

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF PARTICIPATORY METHODS FOR RAPID DEFINITION OF PROBLEMS AND POTENTIALS TO PROMOTE SOCIALLY JUST URBAN INTERVENTION

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ABSTRACT

Urban development and planning, at present, demand an approach that both provides an account of the forces leading to change in the qualities of places in urban regions and offers ideas about the forms and processes of governance. People's participation is seen as one of the main element of ensuring socially just urban intervention although it is often misdirected, applied in inappropriate ways, or controlled and manipulated on purposes against the interest of the local communities. In most of the urban intervention process, policy decisions are often required quickly, with incomplete data or with limited resources with which to obtain information. One of the main challenges, the urban development practitioners' faces, is how to find out, evaluate and use relevant information in a timetable dictated by events outside their control. To ensure a socially just intervention the investigators have a need for careful reflection on the enquiry process and a clear sense of their own purpose in undertaking it. This essay tries to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of the participatory methods in the rapid definition of potentials and problems for a socially just urban intervention with some suggestions about the justification of using participatory process for urban intervention.

Key words: participation, urban intervention, rapid definition.

I. INTRODUCTION

Urban development and planning, at present, demand an approach 'which both provides an account of the forces leading to change in the qualities of places in urban regions and offers ideas about the forms and processes of governance through which stakeholders and local political communities can come together to work out what to do and how to act' (Healey, 1997: 34). People's participation is seen as one of the main element of ensuring socially just urban intervention. Although the popularity of participatory planning has grown substantially in recent years, but the rhetoric is reflected in many speeches, reports and project proposals that 'the realities of citizen participation are often misunderstood and the practice of participation is often misdirected, applied in inappropriate ways, or controlled and manipulated on purposes that are odds with the interest of the local communities' (Driskell, 2002: 32).

In most of the urban intervention process, 'policy decisions are often required quickly, with incomplete data or with limited resources with which to obtain information'. One of the main challenges, the urban development practitioners' faces, is how to find out, evaluate and use relevant information in a timetable dictated by events outside their control. Sometimes speed becomes an excuse for not allocating adequate resources to analysis and investigation. Demand to act as the situation or a politically imposed timetable, may limit the applicability of standard research methods which have self-imposed requirement of the sample size, statistical confidence or corroboration of evidence (Thomas, 1998: 1). To ensure a socially just intervention the investigators have a need for careful reflection on the enquiry process and a clear sense of their own purpose in undertaking it.

This essay tries to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of the participatory methods in the rapid definition of potentials and problems for a

socially just urban intervention. This requires the notion of participatory process to be defined and judged in respect to urban intervention. Within the confines of this essay, this is achieved firstly through a brief review of the definition of participatory process, its origins and applications, followed by examining the strengths and weaknesses for rapid definition of problems and potentials from political, methodological, practical and epistemological principles levels. The essay concludes with some suggestion about the justification of using participatory process for urban intervention.

II. THE CONCEPT OF PARTICIPATION

Generally, participation is seen as ‘local communities being actively involved in the decisions that affect them’ (Driskell, 2002: 32). The participatory development ‘paradigm’ suggests two perspectives:

First, substantively involving local people in the selection, design, planning and implementation of the programmes and projects that will affect them, thus ensuring that local perception, attitudes, values and knowledge are taken into account as fully and as soon as possible.

Second, making more continuous and comprehensive feedback an integral part of the development activities (Mikkelsen, 1995:61).

According to Driskell (2002: 32), ‘meaningful participation involves residents of all ages in evaluating relevant data, considering alternative courses of action, developing consensus on the best plan of action to take, and putting the plans in the practice’. He (2002: 66) also used a diagram (Figure 01) to illustrate ‘the basic components of a participatory planning process and the relationship between them: the project’s context, the stakeholders who are involved, and the activities that constitute the actual process in action.

