

Public Participation in Planning for Sustainable Development: Operational Questions and Issues

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Abstract

The call for radical change to the traditional planning approaches in terms of policy, management, administration, information, knowledge, values and actions is not new. Consequently, the search for efficient and effective public participation is never ending. Malaysian town planning has progressed since the colonization period and it is a challenge for the government to shape a new approach to encourage participation from the public. This paper proposes quality public participation and its importance for sustainable development, the changing approach of participation in Malaysian planning process, role of actors involved in participation and some methods to facilitate quality participation and issues related to its operation.

Keywords: Sustainable Development, Quality Public Participation, Town Planning, Capacity Building.

1. Introduction

The rhetoric of community participation has been rehearsed many times, but it remains the exception rather than the norm on the ground (Warburton, 1998). This statement finds its truth in planning where theoretically, public participation has been included in its written process

but in reality, the intended objectives for participation are not realized. Malaysian town planning's approach has been characterized as pro-government since the British colonization era. Since the inception of CAP 137 in 1927 until independence, planning has been solely the dominance of the government, in view of representing the public interest for the nation's success. Malaysian town planning approach during this period was largely modelled on the British development plan and development control system. However, globalization has increased concern to include common people in policy making. With sustainable development in most government's policies, there is no escape but to include the community in decision-making process. The Town and Country Planning Act (1976) or Act 172 was enacted in 1976, to replace CAP 137 and it opens up a new dimension for public involvement in planning. Since then, several amendments were made in Malaysian planning for three decades to suit the local needs and global demands. The recent amendments on Act 172 further give public allowance to participate at the early stage of development plan preparation process, which could insert stronger impact, rather than at the stage where draft plan was completed, in previous practice. This paper explores the extent of public involvement in Malaysian planning practice towards realizing our goal to become a fully industrialized sustainable developed nation. Following this section, this paper lays down the background of sustainable development and practice of public participation during its process, and the implication of sustainable development on planning. The discussion is followed by descriptions on quality public participation and the need for capacity building. Later, the paper presents the Malaysian way for public

participation in planning before raising some operational questions and issues for future studies. Final discussion is on the three important groups identified to create quality public participation that are the authority, private sector and community.

2. Sustainable Development and Public Participation

Sustainable development requires collective action that is closely identified with democratic community. Sustainable development depends on *“the legitimacy and trust with which government are perceived and the sense of citizenship which enables individuals to participate in a civic society... (this) implies a renewal and rejuvenation of the democratic process”* (Jacobs, 1995:5). This can be done through providing the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes, encouraging public awareness and participation by making information widely available and effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings.

Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration stressed on different levels of participation including *“the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes”* (and) *“States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available”*. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided. In addition, Principle 1 stresses that, *“human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development, they are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature”* (The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development from the Earth Summit in Rio De Janeiro, 1992).

Public participation is also highly stressed in Local Agenda 21, which is one important strategy to achieve sustainable development. Chapter 26 in Local Agenda reads, *“Recognizing and strengthening the role of indigenous people and their communities”* while Chapter 27 mentions about *“Strengthening the role of non-governmental organization, who are considered as “partners for sustainable development”*. This clearly calls for commitment and genuine involvement of all social groups in planning and decision-making as one of the fundamental prerequisites for the achievement of sustainable development.

When Malaysian Town and Country Planning Act (1976) was first implemented, participation from the public is required after the draft plan is

ready. It was through the recent amendment of Malaysian Town and Country Planning Act (Act 1129) (Section 9 and 13) in 2003 that public participation is mandatory during the formulation stage and after the draft plan is approved. This move has been said as timely and in line with our goal to become a democratic, developed nation. Healey (1998:139) notes that public participation is vital *“to allow consensus to be negotiated prior to the deposit of plans, to reduce the scale of objections, and to give support to the planning authority’s policies where significant conflicts over land-use and development exist”*. On the same token, Burmingham (2001:105) writes that, *“planners recognize that unless people feel that they have been adequately consulted and their views represented, the planning process will be more conflictual, time consuming and costly”*. This implies that engaging public participation before the plan is finalised could avoid future conflict and assist in legitimating the established policies.

