

URBAN PARTICIPATORY PLANNING

PRACTICAL ACTION
Technology challenging poverty



This brief looks at some of the issues of participatory planning in general and what differences might be found between urban participatory planning and rural participatory planning.

The urban poor in an increasingly urbanised world

In 2011 world population reached 7 billion people and is projected to surpass 9 billion by 2050 (UNDP 2009a.). With an urban population of 3.3 billion in 2008, the proportion of people living in cities reached the 50% mark, and by 2030 the urban population is expected to expand to 5 billion. The towns and cities of the developing world are expected to contain up to 80 per cent of the 5 billion urban population. In particular it is predicted that Africa and Asia will see their urban populations double by 2030 (UNFPA 2007). Almost all of the world's population growth over the next 30 years is likely to be concentrated in urban areas (UNFPA 2008).

Urban environments present many opportunities on both an individual, and an institutional level (Satterthwaite 2007) in terms of improving livelihoods, as well as in the sustainable distribution of and access to resources (Jenks et al 2000). However, the management of the pattern of urbanization and the development of cities can have profound effects on how equitably and sustainably these opportunities and resources may be shared, and how their positive and negative effects impact on the population (Satterthwaite 2007, Graham and Marvin 2001, Castells 2009).

The urban poor remain a largely underrepresented and misunderstood section of the poor community (Patel and Mitlin 2002, d'Cruz and Satterthwaite 2005, Jones and Corbridge 2010), however their continued growth and potential to self-organise (d'Cruz and Satterthwaite 2005) gives rise to the possibility that, if they were recognized in urban governance processes they could lobby for more equitably distributed rights and access to the resources that urban environments hold.

What does Participation mean? Reengaging with unjust systems of inequality

Participation has been a popular buzzword in development theory and practice since the 1980s, and continues to be so to this day. The concept of participation has its roots in radical grass-roots movements, with the original aim being the transformation of marginalising political and social structures (Leal P.A. 2010). Since its original introduction, the term has grown in popularity in



Figure 1: Community Action Planning Event hosted by Practical Action with Nyalenda, A Neighbourhood Planning Association, Kisumu, Kenya.

Photo credit: Caroline Cage.

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mainstream development theory and practice (The United Nations Centre for Human Settlement (UNCHS) declaration (1976) in Vancouver, and the Earth Summit (1992) in Rio are among the major world conventions that gave significant impetus to participatory planning approaches).

A number of participatory approaches have been developed in an effort to 'standardize' and institutionalize participation in development practice. For example, Participatory Urban Appraisal (PUA) methodologies; Rural Rapid Appraisal (RRA) techniques; Participatory Learning Methods (PALM); Micro-planning; Planning for Real; ZOPP and UNCHS (Habitat) Participatory Urban Decision Making; Community Action Planning (CAP) among others. In particular Participatory Urban Appraisal (PUA) has been used in many urban settings to identify the needs and priorities of communities, often in combination with Community Action Planning, in order to develop a series of actionable ideas for the implementation of community development. At the city level City Development Strategies (CDSs) have enabled city residents to participate in the prioritisation of city development projects while participatory budgeting has enabled residents to influence the planning and spending of municipal budgets, and at the national level new policy models such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) aim to institutionalise participatory processes.

However, in recent years there has been much criticism and debate over the concept of participation. It has been argued by some scholars that since the adoption of the concept of participation into mainstream development practice it has become co-opted and 'modified, sanitised, and depoliticised' (Leal, P.A. 2010:95) as a tool to better serve the dominant neo-liberal agenda in order to maintain rather than challenge the status quo and current inequities. Many civil society organisations, wanting to remain neutral in their interactions, are reluctant to get involved in local politics, however through their processes and interventions it would be unavoidable not to have an effect on existing power structures and hierarchies. The tools that have been developed often tend to address either sectoral or specific development issues in specific countries, and many of the broader participatory methodologies, having originally been developed in the North, and often also developed in rural environments may not be suitable for addressing the complexity of urban life. Thus many existing approaches oversimplify the concept of 'communities' and the political, social and cultural context in which they and the groups and individuals that constitute them form and are formed by.

