
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING
A Strategy for Popular Involvement

The Development GAP

A Non-Profit Development Resource Organization

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Preface

This work is a synthesis and further elaboration of two previous reports on public participation in regional planning commissioned by the Urban Office of USAID's Development Support Bureau. Its purpose is to provide a practical, conceptual basis upon which conventional, regional planning authorities in the Third World can elicit and incorporate public participation in their planning process. The work differs from much of the literature on participatory planning in that it is action-oriented and suggests specific approaches and strategies to adapt. It is also distinct in its attempt to link participation and planning at a regional level, whereas most works on this subject focus on community-level planning. Although it is mainly addressed to planners, administrators and other professionals in the field, the work should also be of value to students, social scientists and others interested in either the practice or study of social and economic development planning in the Third World.

The report is based on a review of literature and case materials in the fields of planning (economic, physical, social and environmental) and public participation, as well as upon consultation with planners. It also draws upon the authors' experience in regional economic planning and social and community development.

The task inherent to this study was an ambitious one. Neither planning nor the elicitation of public participation are well understood as processes: both fields are relatively young, quite complex, and currently at a point at which experience remains far ahead of intellectual analysis. Since the report covers much unexplored territory, it is by necessity highly conceptual and exploratory in nature. Given these limitations, however, we believe that an important conceptual groundwork has been laid for planning authorities to initiate a process of public participation without disrupting the normal planning cycle.

We would like to express our sincere thanks to those individuals who were consulted during the course of this study. They are: Dennis Rondinelli of the Maxwell School, Syracuse University; Miguel Tirado of California State University, Sonoma; Fernando Kuznetzoff of the University of California, Berkeley; Roger Clark of the U.S. Forest Service Research Division, Seattle, Washington; Douglas Hart of Reading University, U.K.; William Hampton, Sheffield University, U.K.; and J.C. Maugh-ton of the University of Nottingham, U.K. Very special thanks are due to David Harrington of the Catholic University of America for the insights he contributed and to Candice Reffe for her valuable help in the editing process.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chapter I

While the use of conventional data has afforded regional planners the capability to generate technically feasible plans, problems can arise in implementation due to the planner's lack of understanding of the "dynamics" at play at local levels. A valid understanding of local and regional dynamics can only come about through communication between the planner and the public. Beyond this, there has been increasing recognition of the need to involve local populations, especially the poor, in determining the nature of projects and programs from which they are to benefit.

In order to accommodate public input, successful participatory planning has usually involved a decentralization of the planning process in which local plans are aggregated to form a regional strategy. While the logic in favor of such decentralization is strong, most existing regional planning entities are in fact centralized, and it is unrealistic to presume that they can be dramatically reoriented and restructured in the short term. It is far more practical to move toward decentralization gradually; that is, to pursue the initial opening-up of conventional planning to allow for meaningful public participation. This initial movement in a transition from conventional to more participatory planning is the primary focus of this work.

There are two major considerations which govern the initial attempt to elicit public participation at the regional level. First, meaningful participation will best result from ongoing dialogue between the planning entity and local populations, rather than from the elicitation of one-way, one-time public inputs. Second, to assure the effectiveness and utility of public participation to planners, public inputs must be made to conform, in form and content, to the different data needs of the various stages of the planning process.

Chapter II

While the conceptual breakdown of the planning cycle into specific phases or steps is generally valid, a deeper analysis of the planning process demonstrates that, in fact, the various steps are often initiated simultaneously, yet concluded sequentially. This allows for a continual readjustment of each step as more data (particularly from the public) is fed into the process. Public participation need not be part of every phase of planning. Rather, sound, initial participation in planning can occur through the integration of public input at two points in the planning cycle: the formulation of goals and the assessment of project options.

Chapters III and IV

There are various approaches to eliciting participation, and the utility of a particular approach in any given planning context must be assessed according to a few key criteria. These include: 1) the dependability of the information which would result from the use of a given approach; 2) the practicality of the approach in regard to cost and efficiency; 3) the approach's intergrability with the regional planning pro-

cess; and 4) the amount of local support to the plan which a particular approach may generate.

A summary and initial assessment of the categories of participatory approaches available to planning entities is as follows:

A. "One on one" Approaches; i.e., all approaches employed to elicit local input on an "individualized" basis from the general local population. This general approach has two principal strengths. First, it provides a sound basis for eliciting a broad sampling of individually expressed needs. Second, it gives the planner a high degree of control over the precise form and content of the information elicited, thus facilitating the integration of the information into the planning process. On the negative side, the approach does not provide a reliable means for gaining a "depth of understanding" of felt needs. Furthermore, it engenders a "passive" posture on the part of respondents and therefore does not constitute a vehicle by which intensive local support for the implementation of the plan can be mustered.