3. Sustainable development implication on planning

The call for radical change to the traditional planning approaches in terms of policy, management, administration, information, knowledge, values and actions is not new. This call for changes has been intensified since early 1990s, in line with the Town and Country Planning Department establishment of Total Planning Doctrine, to integrate planning with environment and human needs. The suggestion for changes in planning approach has been made by a few writers to make it more supportive towards sustainable development (Blowers, 1993; Healey and Shaw, 1993). This is due to several weaknesses such as lack of integration among departments responsible in planning process and ad-hoc planning implementation (Kamariah, 2003).

According to Counsell (1999) the planning system has suffered fragmentation due to the market-led ideology of the 1980's, where there is only tenuous links with the management of most natural resources and the tendency has been to contain it to a narrow remit focused on land-use and development. Apart from the weaknesses in contemporary planning system to provide healthy environment for sustainable development, the fact that sustainable development may be interpreted differently in different location or field or by different actors makes it difficult for planners to draw a

standard operational procedure when implementing planning for sustainable development.

In the United Kingdom, for instance, it is said that one factor that hampers healthy development of appropriate planning policies (that support sustainable development) is the institutional constraints (Blowers, 1993). Blowers (1993) contends that the institutional constraints like the sovereign power of nation-state appears to be a major obstacle for sustainable development. From another perspective, Hales (2000:14) writes about restraining factors that hamper sustainable development's influence on the planning system that include the short term nature of development plans, decision making bias towards development, and the sectoral nature of land-use planning that does not integrate socio-economic and ecological needs. From literature review, it can be deduced that these same barriers do exist in the Malaysian planning (Khairiah, 2000; Halimatun Saadiah, 2000 and 1994).

Several attempts have been made to implement sustainability through planning following the Rio Declaration. For example, in the United Kingdom, a white paper titled '*This Common Inheritance*' (1990) outlined the sustainable development strategy and measurement of progress to be implemented in that country. The United Kingdom also published a number of planning guidance that emphasize on the need for sustainable development to be incorporated into local planning practice.

Malaysian efforts to implement sustainable development include the adoption of Total Planning Doctrine, National Physical Plan and developing "Urban Indicators" by the Town and Country Planning Department. One of the principles in the doctrine stresses on the relationship between humans in which a person has the right to get or implement his right as long as it is not harmful to others. In addition, majority of local authorities have been actively implementing Local Agenda 21 that focuses on community as the main stakeholder for the city. In this light, the state of Selangor has been seen as advance in its effort such as the launching of Sustainable Development Strategy for the state. In addition, Quality of Life Program for Malaysian Cities was also promoted by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government recently.

4. Quality Public Participation and Capacity-building

Participation can serve three purposes: consensus and stability; conflict reduction and increase consciousness; and containment and bargaining. The goodness of involving public in planning has been discussed in works under variation of terms to describe participation such as collaborative planning (Healey, 1998), community government (Day, 1999) and communicative planning (Forrester, 1993). Participation could encourage intellectual development, appreciation of multiple characters in society and reduce the command and control mode of the government (Day, 1999; Healey, 1998; Forrester, 1993).

However, one must caution that increase participation does not necessarily equal to increase in public benefits. Gaining quality participation, that is the real fruitful involvement from all, is not an easy task. Several writers and practitioners have voiced their skepticism on the underlying rationales and consequences of the adoption of such an approach (Campbell and Marshall, 2000; Tewdr-Jones and Thomas, 1998).

Participation could open the opportunity for the public to exploit their right to articulate self rather than collective interest (Campbell and Marshall, 2000). It could also lead to complexity in reaching consensus as genuine common interest may clash with social justice or economic efficiency. In parallel, there are dangers of focusing on narrow self-interests rather than to acknowledge interdependencies of complexity of certain issue such as sustainability. It can be as a form of tokenism, where public consultation is included to provide public satisfaction, when in fact the decision has already been made, or little importance is attached to the views expressed (Freudenberg and Keating, 1985). Soh and Yuen (2005) caution that although the involvement of various interest groups is a move towards a more pluralistic outcome, excessive competition that is detrimental to the policy making process could result, if it is not well-managed. Campbell and Marshall (2000) write on the complexity of the decision making process in planning when public is involved. When local communities were given power, it is unlikely that consensus will be gained and this will always do more harm than good. In short, public participation can be manipulated in many ways, thus straying from its true purpose. This implies that although there may be inadequacies in the current structure and democracy in the planning system in Malaysia, these may not be resolved through increasing the number of participation alone.