In response to the perceived lack of engagement with the power struggles and inequalities associated with participation, there has been a substantial amount of debate on how participation can reengage with its transformative roots (see for example Cook and Kothari 2001 followed by Hickey and Mohan 2004 for some of the discussion). It is argued that a development intervention should not only aim to understand existing power structures both internal and external to the 'community' in which it is working, but also aim to build the capacity of those who are marginalised to engage with those in positions of power, as well as to create secure and inclusive spaces where this can take place. The poor should not be seen solely as participants in the design and implementation of development activities, but also as partners and active agents of change within themselves. In this way participation may give the opportunity for a longer-term, more meaningful involvement of marginalised members of that society.



Figure 2: Ladies from Gonda Nguono Self-help Group collecting water from a shallow well, Manyatta A ward, Kisumu, Kenya

Photo credit: Caroline Cage

What does participation mean in the urban context? Complexity and diversity

As the world demographic has shifted from being more rural to more urban, the focus on participation in urban settings has also intensified. However, while there is increasing focus on urban environments, there is still debate as to what differences should be recognised as significant in the transition from rural to urban, and in turn what effect this should have on the processes and techniques used in participation at an urban scale, and whether it is appropriate to use or adapt processes that were initially developed for use in rural environments.

While some have argued that there are few significant differences between rural and urban environments in terms of participatory processes (Mitlin 1995), there are a number of key factors that become at least more significant in urban environments, and will therefore need to be taken into consideration in the participatory approaches used (Sahley and Pratt 2003):

Defining community: Many of the participatory approaches designed in rural areas were developed for use at the household or community level. However, the use of the word 'community' has been widely criticised in terms of the underlying assumptions in defining those who live in a particular geographical area as likely to be homogenous and cohesive in nature. Even within the smaller 'communities' in rural environments this is unlikely to be true, but even more so within the dynamic social environment of urban settings. While some people may have lived in the same area for many years, a large proportion of the population is likely to be made up of a fluctuating number of migrant workers and tenants, there is also likely to be much more diversity as people from many different areas, backgrounds and cultures come to take advantage of the opportunities of urban environments.

"The reality in urban areas is that even people living on the same street can have little in common, either socially or economically: beyond sharing a few basic services" Sahley and Pratt (2003:31)

The lives and livelihoods of the poor are often made up of a complex web of connections and interactions (Nabeel Hamdi (2004) cites five types of overlapping 'communities' that people are often simultaneously connected to) that become even more complex in urban environments. The increased heterogeneity can mean that there is greater potential for the divisions and inequities between groups experienced in small pockets elsewhere to become much more apparent, and potentially volatile in the densely populated and overlapping environments in urban areas. However, there is also a greater potential for changes in traditional hierarchies and social norms and thus greater potential opportunities for those who are traditionally marginalised in society, such as women.

Scale: The increasing scale of urban environments means not only that 'communities' within themselves have become more complex, but also that their population mass and density as well as in the complexity of how they fit into the urban fabric and the relationship between areas of poverty and the urban environments in which they are located is also changing. While some settlements, 'informal' or 'formal' have been in existence for many years, others are emerging all the time, as official and unofficial approaches to dealing with the urban poor are changing. It becomes much harder

to define a community when the face of poverty within the city is constantly shifting. However, while the scale of urban poverty is often overwhelming to local and international institutions alike, the numbers and density of the poor in urban environments can also present new opportunities in terms of the potential scale at which the poor can act collectively. Thus, while



Figure 3: Mathare informal settlement, Nairobi, Kenya
Photo credit: Caroline Cage

the heterogeneity of populations may mean that forming alliances can be complex, where they are built the voice of people living in poor environments can potentially be much more powerful and influential.

