

Engaging communities

LESSONS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Citizens around the world are increasingly vocal about how their cities should be run or developed. They are also more willing to play an active role in partnering the public and private sectors in development projects. So how are cities tapping this opportunity? The **Centre for Liveable Cities** recently embarked on a research project jointly with Singapore's **Urban Redevelopment Authority** and other agencies under the Ministry of National Development to learn from other cities' experiences in engaging communities. This essay shares some of the findings.

Singapore's limited land resources mean that new developments often present significant trade-offs, sometimes affecting heritage sites, recreational spaces, green sanctuaries and familiar places. This has generated debates about what the right balance between maintaining quality of life and the pursuit of economic growth should be. These trade-offs are not new. People, however, are no longer content to be passive consumers of the outcomes of development decisions. There is growing interest in the rationale behind the decisions made, and mounting pressure to open up opportunities for greater public involvement in the decision-making process.



Hitherto, the approach has been for the government to take decisions in the best interest of the population. This model has worked well for Singapore over the last half century – quickly and effectively transforming Singapore from a squatter-lined colony into a modern metropolis. But rooting a people to their country does mean giving them

greater scope and empowerment to influence the changes in their environment.

There is therefore a need for effective public engagement. Here are some observations of the different approaches to public engagement undertaken in Hong Kong, New York City and Bilbao.

01 Bilbao officials consult citizens in different ways, such as these group discussions.



Learning to Engage Early in Hong Kong

Like Singapore, Hong Kong's key challenge is land scarcity. Particularly since the 1970s, reclamation has proceeded at a rapid pace to support Hong Kong's fast-growing economy. Appalled at the speed of reclamation, the Legislative Council passed the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance in 1997, stating a presumption against reclamation at Victoria Harbour.

Reclamation plans at Victoria Harbour were first mentioned in the 1985 planning strategy. By the mid-1990s, reclamation for the early phases of Central and Wan Chai waterfronts was almost complete. Although objections to the reclamation from the public had



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been received, the government proceeded with the reclamation, while making efforts to reduce the amount of reclamation. Nonetheless, this did not appease the public and a civic group, The Society for the Protection of the Harbour, lodged a judicial review against the government's reclamation plan at Wan Chai (Phase II). In 2004, the Town Planning Board was ordered by the Court to review the reclamation plans at Wan Chai. Invoking the Protection of the Harbour Ordinance, the Court noted that reclamation at Victoria Harbour could be justified only if it served an "overriding public need" that is both "compelling and present" and cannot be accommodated by a "reasonable alternative".

The case marked a watershed in the relationship between state and civil society in Hong Kong. It led to an extensive public engagement approach, with the government soliciting public views much earlier than before, during the planning and policy formulation stages. Although not legislated, public engagement has since become an integral component of policy-making in Hong Kong.

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Consultation is a Must in New York City

New York City has a legislated time-bound consultative process for development projects. Development proposals that require rezoning are subjected to the Uniform Land Use Review Process (ULURP), which takes seven months. Within this time, the views of the Community Board, the Borough President, the City Planning Council and the Mayor are taken into account.

In addition, as part of the ULURP application, developers are required to submit an Environmental Impact Assessment for their proposal. Drawing up this Assessment during this pre-ULURP phase can at times be tedious and protracted, particularly if the proposed development is challenged by the community and interest groups. As such, developers can be tempted to circumvent the ULURP process altogether.

One such example is the Atlantic Yards development, a US\$4.9 billion project to build Barclays Center Basketball Arena and 16 residential and office buildings in the gentrifying Park Slope area. Citing eminent domain (government's power to take over private property for public use) and the use of state land, the Mayor's Office signed an agreement for the project to proceed under a state review process, bypassing ULURP. Nonetheless, the concerns of the residents and the stakeholders still had to be addressed through various means, such as, community benefit agreements.

So although a statutory process like ULURP could be rigid and dominated by powerful lobbies that may not be representative of general sentiments, it is a transparent system where all parties concerned respect the final decisions made, even if it does not satisfy everyone. ULURP is also strictly time-bound, thus ensuring a consultative process that is finite.

01 Hong Kong's Society for the Protection of the Harbour successfully lodged a judicial review against government reclamation plans.

02 New York City pedestrianised Broadway by first securing public buy-in for a larger "Sustainable Streets" initiative.



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Hearing From All in Bilbao

The Spanish city of Bilbao does not have a legislated system of public engagement, but is firmly committed to civic participation as part of good governance. Bilbao’s engagement approach is to be “as mainstream as possible” and not be limited to minority groups with the loudest voices. Bilbao tries to do this by getting its officials to “walk the street” to identify first-hand the issues of concern to the public, as well as be savvy with the mass media and online social networks as means of communication. Surveys on both qualitative and quantitative issues are also carried out at least

once a year to identify what people want, what they are unhappy with, as well as the service gaps and areas for improvement. Survey data then becomes a good resource to distil the needs and views of the “silent majority”, which could be used to counter the views of interest groups, if necessary.

In addition, transparency is valued highly as a determinant of good governance and Bilbao places great emphasis on facilitating public access to information that affects the town, local districts and one’s immediate neighbourhood. The aim is to establish a channel of communication to promote discussions based on accurate facts, thus ensuring useful, rather than misinformed, public debates.

01 The Mayor of Bilbao (second from right) meets with citizens to share information and better understand their views.

02 The success of New York’s High Line was due to a vibrant civic culture and the individuals and groups that advocated it effectively.