Recognition of the multiple and conflicting voices within communities is not new in the developed nation. In Malaysia, the problem of low participation to gain suggestions from the plural society has been one major drawback (Kamariah, 2003). Even when there is participation, some groups are seen to be more interested in advancing their own agenda rather than representing real public interest. Calling for greater community involvement should be complemented with planners' professional ability to tolerate and handle the egregious consequences of empowering the public as well as equipping public with the right skills and knowledge to participate. In other words, to increase the potential for community participation, the community must have the capacity to do it.

In proposing equal participation, Briassoulis (1999) contends that although these principles are common in past and contemporary planning approaches, they must be adhered to simultaneously if planning is to support sustainable development. For instance, satisfaction of the basic needs of people has long been the major goal in planning, but without acknowledgement of ecological constraint of the area, development will be bias towards social needs thus neglecting the environment.

The process of providing training to enhance knowledge and skills in participation or capacity-building process should be stressed in order to create quality public participation. Much has been written about devising and holding participation, but the inherent imbalances of power and resources are not always articulated. Participation organizers should realize that not many common people have the ability to communicate clearly what they want. For poor people, the capacity needed revolves around enhancing their ability to improve their quality of life without help, the ability to identify priority of their needs and to voice it out with confidence. For those who make decision, the ability is to make rational judgment and to identify real needs of the community. At this juncture, Warburton (1998) asserts that capacity building is seen as a precursor to participation in that ordinary people cannot take action or responsibility unless and until they have their capacity built. Capacity-building, according to Wilcox (1994:31) could help people to develop confidence and skills necessary through training and other methods.

The Town and Country Planning Act (1976) also states that the planning department is required to find methods to educate the public about their right to make appeal. This implies that the need to train community to participate effectively is stressed in the Act. Such methods that have been

exercised are giving talks, road shows and exhibitions in public participation. In community participation, ordinary people need to be trained and exposed to skills needed to participate effectively. At this instance, it is stressed that participation program may fail to function effectively if people were not equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to play their part. Therefore, capacity-building is necessary to gain maximum benefit from public participation.

5. The Malaysian Way of Public Participation

It is clearly mentioned in Town and Country Planning Act (1976) or Act 172 that the public is given the right to be involved in the preparation of Structure Plan and Local Plan. The process, which is called "SERANTA", has been implemented and it is reported that comprehensive efforts are carried out to inform the public and encourage them to participate. The Act requires publicity of SERANTA to be announced in at least two local newspapers. In view of Malaysia multi-racial community, the current practice is that four local newspapers (Malay, English, Tamil and Mandarin) have been employed to announce SERANTA. In addition, banners and radio announcements are also included. Local authorities are encouraged to facilitate public participation through various innovative activities such as user-friendly material and information, the usage of sketches, plans, diagrams, pictures and models, which are used to increase the effectiveness and establishing two-way communication. Supportive activities such as seminars, focus group discussions, dialogues, interviews and feedbacks from newspaper and e-mail are also being carried out.

Encouraging public participation includes publicity or public announcement made by the department to inform the public on exhibition of any development plan which is in draft stage. Among the objectives of publicity for participation in development plan are giving opportunity to the public to voice their opinion and inspecting the draft report prepared by the department. In addition, publicity for Local Plan and Structure Plan has similar first objective including providing transparency in the government's proposals. Publicity is also carried out in the case of Development Control to inform neighbouring landowners about proposed development in their areas where they can forward objections within the given period of time. It is also stated that public participation is needed to assist the local authority

to identify current problems and future prospects of their area. The community is to inspect, understand and accept or reject the contents of the development plan and subsequently forward any appeal, suggestion or objection. Appeals or objections shall be forwarded to Public Hearing Committee and decision on these appeals should be completed within the specific period. The Act 172 also states that the planning department and the local authority have the right to accept or reject application to amend the draft plan.

