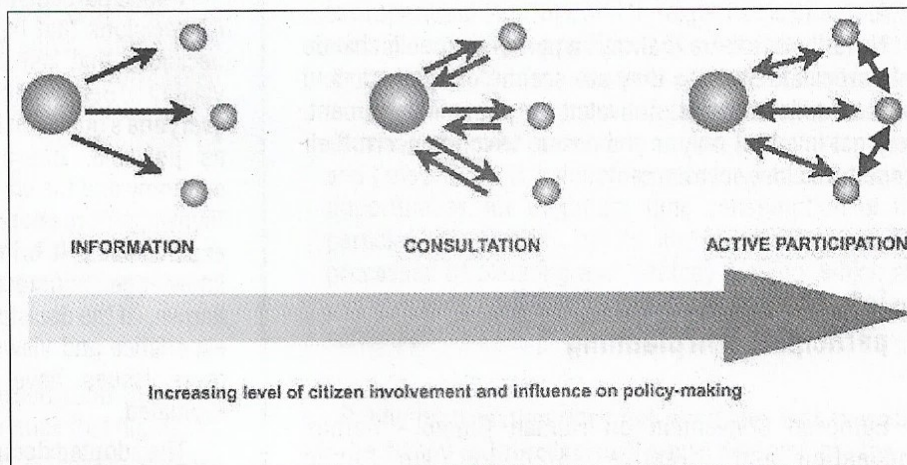

INFORMATION　　CONSULTATION　　ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

Increasing level of citizen involvement and influence on policy-making

Figure 1. **Three levels of citizens' involvement (adapted from OECD 2001a)**

Who are the public

In general in the process of public participation the whole population can be considered as the public and when national planning issued are being considered, it could be true. In practice most planning issues are of a much more local nature and public participation works most effectively when applied at smaller scale and when the issues that are considered are well defined. In that case it is always a person or a group of people who are interested to give the views, get involved and affect the decision. They are called "the public concerned" and mean the public affected or likely to be affected.

The concept of the concerned public varies in quantity and quality and depends on the plan/proposal under consideration.

In principle it is possible to distinguish two different roles of the concerned public, but equal in their importance for the process of public participation:

- Information carrier - one that carries information on the area and spaces he/she lives in and which can be used in the planning process in the form of feedback comments,
- Information recipient - one that receives information on the prepared plans/development proposals/policy guidelines,

Regular public participation shows people that they are valued and that their views are important. These exercises build trust and confidence in the authority undertaking the exercise and demonstrate to the public that change is possible. Individuals and community groups can become more active and more responsible for their environment and quality of life. People can feel more part of a community and authorities can make better relationships with these communities, which continue after the decision has been taken.

Nevertheless there is always a part of the public that do not participate because they are sceptic or apathetic and they are difficult to get motivated for public involvement. They get involved only in the cases, which concern their property or close environment.

International context of public participation in planning

European Convention on Human Rights - Aarhus Convention and Directive 35/2003/EC on Public Participation

The process of globalisation impacts also the process of spatial planning. It means not only solving the problems of spatial development at the European level or the issues of cross-border cooperation but also the approximation of legal frameworks of planning activities with the objective to ensure equal living and working conditions.

UN/ECE Convention on Access to Information, Public participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters - signed on 25 June 1998 by Ministers from 35 European countries and European Union in the town of Aarhus, Denmark. This European Convention on Human Rights is now known as the Aarhus Convention.

EC Directive 35/2003 of 26 May 2003 providing for public participation in respect of drawing up of certain plans and programmes relating to the environment was adopted in order to contribute to the implementation of the obligations arising under the Aarhus Convention, in particular by providing for public participation in respect of the drawing up of certain plans and programmes relating to the environment, addressed to the Member States.

The Aarhus Convention provides the framework for good practice by providing the basic procedure for public participation and specifying the types of decisions to which it should apply. Public participation in making decisions is vital. It brings benefits in making an individual decision and also for democracy more generally. It uses the knowledge, skills and enthusiasm of the public to help make the decision and recognizes that the public has a significant role to play. The objective of Aarhus Convention is to support the responsibility and transparency of decision-making processes at all levels as well as to strengthen public participation in the environmental and social decision-making.

There are three pillars to support public participation and transparent decision-making:

- The access and right of the public to obtain information on the environment,
- The right to participate in decisions that affect the environment, and
- The right to justice in environmental matters.

Public participation can lead to better decisions. That is, decisions that better meet the needs of more people, decisions that last longer and decisions that have more validity. Better decisions will lead to improvements in everyone's quality of life. By considering the issue as widely as possible, improvements in social conditions, the economy and the environment can occur at the same time. Involving more people in the process uses a wider range of experiences. It brings in more points of view and uses knowledge about local conditions that might not be widely known. If the decision takes account of this wider range of experience and views, it is more likely to be 'right' since more issues have been considered and more risks evaluated.

