COUNTERPOINT

The Limits to PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

by Susan S. Fainstein

Susan S. Fainstein argues that civic participation – while possessing the potential to make policy-making more responsive to citizens' needs – can undermine inclusivity. Professor Fainstein, who has taught at the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD) as well as at Columbia and Rutgers universities, focuses on planning theory, urban redevelopment and comparative public policy in her research. In her latest book, *The Just City*, she argues that urban policy should be valued according to its contribution to justice rather than competitiveness. She is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Harvard GSD and a visiting professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore.

The call for civic engagement in policy-making, or citizen participation, is a political demand that evokes powerful feelings. Its intent is to create a form of strong democracy that empowers citizens to shape policy directly rather than through the actions of their elected representatives. According to its supporters, citizen participation in the decision-making process produces more informed decisions and confers legitimacy on the final outcome. My purpose is not to dispute these claims – citizen participation in many contexts is indeed desirable. At the same time its proponents often exaggerate its benefits, assuming that the results of participation will be fairer than if policy remains the realm of bureaucrats and politicians. Unfortunately, even though participation potentially makes policy-making more responsive

to the needs of citizens, it has weaknesses that can undermine its inclusivity and effectiveness.

At the neighbourhood level "NIMBY" – i.e., not in my backyard – reactions of residents to proposed changes in their area comprise the most commonly cited drawback of allowing citizens to influence policy decisions. In cases where new projects will almost certainly not produce benefits for a neighbourhood, even if they are justifiable from a city-wide perspective, responses are virtually always antagonistic. By now the examples of neighbourhood opposition to locally unwanted land uses like group homes, halfway houses, garbage incinerators, etc., are legendary. Even day-care centres and housing for the elderly can provoke negative responses. In Singapore, housing for foreign workers causes sharp protests even while citizens depend on these workers for a vast range of services. The hope for citizen participation is that deliberation will lead to compromise and inclusion but sadly, stalemate is the more usual result.

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Neighbourhood participation offers the hope of overcoming some of the disabilities of centralised government. Many have argued that centralised, professionalised urban bureaucracies take on a life of their own, becoming increasingly insulated from their environment. The public feels dissatisfaction with the rigidities of government run by "experts" who owe their allegiances to functionally demarcated bureaucracies rather than geographically defined units. Calls for the democratisation of bureaucratic decision-making arise in response to two perceptions: that “street-level bureaucrats” – first defined by political scientist Michael Lipsky in 1969 as “men and women, who in their face-to-face encounters with citizens ‘represent’ government to the people” – including planners and service providers, make decisions affecting urban residents without regard to their knowledge, opinions and interests; and that public agency staff come out of different social backgrounds from those affected by their decisions.

Experts, on the other hand, fear that citizen activists lack the necessary knowledge for wise decision-making, are parochial in their interests, and are likely to exclude minority groups and the poor. Typically citizen participants are well educated and middle-class, not necessarily so different from the experts they are challenging – in fact, demands for participation often emanate from a perception by members of the public that they have as much claim to knowledge as the supposed experts. Neither group, however, may be very representative of poor and minority groups. For example, middle-class participants may be passionate about historic preservation but concern themselves little with the housing problems of the poor, and, as mentioned above, care even less about shelter and recreation for foreign workers.

Discussions among political theorists that focus on “deliberative democracy” – which involves decision-making based on discussion that is undistorted by the unequal power relations of various groups – fail to indicate how differences of wealth and power can be overcome.

The tension between democracy and justice raises difficult problems for these theorists, since after deliberation people may still make choices that are harmful to themselves or to minorities. There is an assumption that processes with unjust consequences must not have been genuinely open or participants were inadequately informed. Just procedures are expected to produce just results; if unjust results have been produced, then the process must have been subjected to distortion. This presents a problem of circularity or infinite regress. Analytically, separation of the terms democracy and equity (or justice) allows process and outcome to be used as separate evaluative standards.

Civic engagement raises problems of which citizens to involve. Even when they are not biased towards middle-class interests, neighbourhood institutions do not reliably produce effective representation. Self-appointed leaders may alienate other potential contributors and lack the legitimacy conferred by elections. Neighbourhoods are limited in their human resources. Some neighbourhoods simply lack the leadership cadre and institutions necessary to articulate the interests of residents.

The small size of the neighbourhood presents planners and community groups with economic, political, and logistical difficulties. First, neighbourhoods are not economic units in their own right. The creation of many small programmes tailored to individual neighbourhood needs necessarily sacrifices the economies of scale characteristic of centrally administered programmes. Of even greater consequence, growth and investment in neighbourhoods is largely a function of forces beyond the control of any given neighbourhood and may depend on city-wide or national factors. While neighbourhoods may be appropriate units for fostering the face-to-face, continuous relations that are a prerequisite of strong democracy, they are insufficiently large to address metropolitan issues; developing inclusive mechanisms for metropolitan-wide participation, however, is extremely difficult. Although electronic communication now makes it possible to engage a broad public, without energetic effort to bring non-citizens and minority groups into the discussion, participation is likely to involve only a limited segment of the population.

Despite these liabilities, citizen participation offers the potential to overcome the disabilities of centralised planning and administration, as well as a forum in which disagreements can be negotiated. These benefits are quite real and of value to ordinary citizens. It is important, however, for practitioners to develop strategies which build on these strengths while addressing neighbourhood planning's core weaknesses – parochialism, representation and scale.

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