Previous reports and works on public participation have given the picture of very low public participation when it involves planning. According to a research done in 2001 by The Department of Town and Country Planning, the real objective of full participation has not been fulfilled as only 1% to 12% of local population attended the Draft Local Plan exhibition while only 1% to 8% participated in the Draft Structure Plan exhibition held by the department (Department of Town and Country Planning, 2006). A study by Kamariah (2003) reveals that the majority of respondents had not participated in SERANTA and those who had participated admitted that it was not voluntary as these were due to job requirements. The same study reveals that only one percent of visitors filled in the objection forms. Random survey conducted on UPM students since 2001 to 2006 indicates that public are not aware of SERANTA and they are not able to give the correct meaning of the word SERANTA.

This implies that both the planning department and local authority should find ways to create higher public awareness to be involved in planning. Majority of the public may have limited awareness and knowledge on their rights in planning. This could provide three implications: first, the public is always satisfied and believed in the government's proposal; second, the public do not feel that participation is necessary and third, they do not understand the plan and do not know their rights.

A process that facilitates sustainable development must provide equal opportunity for participation from all levels (Tewdr-Jones, 1998; Healey, 1983). The effects of planning process on people's self-esteem, values, behaviour, capacity for growth and cooperative skills are often considered more important than the merely instrumental consequences of a plan (Naess, 2001). Therefore, people must be involved in decision-making, resolving conflict and planning for their future. This is in line with the Brundtland Commission's (WCED, 1987) emphasis on the need to support

grass-root initiatives, empower citizen organizations and strengthen local democracy. In similar vein, Boyce (2002) in his analysis on the dynamics of environmental degradation in terms of the balances of power between the winners and the losers claims that democratisation, that is the movement toward a more equitable distribution of power, is an important means to achieve the social goals of environmental protection and sustainable development. For equal participation and democratisation of planning for sustainable development, input from all levels and groups, including between local authorities, must be considered in the whole process of planning. Therefore, quality participation needs equal distribution of power among those involved in local plan preparation process. .

On the issue of democratisation, Kamariah's (2003) study reveals that 83% of respondents were satisfied with the current procedure of SERANTA although few are skeptical in that they considered the process as merely to fulfill legal requirements, while their roles in the process were only peripheral. It was also found in this study that the general public (except for NGO's, developers and political groups) had limited knowledge of the role and remit of land-use planning and was generally unaware of channels for participation (Kamariah, 2003). The participation process was also considered as long winding for they have to attend hearings to propose their objections. In addition, some members of the public question the transparency of the decision making process and thus regarded the process as a form of tokenism as highlighted by Freudenberg and Keating (1985). This gives a perception that decision-making for local plan is very much politically influenced, and they were not given the opportunity to know how the process of hearing was carried out and whether their objections were accepted and if not, why (Kamariah, 2003).

However, it is also noted that the current public are more educated and aware of various channels to voice their grievances such as the mass media which they consider as the most effective way to get quick responses. This suggests that although participation has not achieved its maximum potential, the process of democratization is gradually taking shape. The current trend has also shown that globalization and 'world civil society' has risen in Asia in 1990s (Yamamoto, 1995, Wapner, 1996). The recent public outcry on the issue of power abuse of councillors in the Klang City Council is one good example that the Malaysian public awareness of their rights is increasing (The Star, 1st November 2006).

6. Operational Questions and issues

The current practice of eliciting public views in planning can be considered as not successful in gaining the maximum input. The ineffectiveness of facilitating effective and efficient public participation could be grouped under three main actors, the government (local authority and planning department), the majority public and those with special interest in government's projects (developers and businesses).

For the part of the government, there are questions on whether they have provided adequate channels for participation and transparency in decision-making process. Clear roles and responsibilities should be outlined to ensure opinions from all levels of community are taken into consideration. User-friendly and effective communication channel should be devised. This could alleviate the problems of poor participation. Ineffective materials used to explain the planning content should be avoided. Instead, the use of simple language and interactive medium must be explored. The government should also reduce public skepticism of lack of transparency and long-winding process of getting one voice heard by being more open. The current communication technological advancement such as the internet and a more efficient and quality service has partially solved some of the problems. However, more needs to be done to reduce bureaucracy and provide more transparency to gain public trust. The employment of internet as a medium of fast communication has been proven effective to spread information and gaining public feedback. The authority should find ways for easy communication and quality participation in order to gain public trust. They should welcome suggestions from public, not to regard them as barriers to the smooth flow of the preparation process (Kamalruddin, 1991).