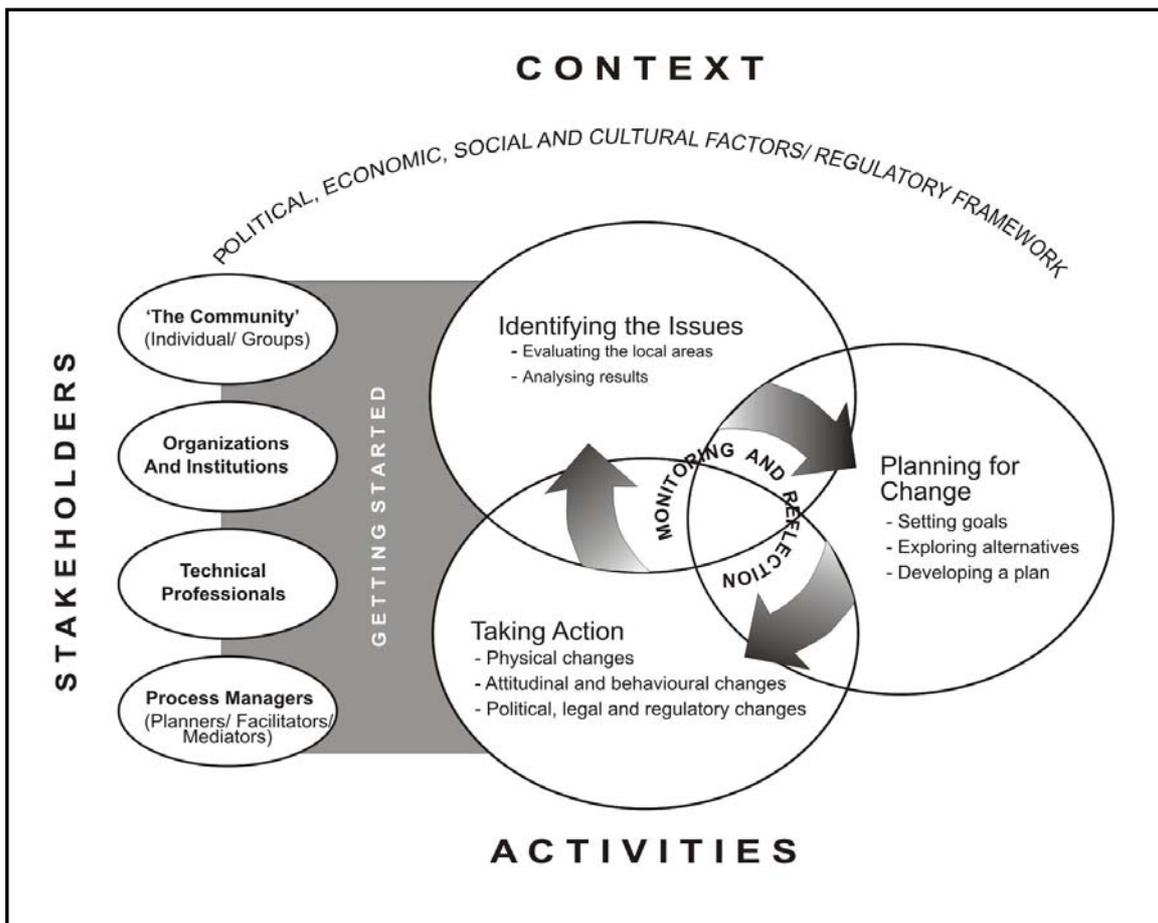


Figure 01: Participatory Planning Process
Source: Driskell, 2002:66

The World Bank identified the key elements of appraisal for participatory approach being:

- a) Participation by the local people for its value as a research and planning method and as a means for diffusing the participatory approach of development.
- b) Teamwork representing balance between the diversity of socio-economic, cultural, gender, and generational perspectives.
- c) Flexibility in terms of the appropriateness of time and resources availability, and the topic and location of the work.
- d) Optimal ignorance while gathering just enough information to make necessary recommendations and decisions to be efficient in terms of both time and money.
- e) Triangulation by which the qualitative data can be validated by consulting or using at least three different techniques or sources.

III. ORIGINS AND APPLICATION OF PRA AND RRA

Over the years organizations adhere to the participatory ‘paradigm’ have developed a number of techniques for effective interaction with the community for example, Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Participatory Action Research (PAR). These concepts evolved during the 1970s and 1980s in response to the disappointment and criticism of ‘the perceived problems of outsiders missing or mis-communicating with the local people in the context of development work’ (World Bank, undated). The overview recognized ‘a parallel process of politically driven and poverty focused activism with the development of principles to guide empowerment for poverty reduction’ (Kanji and Greenwood, 2001:8). The tools and techniques of the participatory methods originated from a variety of disciplines and in various tradition of communication and decision-making in the communities, for example: applied anthropology, activist participatory research, rural development research, development market research, adult education, development communication, popular theatre and technology assessment (Mikkelsen, 1995:67).

At present PRA and RRA are two unavoidable concepts used in development language and in presentation of participatory methods, techniques and tools. But these terms may be misleading.

Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques are equally applicable in urban settings and are not limited to assessment only, rather they can be employed at every stage of the project cycle and in any country, economic and sector work (World Bank). Examples of the tools and techniques of participatory approaches used in urban areas show the variety of them, as they are:

Participatory mapping of the settlement, Household surveys, Collective modeling of new housing designs, Collective planning of new settlement designs, Collective identification of the resources, Transect walk, Seasonal calendars, Wealth-ranking and well-being analysis, Trend analysis or life histories, Institutional analysis: Venn diagramming, Matrix scoring and ranking, Social dramas and social plays, Establishing formal and informal groups (Mittin & Thompson, 1995).

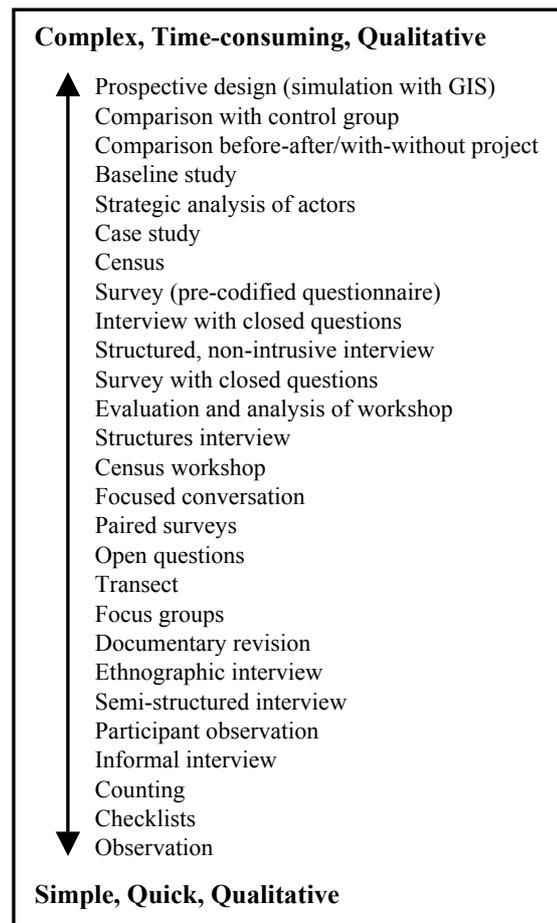


Figure 02: A Continuum of Techniques
Source: Hugo, (2000:120)

IV. PEOPLE, THE SOURCE OF INFORMATION

In any intervention proper identification of problems and potentials can act as a success ingredient. Since any urban planning is concerned with people's life, they can be the prime source of information. By using participatory method people are involved in providing such information, which the development managers would be unable to find out from any other source. Woodhouse (1998:128) suggested that two types of information could be identified provided by the people. Firstly, is the *knowledge* that might not be available from other sources as they are inherent only in the people concerned. Examples of this might be oral histories of rural communities, details of the rules governing customary land tenure, or indigenous technical knowledge relating to the use of space and built environment. Secondly, is the *perceptions* of individuals or social groups in their capacity as users of services and resources, and how these are manifested in particular patterns of decision making.

For any urban intervention process data is collected in several ways. The most common method of collecting data is by conducting group observations during visits, along with using maps and interview guide. As revealed from the continuum of techniques (Figure 02) suggested by Hugo (2000:120) the data collection methods move from simple, quick and qualitative to complex and time-consuming techniques. There is always provision to include participatory methods in the techniques at all stages of the process.

V. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF PARTICIPATORY METHODS FOR RAPID DEFINITION OF PROBLEMS AND POTENTIALS

The participatory method used in defining the problems and potentials for an urban intervention have the usual strengths and weaknesses of the process. But trying to define them in a constraint of time factor adds further and in some cases modifies the usual concepts. For the discussion the strengths and weaknesses can be categorized under four broad levels of political, methodological, practical and epistemological principles.

VI. POLITICAL PRINCIPLE

The strengths of participatory methods associated with the political principles lies in the facts that, the process acknowledges the power of knowledge and also the capacity of creating knowledge as a power. Gaining more comprehensive information, faster than conventional research methods, remove the 'positive dichotomy' between the researchers as the one who knows and the research subjects as those who do not know. Eventually the power of creating the knowledge is returned back to the people. In the process, the practitioners engaged in the definition of problems and potentials for urban intervention, are placed not at the end of the knowledge creation process but their capacity for building knowledge is recognized through engaging the participants in all aspects (Breu and Peppard, 2003:185).

