

# Why is public participation so important in land use planning essay sample



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Public participation is so important in land use planning for many reasons such as the benefits to the overall development with the inclusion of all stakeholders and the tragic failures that occur when there is no public participation. In this essay there is a need to understand what public participation is and to understand the impact of participation and the failures of non participation. Put quite simply public participation is a categorical term for citizen power and true democratic process.

It is the redistribution of power to citizens, those who are presently excluded from political and economic influence, and the right to be involved with the planning and provision of that services that affect them. (Taylor 1995). The important thing to note is the concept of participation is an ambiguous one and those with different interpretations will have different political philosophical bases (Thomas, 1996).

The earliest definition of the different meanings to participation is probably Arnstein (1969) who used the symbol of a ladder to show the different degrees of direct public influence over decision making, there are eight “rungs” in this ladder, the first two (Manipulation and Therapy) represent non-participation, their real objective is not to enable participation but to “educate” or manufacture consent. The next three rungs are tokenism (Informing, Consultation and Placation) and this allows citizens to voice opinions, but they lack the power to have their voices observed or respected by the power holders.

The last three rungs are degrees of citizen power – Partnership enables them to negotiate and engage in tradeoffs with power holders, Delegated power

and Citizen Control allows citizens to obtain majority or total managerial power. Carley et al (2000) says citizen participation should result in empowerment, where communities make their own decisions through various associations, accurate representation of the community, including minorities.

ODPM (2003) identifies four objectives for participation; one is governance which is the right for communities to participate in decisions that affect the interests of the community. Also service delivery, where participants ensure the community is in power to influence use of resources and service delivery, through helping identify problems, set priorities, develop and deliver solutions; to help develop their skills of being responsible for their neighbourhoods and to develop their capacity to plan and deliver community led resolutions.

Another objective is social capital, to allow participation to encourage citizens and give them the confidence to partake in activities that improve the quality of life for the community and enhance good community relations through mutually supportive relationships. The last objective is very important; it is the social inclusion and cohesion, through public participation and the resulting empowerment, communities should be able to resolve its own complex problems, to develop a consensus on community plans, to resolve negative values and attitudes, and foster good external networks and internal cohesion.

The ODPM (2003) sees public participation going one further to achieve its aims through Participatory planning. Whereas public participation is seen as

being too formally structured where information is flowing from the local authority and planner to the public, Participatory planning and its process is seen as less static, this is where mediation becomes very important.

An effective consultation process based on trust can be secured through allowing the process to be voluntary, making sure all the interested parties agree to be mediated, it is very important that the mediator has no special interest or stake in the process to avoid bias, making sure that all the interested parties agree to the final conclusion and they have a total understanding of the following procedures. The OPDM (2003) also emphasises the need in consultation of entering into a deliberative process of dialogue and listening, all while being sensitive to power imbalances and being inclusive.

The benefits of active consultation are what could be the stabilisation of economic, social and physical decline in an area. Public participation and consultation may improve the social and economic prospects of the whole community, there may be greener and more effective management of the environment, the social infrastructure may be enhanced and the sustainability and stability of the existing community may be improved with better communication between local authority and a development with widespread acceptance by the public to be legitimate.

Without public participation we see many expensive planning mistakes that could have been easily avoided, such as the erection of the numerous tower blocks that dominate Glasgow city, the problem wasn't necessarily the design of high density buildings but the fact they were build for the wrong

people, in the 60's they were used to re-house families from sub-standard apartment blocks around the cities, those from small communities dropped into a completely different and alien lifestyle of living in towers (Glendinning & Muthesius 1994).

More like prison cells than housing, they destroyed community interaction and made people isolated and cut off from society, the large open space realistically belonged to no one so this lack of defensible space meant social problems were common (Newman O. 1972). It is rumoured that in the next twenty years, half of the city's 250 modernist tower blocks will be demolished, a waste of a lot of economic resources. The housing executive of Northern Ireland was criticised for its poor performance on public participation.

Murtagh (1998) says the heart of these problems lay at the low record of consultation in major development plans and the imbalance of knowledge and technical competencies between planners and the communities they planned for. One significant failure on part of the government was the creation of the new town Craigavon in the 1960's which utilised a very rigid pseudo-scientific town planning concept, there was no public consultation and as a result the town failed to take off, the town's main employer Goodyear had to leave which caused a ripple effect in the local economy, so an unsustainable economic and social landscape occurred.

In Northern Ireland the Belfast Urban plan of 1969-86 was drawn up to help tackle housing problems in Belfast, it advocated the set up of 12 district centres each serving up to 80, 000 people, the problem lay in the first

proposed leg of road ran through the lower Falls and Shankill areas who were of course not consulted in the matter, there was mass public disapproval with the plan which fostered community distrust of the authority.

Eventually the plan had to be scrapped as the Official IRA and UDA both made it clear to the authority they were prepared to take action should demolition and road be built, and construction companies were reluctant to commit equipment and personnel to these areas. (Weiner 1976). In 1982 the issue was raised again in the Housing Renewal Strategy with 42 smaller redevelopment areas and 15 housing action plans that rehabilitated 7500 dwellings, the regeneration of difficult to let housing estates.

This time around public participation was valued more as Tenants Action Project and Community Places (CTA) were used to support resident in planning projects. In conclusion the reason public participation is so important is the fact that with an effective form of it, not only the community will benefit with improved social infrastructure and stability of the community but there will be a better relationship with the community and economic prospects for all sides could be better.

What is seen with a failure to engage in public participation is the disruption of communities and possible negative social consequences that surround it, community distrust and perhaps outright hostility and an unsustainable economic and social landscape.