B. Communication with Community Leaders; i.e., interaction with local leaders that are representative of their community, have some degree of authority, are sensitive to the development concerns of the community, and understand the broader planning context. This approach ranks high in terms of practicality and integrability since community leaders are usually visible, approachable, and often more knowledgeable about development issues than the average citizen. They can also be valuable allies in the attempt to implement a plan. On the other hand, they may in fact not be highly representative of the local population -- neither in terms of their status nor their perspectives -- and can thus prove to be undependable sources of needs information, as well as draw-

backs to sustained program implementation. In addition, the costs of attempting to reliably determine leader "representativeness" can often outweigh the benefits to be derived from the use of this approach.

C. Interaction through Community Meetings; i.e., the convening of community meetings or public hearings to discuss important planning issues and receive helpful feedback regarding local needs. If carried out with consummate skill, this approach can render reliable, collectively expressed needs information, while providing the basis for the creation and growth of an authentic movement toward development at the community level. It is also practical, since it does not require the existence of institutional bases at that level; in fact, it might stimulate the creation of such institutions. Community meetings can be difficult to organize and control, however, and skill is required to elicit broad, democratic, and technically manageable responses. Accordingly, this approach necessitates the involvement of experienced community organizers.

D. Interaction with Representative Community and Multi-Village Organizations; i.e., communication with established, representative local-level organizations which have a life of their own beyond functioning in response to the planner's request for input into the planning process. Although considerable time and effort are often required to identify and assess the representativeness of these organizations and their leaders, the expense can prove worthwhile. Representative, local-level institutions can provide an efficient and viable basis for both the reliable elicitation of expressed needs -- either on a one-time or ongoing basis -- and the generation of local support for the implementation of a plan. In order to assure the cooperation of these institutions,

accommodation may be required in the planning process for delays caused by intra-organizational decision making and for adjustments in response to organizational feedback.

E. Interaction with Representative, Functional Organizations; i.e., communication with local level-organizations whose existence, structure and operations are based upon a specific production-related function. The considerations here relate quite closely to those regarding representative community organizations. Again, considerable time and effort must be spent in determining representativeness, and some flexibility in the planning process must be demonstrated to insure ongoing cooperation. Functional organizations can be most useful in: 1) the elicitation of highly accurate information, and expertise, related to their respective service specializations and 2) the lending of experienced support to the implementation of a plan. As functional organizations may not represent to any significant degree the population as a whole, they do not provide reliable sources for the general elicitation of expressed needs.

F. Interaction with Representative, Regional-level Organizations; i.e., communication with regional-level organizations composed of numerous local groups which may be both community or functionally oriented. A major consideration with regard to this approach is whether the considerable expenditure of time, effort, and other resources required to determine the degree of representativeness of regional organizations and their leaders is worth the potentially large payoff that they may produce. Dividends can include highly accurate and useful information, effective planning assistance, and region-wide support for the implementation of the plan. To the extent that these organizations are representative, their broad perspectives and experience in planning render them extremely

valuable assets to the planner. This approach can call for the planner to surrender some control in order to better coordinate regional and local-level planning processes.

A matrix which consolidates the key points of assessment can be found on page 68. The matrix presents and analyzes the different participatory approaches under each of the assessment criteria.

Chapter V

In most cases, no single participatory approach will satisfy the total needs of both the planner and the public. Participatory strategies must therefore be designed to utilize combinations of public-input mechanisms that are appropriate to specific regional and sub-regional characteristics. In all cases, such participatory strategies must also correspond to the requirements of the planning cycle. They must allow for the elicitation of 1) general public concerns during the goal-setting stages of planning, and 2) specific responses to project options as these are produced by the regional planning entity.

This being the case, the use of a two-phased, generic strategy may be the most effective means of eliciting initial public involvement in planning. The first phase of the strategy would involve field staff eliciting general development needs and opinions at local levels. This input would be fed into the planning process for consideration in the setting of regional development goals. At the same time, local planning and organizational capabilities would be assessed in order to design the second, ongoing phase of participation.

In this second phase, field staff would return to local levels to elicit responses to specific project options through a variety of participatory mechanisms identified as appropriate during the first phase. Out of this effort there should evolve local participatory systems which would continue to elicit public involvement in all phases of the regional development process.

The types of participatory systems which would evolve from the use of this strategy would vary with the level of local planning and organizational experience existent within the region. In regions with little local planning experience and few representative organizations, the participatory system will be characterized by a reliance on basic elicitation methods, such as small group interviews and interaction with community leaders. Correspondingly, the regional planning entity's role in the elicitation of local needs will be rather pervasive and direct. In the opposite case of regions which exhibit a high degree of participatory and organizational development, reliance can be placed upon the elicitation of needs through local structures already in place. In such cases, the regional planning entity would play a coordinating and advisory role in local planning and project development activities to ensure a complementarity between regional plans and local self-development efforts.

To implement a sound participatory program, it is critical that a planning entity take three basic steps. First, it must employ field staff who are familiar with both general development processes and local populations. Second, it must coordinate the dissemination of public inputs within the planning entity through a central unit which has access to all planning sub-units. Finally, it must use an appropriate data-processing system to order

and quantify multiple, unstructured public inputs for analysis by planners; one such system is described in Appendix B. Planning entities, however, should ease into the formulation of a participation program, making decisions related to long-term structure, staffing and operations as its gains further knowledge of the region and its participatory characteristics.