Also working with the people in defining problems and potentials 'brings out power relations in a very immediate way'. In the knowledge gaining process the investigators determine what information is being sought, from whom and what it will be used for, while the informants decide how much information to disclose. If the aim is for socially just intervention, then the investigation should always seek to 'empower those providing the information by prompting them to reflect and analyze their own experience' (Woodhouse, 1998:127). Many participatory methods like PRA are often used with groups in a public forum, 'with the aim of assisting all members of the group to contribute to a consensus responses to the question raised' (Woodhouse, 1998:143) which moves towards the people's empowerment.

The weaknesses of participatory methods for rapid definition also lie in the process of gaining knowledge. As Alan Thomas (1998: 6) states,

'Who is doing the research is a political question which affects how the research can be done and how the results are likely to be utilized. The investigator cannot think of herself or himself as standing apart from what is being investigated or think of the investigation as an exercise in objectivity to be kept separate from policy actions. In Particular the investigator's relationship with the agencies involved is an important part of the context'.

The other weaknesses include the number of 'filter' for reaching the information up to the policy maker's level that may obstruct the content or experience of the field if they are not sufficiently briefed and enlightened about the objectives. As a consequence rapid decision-making includes 'danger of faddism, rushing, formalization, ruts and rejection' (Thomas, 1998:9).

VII. METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE

The methodological principle in participatory methods obliges the investigators to 'engage in research with people rather than in performing research on people'. He or she becomes co-researchers in the selection and absorption of literature, collection of evidence, building on concepts from data and the interpretation of the findings and their meaning for the practice (Breu and Peppard, 2003:185). More accurate and representative information about the needs, priorities and capabilities from a well-balanced representation of local people of diversified socio-economic, cultural, gender, and generational perspective, can provide more reliable feedback on the impact of government initiatives and programmes.

The common concept associated with the methodological principle is that, 'involving users is time consuming, and therefore more expensive, than relying on professionals who have broad experience and specialized knowledge'. But Sanoff (2000: 22) argued that the time and effort devoted to involving users is a basic form of community or organizational development and helping participants to resolve conflicts and having them identify goals are invaluable contributions to any community planning process. Rather than being an additional hurdle or barrier to development, involvement can be a way to speed processes and generate more acceptable proposals. Some examples from a study done by the Planning Research Programme of Department of Environment showed clear benefits where major inquires were avoided and significant financial savings were made. In other examples, it was difficult to isolate involvement as a factor in the development time-scale or identify the project improvements were the direct result of community involvement (HMSO, 1994: vi).

Thomas (1998: 8) also identified some methodological weakness associated with the rapid

definition of problems and potentials. First, it may imply the conceptualization of the problem under investigation to be fixed and may result in the mitigating of the quest for looking for evidence that could either confirm or cast doubt on the underlying way in which aspects of the problem have been conceptualized. Second, it may lead to over-simplification with in-sufficient data to inform the development intervention. It may imply that 'the form of problem is already known, so that one knows which boxes have to be filled with data. This may be appropriate for administration but is not sufficient to inform development interventions, which are aimed at assisting a change in the positive direction'. Also lack of quality control and the consequent propagation of wrong methods may cause inappropriate use of the method. For example biased and conscious choices based on formal sampling principles in a survey can influence the data.

Participatory process places serious demands and responsibilities on the participants as well as the investigators. Sanoff (2000: 22) states 'some professional argue that participation is not necessary, and often undesirable for eventual users to participate in designing and planning, in as much as they do not have the necessary expertise and often get in the way'. He further states that 'even though the participants, in some cases, voluntarily organize to participate, the technical complexity requires professional assistance. Without guidance, community groups may respond only to the situation of crisis and may not the goal that originally united them' (Sanoff, 2000: 37). In the part of the investigators, the use of participatory approaches requires good communication and conflict resolution skills for working in a constraint situation. 'There is greater potential for better outcomes but greater risks and difficulties in estimating transaction costs' (Kanji and Greenwood, 2001:29).

VIII. PRACTICAL PRINCIPLE

The practical principles around the participatory methods require the strength of achieving flexibility and creativity as the success ingredients for rapid definition of problems and potentials for urban intervention. The process may reduce the requirement of number of 'professional personnel'. Also the short span of investigation may decrease the expectations among the informants. Oakley et. al. (1991: 15) quotes from a World Bank study that

suggested governments 'to encourage rural people to participate only in project implementation since their involvement in project identification and assessment might give rise to increased expectations'.

The weaknesses in term of practical principles are more comparing to the strengths. Alan Thomas made some comments about these weaknesses. In the introduction of the book 'Finding out fast' he states,

'the notion of gathering or extracting information can imply no involvement from those in the situation. The idea of 'providing' information seems to imply observing or measuring them from outside. Quite apart from the dubious ethics of such an approach, the fact that people in any situation have their own aims and aspirations and will react to a policy initiative accordingly makes it important for such an investigation to be interactive if not fully participative' (1998: 8).

