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Public Engagement: The Inclusive Approach

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The Role of Citizens in the Planning Process

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Abstract

This paper is a summary of a presentation delivered during the Vancouver World Urban Forum III at Habitat Professionals Forum Networking Session on June 22, 2006. It reviews the role of professionals in facilitating citizen's engagement in the planning process. It discusses theory and practical applications and concludes by emphasizing the public involvement is critical to democratic governance and local empowerment to achieve sustainable urban development.

Public Engagement and the Role of Housing Professionals

Architects, planners, landscape architects and other habitat professional have long promoted public engagement in the planning and design processes in developing communities and specific housing projects.

Today, community-based planning and design is a fundamental aspect of profession education and practice. This approach assumes that affected citizens must have meaningful input on needs identification, project development and project monitoring.

Why Should Citizens be included in the Planning Process?

There is broad support by international NGOs for public involvement in the urban development process. It is fundamental to democratic governance and provides for an informed, empowered citizenry. In many countries it is required. For example, under the legal frameworks of the provinces of Canada, public input in planning is dictated by the Planning Acts.

In many developing countries there is little requirement or tradition to involve citizens in planning or design. UN-HABITAT supports capacity-building to encourage engagement processes.

Theory of Participation

Sherry Arnstein's (1966) "ladder of citizen's participation" (Figure 1) presented a typology of citizen's involvement in the decision-making process that ranged from total non-participation, through various degrees of tokenism, on to the highest level of involvement that would result in citizen control of the decision-making process. According to Arnstein, the first two rungs of the ladder (1 & 2) represent nonparticipation. Rungs 3, 4 and 5 demonstrate degrees of tokenism in the participation process, while the top three rungs (6, 7 and 8) represent degrees of citizen power.

Although Arnstein was concerned with citizen control of community governance, this ladder has influenced urban planning theory.

8.	Citizen Control
7.	Delegated Power
6.	Partnership
5.	Placation
4.	Consultation
3.	Informing
2.	Therapy
1.	Manipulation

Figure 1. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen's Participation (1966)

It is generally agreed that citizen involvement in the planning process provides the opportunity to enhance acceptance of a proposed intervention through information dissemination and education. However, to effectively move up Arnstein's ladder, a well designed public participation program should draw on people's skills and local knowledge. It can provide a venue to obtain multiple perspectives on issues, needs, preferences and requirements. This will provide a richer information base for the habitat professional to work with and is likely to reduce future conflict. Perhaps the greatest benefit of enhanced public engagement is community capacity building, where local residents are empowered to influence public policy and physical environmental design.

Planning for Public Engagement

In planning for a public engagement component within the habitat planning process it is important to consider the following questions:

1. What types of involvement are required and when?

The following figure illustrates the three types of involvement: physical, social and psychological.

Involvement Type	Benefits
Physical	Allows for a community of citizens to gather together to consider an issue.
Social	Allows for an affected citizens group to receive and share information.
Psychological	Provides a context for solving problems together as a community.

Figure 2. Citizen Involvement Types

Citizens' engagement processes should consider the incorporation of all three types of involvement.

2. Who should be involved?

It is important to involve all sectors of the community related to demographics (age, sex, income level, etc.). For example, women, youth and children are often not well integrated into the decision-making process. Specific participants are often identified and invited to insure the success of the engagement process.

Figure 3 list five groups that should be considered. The first group includes the experts who can provide information on the proposal and also assist in facilitating the process. In the case of habitat development, this would involve the planners or the designers (architects, landscape architects) of the proposal. Leaders and representatives from local community organizations can articulate issues and needs. The third group is perhaps the most important and includes those people that will be directly affected by the project. In may be important to invite local politicians or other influential individuals and could help support the activity. Finally, it is critical to make the process open and transparent as possible. This means that the general public must be also be given the opportunity to participate.

Participants in the Engagement Process
1. Project personnel, the "experts"
2. Community organizations
3. Groups to be affected, the stakeholders
4. Influential individuals
5. Public at-large

Figure 3. Public Engagement Participants

3. How can we involve the people?

The facilitators of citizen engagement process require an understanding of participation techniques and group dynamics to properly manage the activity. Prior to initiation, a public participation process must be carefully designed to identify the key stakeholders, the techniques to be used and the scheduling of activities.

Figure 4 summarizes often used participation techniques used by professionals. These approaches range from the informal and unstructured to the more formal and structured. It might involve gathering impressions by taking to people on the street or a carefully conceived social science surveys that provide a statistically valid sample of needs or preferences.

An innovative approach that is widely used by physical planners and designer is the “community design charette”. This involves a workshop involving local citizens facilitated by architects/landscape architects/planners to identify opportunities and constraints on maps of their community so that issues are spatially defined for planning purposes.

The design professionals then assist the participants at the workshop in giving form to alternative proposals for their community through mapping and drawings.

Participation Techniques
<i>Informal approaches</i>
1. “in the street” conversations
2. Open house (presentation &/or exhibit
3. Mass media
<i>Formal approaches</i>
1. Surveys
2. Focus groups
3. Facilitated workshops
4. Design charettes

Figure 4. Techniques for Citizen Engagement

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper advocates that sustainable communities depend upon meaningful public engagement in the planning and the design processes. Well conceived participation programs will foster greater community ownership and control by the local residents: the beneficiaries.

The outcome should result in greater equity, improved individual and community empowerment and enhanced democratic management of our urban environments.