Institutional complexity: Sahley and Pratt (2003:32) identify some of the variety of institutions that exist in urban environments: Community Based Organisations, workers' cooperatives, trade unions, Non-Governmental Organisations, the local state, the local government, public institutions or quangos, political parties, and a host of other interest groups. Not to mention private investors, local service providers and other international agencies etc. that may also be very influential in urban environments. Thus there are a wide variety of institutions, public, private and civil society, all with their own levels of influence, approaches and objectives. This has led to a much more complex and politicised institutional environment in urban areas, with a range of actors with varying levels of control over planning decisions. The overlapping of old and new systems of governance has led to increased complexity in the policies and regulations that regulate urban planning, so there may be a number of overlapping policies and underlying and explicit influences that affect urban planning decisions.



Figure 4: Artisans Women's Group, Nyalenda A, Kisumu, Kenya

Photo credit: Caroline Cage



Figure 5: Risper Ongwang selling mandazi at the road side in Manyatta A ward, Kisumu, Kenya

Photo credit: Caroline Cage.

Economic, livelihood and tenure diversity:

In comparison to communities that largely rely on agriculture in rural environments, the diversity of employment opportunities within urban environments means that there is also a range of levels of income within communities, leading to increased heterogeneity of urban poor populations (Sahley and Pratt 2003). To further complicate this diversity, the majority of urban growth in developing countries is also characterised by "*informality, illegality and unplanned settlements*" (UN Habitat 2008:30) and thus in the majority of cities there is a "*continuum of tenure categories...from pavement dwellers to freehold owners*" (Payne, G. 2001:1) with associated levels of relative security. Particularly where a settlement is well located there is likely to be a large proportion of slum tenants, often paying very high rents proportionate to their income. For example in a 2008 study of tenure in Nairobi's slums it was found that 92% of the households are rent-paying tenants (Gulyani and Talukdar 2008:1921). So within any one poor neighbourhood there may be pavement dwellers, tenants, structure owners, and landlords, all with very different livelihood opportunities, and all with very different levels of assets. Thus it becomes even more important that

participatory approaches in urban areas take into account the range of influences over potential livelihood and shelter opportunities for the different sections of the urban poor, and how this

impacts on their position within the economic hierarchy.

Putting urban poverty in context: Where do the urban poor fit in the institutional web?

Many of the community level tools listed in the first section of this paper are useful for providing a snapshot of the make-up of a particular community as perceived by those who live there. However, as noted above, urban environments tend to be much more heterogeneous, and often involve a far more complex network of relationships. Thus existing participatory approaches that try to build consensus within communities may be more problematic in urban areas and may potentially serve to strengthen and mask power relations, rather than address underlying inequalities. Instead, some have argued that a more appropriate approach is one that sees participation as an evolving process which recognises differences, seeks to engage different actors at different moments, and allows for both conflict and consensus within this process:

“In a context of inequality, every citizen must also be empowered to participate, and that entails treating them differently both because their power resources are unequal and because, without adopting a misplaced essentialism, they often have different needs. The process should provide resources and opportunities to engage at every stage and to put new issues on the agenda.” (Silver, H et al, 2010:472), This should include processes to engage members of the population who do not normally participate (women, youths and other marginalised members of the population) either through their perceived role within society, or restrictions imposed on them by other members of society. In urban environments it becomes increasingly important to understand the wider dynamics of power relations both internal and external to the community.

A number of tools are now emerging which aim to help practitioners to visualise the interplay of power relations at the macro-level of society in relation to the different actors, institutions and networks that operate and have influence over the social and economic powers that shape urban environments. Often these tools or approaches have been developed from tools that seek to place the marginalised actors within the institutional web (see for example Caren Levy’s web of institutionalisation (1996)), and are also often based on a systems theory approach that recognises the fluctuating dynamics of the urban institutional context (for example the use of Outcome Mapping is increasing in popularity as a more dynamic approach to monitoring and evaluation of projects (Earl et al 2001)).