Pointing out to the relevance of doing a research for rapid definition he further writes,

'the fact that teams of professional researchers can be assembled and paid to produce report in very short spaces of times means 'proper' research can appear a luxury and resources may not be made available. The existence of known and labeled rapid research techniques may encourage the idea that research can be done extremely quickly. Research thought to shallow can be rubbish' (1998: 9).

He suggested that a rapid definition process might result squeezing out of literature study and the analysis of secondary data as a result of 'the combination of reduced resources (especially time) plus the expectation that research includes some kind of direct field observation'. According to him,

'it is all too easy to assume that there is no prior knowledge of a particular case. However, there are often relevant studies either by academics or by other agencies lying unread. Perhaps the fact that certain methods of field observation and interviewing are called 'rapid research', combine with the apparent uncertainty of getting results from the literature study or from the analysis of incomplete data, make the latter appear rather risky undertakings when there is a fixed and very limited timescale' (1998: 11).

The notion of time adds another weakening point to the participatory process, the efforts being

'channeled into what is easier to investigate- towards topics which are less challenging or towards people who are easier to reach and communicate with. This can all too easily lead to a bias against those who are poor and powerless, which often includes women, those in remote area, children and older people. It may mean not broaching issues of social differentiation and power relations, and failing to challenge assumptions- particularly if that might be politically difficult as well as requiring more time to build up evidence' (1998: 10).

Sanoff (2000: 23) adding to this point wrote that, the people involved often do not represent the majority, rather represent special interests. 'This is because of the erroneous process where many affected citizens are left out of the process, or the influence of those citizens included is minimized, or the process is inefficient in bringing citizen input to the decision makers'.

IX. EPISTEMOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Breu and Peppard (2003:185) quoted from Reason saying that, the epistemological principles provide a theory of validation against which the legitimacy of knowledge claims is being assessed. They argued that the joint collection and analysis by the researchers and the informants' helps to work towards shared interpretations proving their validity and reliability. Also 'rapport' created from the collaborative climate between interviewer and the interviewee creates the sense of an egalitarian relationship between them (Woodhouse, 1998:141).

Barahona and Levy (2002) argued that survey-based research tends to be seen by the policymakers as more useful than participatory one as 'it can be difficult to reconcile the difference between the principles of survey-based (often referred to as 'quantitative') and research using participatory methods (often labeled 'qualitative')'. From their experience through research they tried to establish that it is possible to bridge the gap if participatory studies adopt certain statistical principles and the research findings can be 'scaled up' and can become empowering at regional or national level as well.

In terms of validity criteria, ‘the consensus-building nature of PRAs restrict the expression of difference and hence the scope for triangulation’ (Woodhouse, 1998:145). Since interpretation and use of information is guided by the investigators’ purpose in the enquiry, no matter how participatory the enquiry, will affect its findings. Mosse (2002: 18-21) argued that there is a distinction between ‘Planning knowledge’ and ‘People’s knowledge’. Project actors being active facilitators of local knowledge production and planning can shape and direct these processes while people themselves actively concur in the process of problem definition and planning, manipulating authorized interpretations to serve their own interests.

X. CONCLUSION

Participatory methods are radically different from conventional project practice, since it is a complex practice involving cultural, psychological, social and political factors and there are no universal models or guide lines (Oakley et. al., 1991: 270). The effectiveness of ‘participation’ as a validating theory can be judged by the rising international profile of the participatory projects and their invitation to contribute to national and international programs (Mosse, 2002: 31). There is a distinction between participatory development and participation in development. Participatory development means conventional project practice in a more participatory and sensitive manner. Participation in development concerns effort to change in the aspects like dependence, submission, and limited access to resources and to bring the vast majority within the ambit of local and national development initiatives (Oakley et. al., 1991: 271). For a socially just intervention participation in development is desirable rather than participatory development.

From the earlier discussion conclusion can be drawn that defining problems and potentials in a short span of time not necessarily leads to an improper use of the participatory methods. The validation of the results should not end the process; rather it should be a parallel process concerning both the intervention and the policy review. There is a need to imply policy investigation rigor about the selectivity of the object of study to challenge the most basic assumptions or to look for evidence in the areas of the greatest uncertainty in the available time (Thomas, 1998: 12). The approaches can lead to a revelation and recognition of different

concerned groups with tools and methodologies flexible enough to meet the changing needs and priorities of socio-cultural/socio-economic context in urban areas in a constraint time-scale.

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