

Review Paper

Pathways towards Citizen Participation: Insights on Community Planning in Cambodian Cities

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Looking for ways to influence public-policy and decision-making processes in community planning have been debated at great length (e.g., see Arnstein, 1969; Douglass, 1992; Friedmann, 1992; Socha, 1997). Recently, an approach that has gained more widespread use is citizen engagement in deliberation (Mathews and McAfee, 2002). Community deliberation is seen to build on traditional models of public participation by advancing a richer form of citizen involvement in governance processes (Lukensmeyer, 2003).

In order to provide some insights into community planning, this paper runs through the following themes: What does community deliberation produce and does this product make communities more effective? And To what extent can deliberation play a role in planning for participation in community planning in Cambodia? In answering these questions, I will first look at the concept of deliberation. Then, I will review some theories of community participation in developed countries; and juxtapose these with theories and practices of community participation in Cambodia to understand the central issues and dilemmas in planning for participation in community planning. A conclusion, including suggestions and recommendations for future planning for community development, is then drawn.

The Concept of Deliberation

The concept of deliberation is built upon what the United States government has called “a basic tenet of Western democratic traditions,” that is, placing citizens closer to the government affairs will strengthen democracy, stability, and transparency (Lukensmeyer, 2003). Deliberation is an approach to decision making in which citizens come together to look for ways to deal with issues and solve community problems (Mathews and McAfee, 2002). During deliberation, participants consider relevant facts from multiple points of view, discuss and think critically before they can act on. That is to say, they are looking for a “stepping stone” to action—better informed public action. In other words, such processes of group reflection are used to render a public judgment as to the best course of action (Lukensmeyer, 2003). In short, to deliberate is to weigh the consequences and costs of various options before action (Mathews and McAfee, 2002).

Deliberation is different from traditional forms of public participation (Lukensmeyer, 2003). To understand this, it is useful to examine a common tool for public participation in policy-making: public hearings. Public hearings are designed to facilitate the exchange of information between experts, policy-makers and citizens in

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the impacted community. Their general purpose is to get testimony and public comments on draft policy. This two-way interaction stimulates little dialogue as the public hearing process fails to facilitate the engagement of citizens with one another at play. Thus, there is no sufficient opportunity to come to a general understanding of a complex policy at play. Deliberation, in contrast, encourages reflection and understanding of multiple forces and views around an issue before citizens render their comments on draft policy.

Participation as a Means toward an End?

Understanding the concept of deliberation, one would argue that it is a powerful tool for effective participation in community planning. Participation, as well as empowerment and deliberation, implies power sharing (Lukensmeyer, 2003). Sherry Arnstein (1969), in her classic article "*A Ladder of Citizen Participation*," wrote that, in theory, "Participation of the governed in their government is the cornerstone of democracy." It is the redistribution of power that enables the citizens excluded from the political and economic processes to be deliberately included in the future. So, participation in community planning is important for citizen's livelihoods.

Having known that citizens were generally left out from planning processes after she had explored variations in citizen participation in federal programs (i.e., urban renewal, anti-poverty, and Model Cities), Arnstein offered a provocative typology of citizen participation in order to encourage a more enlightened dialogue between different stakeholders, local governments and their planners, professionals, and community groups who are impacted by programs. She constructed a ladder of citizen participation to illustrate an inconsistency in the application of mandates imposed upon local governments and organizations that received federal funds (also in Rocha, 1997), by characterizing citizen participation into eight levels based on actual decision-making power—from less meaningful to more meaningful participation of the communities involved. Each level represented a legitimate effort to provide a participation opportunity to the community. This conceptualization has offered a strategic map in both theory and practice domains for planning community participation processes in the United States since the 1960s.

Pulling ownership of services out of communities has weakened the communities and undermined the people, according to John McKnight, the Director of Community Studies at Northwestern University's Center for Urban Studies and Policy Research as of 1992. He then said that: "There was a mistaken notion that our society has a problem in terms of effective human services," (quoted in Osborne and Gaebler, 1992, 66). This statement indicates that community participation is fundamental for the success of government programs. Excluding community residents from any program will risk a failure. This is not only because programs may not respond to local needs but also because a community may lack human resources for planning and implementation of programs.