On the issue of the failure of the authority to inform the public and encourage them to participate, the root problem could be cultural as Malaysians are also popular with their 'never mind' attitude unless their backyards are at stake. Although this mind your own backyard (MYOB) attitude is universal, lack of education and interest in government's program further dampens healthy participation.

Then comes the next question on whether our public has the capacity to participate effectively. A number of strategies has been implemented by the Town and Country Planning Department such as actively innovating their

approach to educate the public and using the most user-friendly materials as possible. This includes going down to the ground and using local languages to encourage two-way communication. An effective participation should encourage feedback and input at all stages of plan preparation (Healey, 1995; Kamalruddin, 1991). Perhaps the program should be operated simultaneously with the Local Agenda 21 by local authorities since groups from different background, including the youth, have been established under this banner. Effective participation should be encouraged through the joint efforts from influential figures such as from the local planning authority, corporate figures and the public.

The group that represents the majority public should also be given priority. As mentioned earlier, planning should involve everybody, not just the selected few only. Lack of quality participation could be due to lack of knowledge and awareness on the importance of participation in the part of the public. Without clear understanding on the importance of participation and their rights to participate, the public may regard the process as another government agenda that will be implemented regardless of their participation. It was also found in one study that the general public (except for NGO's, developers and political groups) had limited knowledge of their role and right in land-use planning and was generally unaware of channels for participation (Kamariah, 2003). This would eventually distort the original objective of exercising participation process. Limited knowledge on current laws and local issues and sustainable development can also lead to low drive towards the cause. To increase the potential for community participation, the community must have the capacity to do it. This means that the community that consists of ordinary people cannot take action or responsibility unless and until they have their capacity built. This can be done through training and other methods to help people develop the confidence and skills necessary for them to participate effectively. One of the strategies to encourage this is using Focus Group Discussion (FGD) which involves the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political groups, local representatives, village work committees (JKKK), professional groups, developers and business organizations. Thus the question here is that whether or not these groups are considered enough to comprehensively represent the whole community.

The third group comprises those from the private sectors and with personal agenda - the developers and businesses. Previous exercise in planning has shown that this group is most active when it comes to

participation (Kamariah, 2003, Kamarudin, 1991). The government could play a clever role as mediator to balance their dominance to provide ample space for other groups. The current notion that the private sectors should join forces with the government to serve the public should be welcome. Incentives should be given to encourage the private sectors to operate their businesses with some portions allocated to the community. This paper, therefore, questions on whether the current arrangement and procedure in planning provide adequate opportunity for all (including the public) to consult each other, and how each group is involved and influence the decision made in reaching consensus on future development

7. Conclusions

Without quality participation, the journey for sustainable development through planning in Malaysian could lead to rough roads. Several factors have been identified as barriers toward effective quality participation. Among the factors are, the failure to attract more public to participate and gain quality feedback, public lack of knowledge and awareness on the importance of participation and lack of authority's effort to communicate at the field's level thus reducing bureaucracy. In this paper, to increase effectiveness in participation, the role of different actors in the process should be revised and strengthened. The failure of previous participation may stem from the lack of transparency and ineffective communication channel from the government part, the community's lack of capacity to participate and the private sectors' domination in advancing their profit focus suggestions in planning. We need to build the community's capacity for quality participation. Therefore, it is proposed that restructuring of participation process, focusing on building public capacity to participate in the forms of training and other methods could alleviate these problems and assist people to develop the confidence and skills necessary for them to participate effectively.

Rethinking and restructuring of the current system to boost commitment and implementation should be encouraged. Drastic changes in terms of institutional restructuring and local authorities commitment towards sustainable development, such as transparency in planning decision-making and reducing bureaucracy should be implemented. Training planners and government officers to understand the public could

open up more channels for two-way communication. The issue of power relationship where certain dominant group monopolised voice in decision-making process in the past could be resolved by providing equal opportunity to all and with the changing trend that the public empowerment is on the rise, the goal for quality participation is not impossible. With empowerment and with some control, benefits such as ownership and sense of belonging could be easily achieved. Sustainable development requires collective participation to safeguard the environment for our future. Ongoing relationship and trust between government, developers and the public should be promoted. If planning is to maintain a concern with the collective good, particularly social justice and environmental responsibility for sustainable development, extreme care will need to be taken in the role conceived for quality public participation.

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