The adopted documents are an important instrument to strengthen the civic rights in the field decision-making relating to the environment. Moreover, they do not relate only to the environment but to the principles of civic society, where the whole society is responsible of the development. The rules of Aarhus Convention and EC Directive will be included in the "acqui communitaire" of the European Union and since June 26th 2005 they will enter into force in all EU member states. The objective is to strengthen public participation in decision-making on the environment and societal development, where spatial planning processes belong too.

It is good practice for authorities to adopt a long-term strategy to assist and provide guidance to the public. This can encourage the public to take part in making decisions and also help them to develop the skills and knowledge that will make it easier for them to do so. Providing the public with this sort of assistance should lead to having a greater interest in the decisions, a better understanding of their effects and better considered opinions.

There are many excellent tools and a few excellent examples of where best practice in public participation has featured in urban regeneration activity, however these remain relatively uncommon and are poorly known as a vital component of sustainable urban management.

There needs to be improved dissemination of not only the tools available, but also of case studies that demonstrate how well structured participation can have a beneficial effect on both process and outcomes. In order to achieve this, mainstreaming public participation best practice will involve significant cultural shifts among many professionals, and a higher skill base is required. In addition, a number of professionals will be needed to lead the necessary changes to ensure that public participation is fully realised.

Public participation should not be regarded as a static or one-off activity. What constitutes an effective participation process will change as a project progresses through the stages of inception, planning, implementation and long term use and management. For example, having engaged citizen interest during the project planning process (where issues will focus largely on questions of 'what'), different mechanisms will be needed to maintain this interest and ongoing involvement during the implementation phase (where issues will largely revolve around questions of 'how'). In addition public participation should not be regarded as a necessarily highly formalised or mechanistic process. Quality public participation process, or at least a large parts of it, can frequently be conducted in a relatively informal manner.

Although there is sufficient existing know-how to enable public participation to be more widely adopted in planning practice, there are nevertheless a number of areas that require further research:

1. Critical evaluation of public participation benefits. Although there is an extensive experience that highlights the value of public participation in achieving positive outcomes, and although public participation is important in regards to social and environmental justice, there is a lack of critical evaluative research on this matter. Further work is therefore required to test the hypothesis that quality public participation process will invariably lead to better projects and that this therefore represents good value for money.

2. Validity of representativeness of demonstrated views and interests in the process of public participation and related role of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). There is always a big question mark whether the views, opinions, interests and complaints that have appeared in the process of public participation are representative for the whole community or they represent just some interest groups and what is the role of NGOs in the process of public participation. In regions with a strong tradition of NGO involvement, there is already a greater effort and involvement to participate in participation processes. Alternatively, in regions with the absence of NGOs there is less overall capacity to demand and manage public participation and when NGOs start with getting involved, the question is whose views and interests they represent and what role they will take in the whole process.

3. The role of independent 'honest broker' organisations or intermediary bodies. As with NGOs (see above) there is much variation across Europe; in some countries the use or involvement of such bodies is now increasingly common whereas in others it is virtually unknown. There is some evidence that the involvement of such organisations correlates with the depth of public participation processes. A fuller understanding of what constitutes best practice for intermediary bodies / 'honest broker' organisations is required.

4. Availability of resources for participation processes and effectiveness of their utilisation. Difficulty of securing funding for public participation processes is frequently cited as an obstacle, especially where it is regarded as a project overhead or included within the category of 'fees' rather than regarded as a legitimate project cost in its own right. Of equal significance is the availability of expertise in facilitating participation processes as well as their efficient utilisation. Special sets of skills are needed to properly achieve this, and the expertise is often lacking among planning practitioners. Another important element in factors/resources of participation processes is time. The effectiveness of participation processes depends not only on funding but on human resources and time as well. It is therefore necessary to examine the opportunities for minimum time consumption of the participation process by its implementation into the processes of planning and strategy making, which are usually going on under separate legislation with its time schedule.

Public participation does not guarantee that everyone will be happy with a decision since different groups of people will have different priorities and concerns. But involving the public at an early stage in the decision-making process, and finding ways for their views to be heard and taken into account, helps to build consensus. It means that concerns can often be met early in a planning process, when changes may be easier to make, rather than late in the process when even small changes may cost both time and money. In addition, by being involved in the process, the public is exposed to the whole range of factors, which may influence a decision. Even if people do not agree with the final decision, they are more likely to understand why it was made. Good public participation processes give stakeholders the opportunity to articulate their views, with these being seriously considered in the decision-making process, even if decisions ultimately run counter to these views.

In the longer term, public participation can improve democracy. Regular public participation shows people that they are valued and that their views are important. These exercises build trust and confidence in the authority undertaking the exercise and demonstrate to the public that change is possible. Individuals and community groups can become more active and more responsible for their environment and quality of life. People can feel more part of a community and authorities can make better relationships with these communities which continue after the decision has been taken. Participation exercises can build confidence to undertake other initiatives, help give the public the skills to do so and generate enough enthusiasm to complete the initiative. However, these significant benefits do not mean that public participation exercises are easy. They require careful preparation well in advance of involving the public.

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