A Space for Citizen Participation: The Case of Community Planning in Cambodia

In a democratic society like the United States, community participation, compared with that in a country like Cambodia, where democracy is still young, generally re-

sults in better outcomes. As understood from John McKnight's statement, he strongly acknowledges the importance of community participation. In Cambodia, the theory of community participation is not different from that in developed countries like United States and other democratic societies. That is, planners, practitioners, and theorists argue that citizen participation contributes to, for example, better development outcomes, more accountability, more transparency, and decision making that is responsive to community needs and wants (i.e., see Turner, 2002; Oberndorf, 2004; World Bank, 2004; Nou and Chan, 2004; Pellini 2005; Horng and Ann, 2005; Kim and Ann 2005; ACHR, 2005).

Douglass (1992) is right to argue that the engagement of citizens in cooperative efforts and interaction with governments promotes the type of awareness needed for consensus-building for further action. However, putting the theory in practice domain is not the same and thus challenging. Much depends on the situation where the practice takes place. While the theory holds true, its application in a country like Cambodia is still in question.

The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) is implementing institutional reforms that recognize community participation as one of the main objectives for developmental success. However, participation is often limited in Cambodia due mainly to the destruction of trust and social relations caused by civil war and the Khmer Rouge regime. Pellini's (2005) studies on associations between the Botum pagoda in Kampong Thom province, public institutions, and villagers at the local level found that community participation with the pagoda is relatively positive due to its strong roots in indigenous forms of traditional belief in pagoda leadership; whereas with public institutions, participation is relatively weak due to the lack of trust in government systems and political leadership.

Understanding local community issues and tradition and local culture, for example based on Pellini's findings, can help in developing appropriate strategies for community participation for dealing with local problems. In the case of public agencies, on the other hand, governments will have to create necessary conditions to provide space for community participation where dialogue can result in greater citizen involvement in public-policy and decision-making processes.

In the implementation of decentralization policy in Cambodia in the context of good governance reforms, in theory, local governments are believed to be more effective in service delivery than national and provincial governments due to their proximity with local residents (e.g., see World Bank, 2004; Horng and Ann, 2005). Several studies, however, show that there are constraints in implementation processes.

Horng and Ann's study on services such as basic health, education, solid waste management at the commune (or *sangkat* in Khmer) level found that there are some promising factors for community participation for success in service delivery, although it has not yet been satisfactory. The study recommends that clear management policies for solid waste collection in peri-urban areas need to be put in place, especially the roles of contractors for solid waste collection and local public agencies, and that communes need to be given power to sign garbage collection agreements with contractors for accountability reasons. While such recommendations exist on paper, they are often neglected, and thus the service delivery practice continues to be inefficient.

Regarding planning for citizen participation in community planning at the city level such as Phnom Penh, it is not an easy task. Urban poor communities are generally faced with the pressure of land market speculation. Government policies concerning selling and leasing state lands to private developers for investments have been af-

fecting such communities significantly. Studies (i.e., Meng 2003; Khemro and Payne, 2004; Payne, 2005) show that evictions and resettlements of residents in such communities to remote areas have further impoverished their living standards, and that the areas are not adequately serviced. This approach to solutions not only creates new problems in new places, but also creates the same problems in the same city's central areas. Many of the relocated residents move back to Phnom Penh seeking new places to live and work.

Thus, there are always obstacles to community participation in Cambodia, especially in a growing city like Phnom Penh. Such problems are usually associated with lucrative land sites for new developments. Sometimes, the term "community participation" is used to decorate political landscape in order to gain support. Its practice will be different when there is benefit involved. For example, in the case of Boeng Kak Lake,¹ the only remaining lake in the heart of the city with a size of 133 hectares, the city governor of Phnom Penh has recently signed a 99-year lease contract with a local little-known company for commercial development. This coming development will consume almost three-fourths of the lake area for its physical structures. This development will lead to the displacement of more than 3,900 families and hundreds of businesses that are currently occupying lands around the lake (see Hayman and Sam, 2007; Prak and Welsh, 2007). What is astonishing is that the plan for development has been revealed publicly and the local residents were well aware of the plan and its development agenda. Such development will not only negatively affect residents, but also the city scare resources. Such loss never returns.