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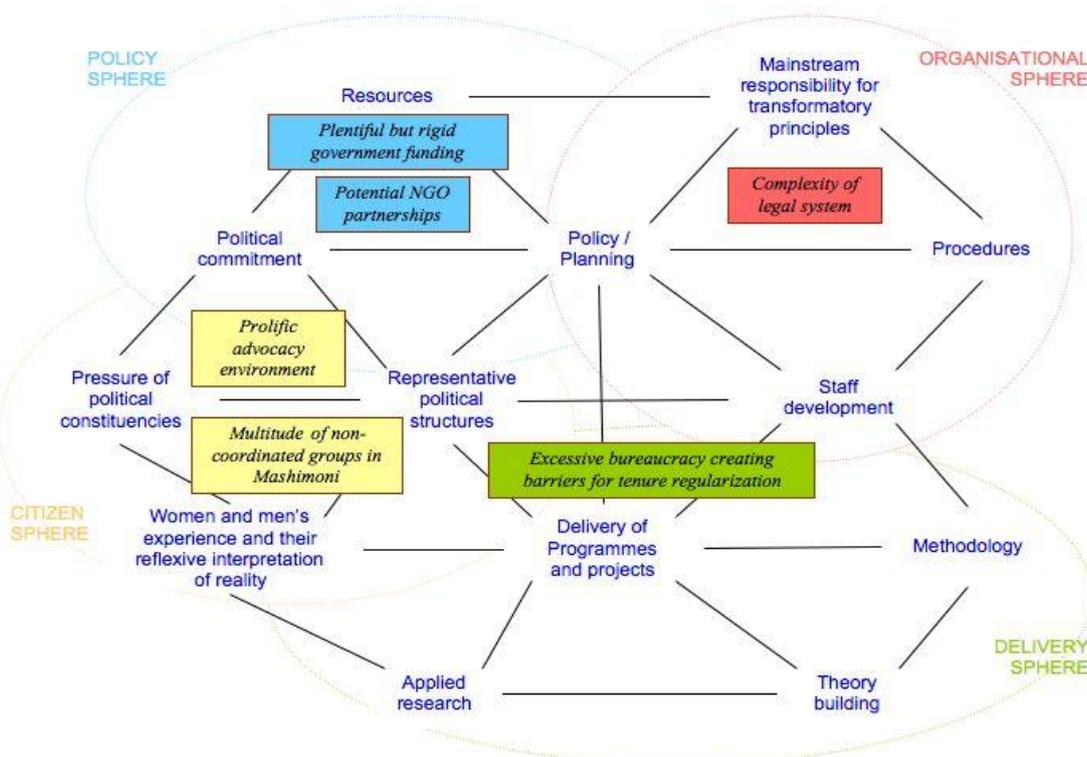


Figure 6: Caren Levy’s web of institutionalisation (1996) adapted for a workshop by Architecture

Sans Frontiers – UK outlining some of the issues affecting a slum community in Nairobi, Kenya
Credit: ASF-UK, Change by Design Workshop, 2011 (Report forthcoming)

Preconditions for effective participation in urban environments: Political support and a dynamic civil society

The 2009 UN Habitat Global Report on Human Settlements has as its focus the planning of sustainable cities. Its initial introductory paragraphs highlight that it was found through an analysis of existing approaches to urban planning systems that very little has changed over the past 100 years. Through technocratic and inflexible approaches, planning systems are '*often contributors to urban problems rather than functioning as tools for human and environmental improvement*' (UN Habitat 2009:3) as they should be. This has led to calls for a change in the current approaches to urban planning, and in particular the ways in which urban planning is failing "*to accommodate the way of life of the majority of inhabitants in rapidly growing and largely poor and informal cities*" (ibid:12), contributing to rising levels of both "*social and spatial*" (ibid) inequality, evident in the growing number, size and density of slum settlements in many developing cities as well as a growing number of gated and spatially segregated communities. In order to change the current processes of urban planning that have facilitated the development of highly segregated and exclusionary urban centres, the UN Habitat report identifies "*participatory and partnership processes*" (ibid:15) at the neighbourhood level as among some of the key innovative approaches that have made significant improvements to processes of urban planning.