Insights on Future Planning for Community Development

To avoid any associated impact, planners, in governmental agencies mainly, have to come up with options identifying appropriate areas for any possible relocation of urban poor communities as part of city planning processes and ensuring that the affected residents have access to jobs and basic services and infrastructure. Relocation guidelines that were established in 2003 must be put in place for practice. Situations such as the Boeng Kak case also limit the role of planners and other actors working in civil society organizations to play their advocacy role. The advocacy planning model advocated by Paul Davidoff (1965), which is viably sound, does not always work in the Cambodian context. For example, a recent eviction and relocation of Bassac urban poor communities of about 1400 families saw intervention by about a hundred civil society groups, including advocacy groups and human rights groups as well as community protests, but they did not achieve their intended goals.²

Community participation in human settlement planning, including infrastructure planning, has not been systematically addressed in any law with clear objectives even in decentralization policy, the intent of which is to devolve power to the grassroots. Planners and professionals who work in the government systems, tend to believe their professional knowledge is better than others. These rational comprehensive planners, as Friedmann (2002) and Sandercock (1998) point out, are part of a comprehensive public policy process, attempting to coordinate specialized and narrowly defined activities. They are confident in their capacity of know-how, relying strictly on their professional expertise and objectivity to do what they believe is best. This is witnessed in the development of the Master Plan for Phnom Penh 2020. The processes of making the plan did not even seek public involvement during the plan-making processes, not to mention public hearings or display for comments or feedbacks.

Public, community, participation practice will continue to face dilemmas as long as these government planners still believe in their sole professional knowledge; and the government does not change its authoritarian attitude and seek citizen's opinions; and they do not get rid of their culture of determinism in planning. Conversely, as Tandler (1997) argues, good government policy, of course, can promote stronger and more effective civil associations. Deliberation may be the place to start to confront government to change their leadership. Mobilization and empowerment of community residents for effective deliberation is necessary. Also, civil society organizations may need to play a more critical role in helping local communities and households not only at the time when problems arrive, but also beforehand in order to press the government to change their culture of policy and decision making. In short, they should play a more proactive, rather than reactive, coordinating, facilitating and negotiating role between local communities and governments.

Conclusions: What Planners Should Do

Friedmann (2002, 108) asks: "*Whose city?*" Answers may vary; but a majority would answer, to my assumption, "*The city for all citizens.*" However, my argument is that how to plan the city for all citizens is something planners will have to position themselves in the *societal* context. I am inclined to agree with Friedmann that the city is ultimately identified with "the people," and with Susan Fainstein (2005) that planners are to create "the just city."

Planning all aspects of planning, including infrastructure planning, requires planners to understand what "the just city" is, and seek a balance between those who are going to be impacted and those who are going to benefit; otherwise it is unlikely to turn out good just results. This requires them to work closely with citizens. Understanding what citizens need and want will help in shaping planning practice, making it more accountable and responsive. At all levels, including the grassroots community level, the concepts of participation and deliberation seem to provide a good domain for understanding citizen-centered views about their community problems. More to the point, it is not a matter of finding the right answer to a given problem, but of facilitating the collective process of deliberation and discovering the appropriate solution.

Planners need to learn to develop new skills effectively from both academic institutions and day-to-day practice in the real world in making effective communications with citizens and making efficient conflict resolutions with, not for, citizens in order to be able to effectively elaborate citizens' views into the planning agenda. Social learning and mutual learning is perhaps the most appropriate catalyst that all individuals, planners, governments, and other involved stakeholders need to go through together for the creation of the city for all citizens.

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Notes

¹ Boeng Kak was included in the Phnom Penh Master Plan as a major blue-green park of the city. In the late 2003, it was the subject of an international planning and design competition, in which I also attended and won the first prize, organized jointly by the Municipality and a French university. In February 2007, it was contracted to a local company for residential and commercial investments for 99-year lease. Local companies in Cambodia are in general criticized for their bad and ugly design, planning, and low quality of construction.

² Information on this relocation is widely available from media such as local (in Khmer and English) newspapers and radio (i.e., Radio Free Asia, Voice of America—in Khmer) during the relocation period in the late 2005. For the purpose of this paper, I will not reference specifically.