There are a number of conditions that are stipulated by the UN as a minimum requirement in ensuring that participation is "*meaningful, socially inclusive and contributes to improving urban planning*" (ibid:28):

- a political system that allows and encourages active citizen participation
- a legal basis for local politics and planning that specifies how the outcomes of participatory processes will influence plan preparation and decision-making
- mechanisms for socially marginalized groups to have a voice in both representative politics and participatory planning processes

Similarly, Nick Devas identifies "*a better understanding by those in power of the livelihoods of the poor, political commitment from the leadership, resources to do something about the situation and a dynamic civil society that brings pressure to bear on the decision making process*" (Devas 2002:220) as factors necessary in achieving an urban governance structure that is responsive to the needs of urban poor communities, also echoed in what Patrick Heller states as the necessary (but not sufficient) preconditions for decentralization to be successful (Heller 2001:138)).

For the urban poor to participate effectively in urban environments, there needs to be a transition made by many governments to recognise the rights of all those living within their boundaries, and in particular the rights of poor urban communities to engage with the political decision making process and ensure that everyone's views are heard. In order to ensure that local and national governments effectively respond to the population's needs, there need to be in place local institutions "*with the power and the legal basis to allow them to negotiate effectively with powerful external agencies or companies, even to question the proposals they put forward, and to hold these agencies or companies to account if they contravene agreements*" Satterthwaite (2007:71). The decision making process in itself needs to be transparent in order to ensure that those in power can be held accountable in recognizing and responding to local needs.

While the commencement of a successful participatory planning process depends on the good will and commitment of the partners involved, there also needs to be awareness created, and efforts made to ensure that those who may be excluded from dominant social and political networks are included in participatory processes. As noted previously, there are a variety of urban institutions (including those of the urban poor) that may initiate a planning process with a view of bringing partners and stakeholders on board to find solutions to local development problems.

Involving local partners in new approaches to participatory planning gives the potential for existing institutionalised policies and practices that may not involve local people's participation or may be tokenistic at best, to be made more inclusive for those who are the most marginalised in urban environments.

Organisations of the urban poor: Important new actors in urban participatory planning



Figure 7: Magadi Unit Group, Manyatta A ward, part of the Neighbourhood Planning Associations, Kisumu, Kenya

While the heterogeneity of urban environments poses specific challenges for building cohesion and solidarity amongst members of urban 'communities' as noted above, the number and density of the poor living in urban environments means that there is potential for networks and organisations to develop to such a scale for them to potentially become significant actors in urban planning and development processes (see for example the work of the Slum Dwellers International). As the world becomes increasingly more urbanised the number of large-scale organisations or federations of the urban poor have increased dramatically, as has the

extent of their coverage and their impact in terms of the changes they have made in service delivery and building social cohesion. In addition, they have become powerful actors in lobbying for the rights of the urban poor at local, national and even international levels. Partnerships between local organisations of the urban poor and external actors in urban planning can potentially lead to significant changes, physically within their local environments, and also socially and politically in terms of the policies and power relations within the countries that they are based. Approaches that not only aim to increase participation, but also aim to strengthen local initiatives and build the capabilities of the urban poor to self-organise have the potential to have a deeper impact on the root causes of poverty.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to outline some of the complexities that urban environments present that should be addressed when designing and implementing participatory planning processes. Urban environments pose specific challenges in terms of their heterogeneity and diversity, while at the same time they present new opportunities for pro-poor reforms in existing planning processes, and new forms of partnerships that can potentially strengthen the capacity of the poor themselves to bring about changes at a much larger scale. While the process of changing current practices in urban planning may take time, building local institutional as well as urban poor people's capacity to articulate and negotiate throughout the planning process will lead to urban environments that are much more sustainable and social cohesive in the long-term.

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