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Tapping Platforms and Partners

Institutions can provide useful platforms for constructive discussions between the public, private and people sectors. The Association for the Revitalisation of Metropolitan Bilbao (BM-30), for instance, is an apolitical think tank that brings together members of the government, professional, business and people sectors to network, exchange views and debate on issues of the day. Similarly, the Kaleidos. red Foundation (Bilbao) is a network that lends its expertise to local districts on governance matters relating to social capital development, open governance, relational administration and citizen participation.

Independent parties, such as academics and accredited professional bodies, can help build legitimacy in development proposals. Hong Kong uses them widely, commissioning studies by third parties who are seen as more “neutral”, thereby shoring up credibility for proposals. Task groups and committees are also often specifically set up to build consensus, brainstorm solutions and iron out implementation details for projects. The Harbourfront Commission is one such example, and is the go-to agency for all development proposals related to Victoria Harbour. It is chaired by an independent, respected member of the community, and vice-chaired by a high-ranking government official (the Secretary of Development) to give impetus to pushing advocated ideas through.

A vibrant civil society can play a big role in galvanising projects for the greater good of the community. The Friends of the High Line (FHL), an interest group with influential members from New York society, played a leading role in pushing the High Line project, which sought to conserve a disused railway track and turn it into a park. The group lobbied for political support and rallied the wider public through events such as an ideas competition and an exhibition. The FHL also managed to garner support from the business community as well as philanthropic individuals and organisations to provide the funding essential for the High Line’s success.

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Frame the Engagement

The way in which public engagement is pitched oftentimes influences the success of the engagement process. For instance, the High Line project was framed as economic revitalisation rather than conservation, with the abandoned elevated rail-line cast as the centrepiece for new commercial and residential developments along the western edge of Chelsea.

Similarly, the proposal to pedestrianise Broadway was publicised as being part of New York City’s “Sustainable Streets” initiative. A key tenet of the “Sustainable Streets” initiative was that streets were public spaces not just for cars but also bicyclists and pedestrians. Having given their buy-in on this bigger picture of developing “sustainable streets”, people found it harder to disagree

with the specific proposal to pedestrianise Broadway. First announced as a pilot in February 2009, the pedestrianised Broadway became a permanent feature of the city’s landscape a year later. A mid-term evaluation report suggested positive implications for public health, safety (meaning more “eyes” on the street), retail sales (as pedestrian density translates to higher expenditures per capita) and general urban liveability.

These international examples provide the following useful lessons for Singapore and other cities that are keen to enhance their public engagement processes.

01 Workshops like this are one of the ways Bilbao engages its people.

Lesson 1: Lead by Example

Public engagement does not displace the need for leadership. In fact, leaders are looked towards to set the tenor, direction and boundaries of public engagement for the rest of the governance apparatus.

Fundamentally, government has to come across as sincere, open-minded and willing to modify plans when there are good reasons to do so. This requires a change in mindset starting from the highest level, on the definition of effectiveness to one that is more people-centred rather than time-centred, with concomitant financial and human resources dedicated to the implementation of public engagement processes.

Lesson 2: Cultivate Good Relations

The special interest and technical familiarity of civil society groups and professional organisations position them as credible parties in mediating and shaping public opinion in the public engagement process. The history of public engagement in these three cities surveyed, however, indicates that these groups need time and opportunities to develop and mature. A good understanding of the diverse stakeholder groups concerned in a particular development project can generate win-win outcomes that connect the parties involved emotively – not just to meet rational goals. It is thus important to develop positive relations with various stakeholder groups, NGOs and the media on a regular basis.



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Lesson 3: Clarify Engagement Goals and Mechanics

It is important to be clear about the reasons for engaging the community, as well as the extent to which the population at large needs to be involved, and the key stakeholders involved. Building legitimacy and garnering buy-in for policy decisions is not so much about more engagement, but better engagement.

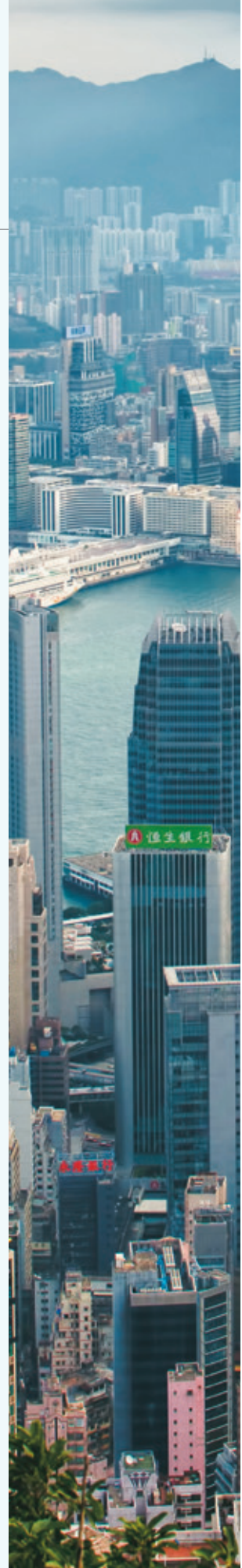
A firm grasp of the mechanics (the how-to's) of engagement is also crucial in determining a successful engagement process. This includes the way the engagement is framed and pitched, and the strategic use of data and survey material that could highlight “silent” majority views while countering the more vocal minority voices, thereby enabling a more balanced understanding of the issues at play.

To facilitate constructive public debate, transparency of information should be commended as a cornerstone of good governance. In an era of social media where opinions abound, ready access to information allows engagement to proceed based on available facts.

Lesson 4: Recognise Local Contexts and Capabilities

The effectiveness of any public engagement approach is highly dependent on the political and cultural milieus of the country, and the readiness and maturity of their civil society to propose ideas and responsibly see them through. The success of the High Line development in New York, for instance, is very much due to vibrant civic culture and the passion and vision of individuals who had the tenacity and connections to push the project through.

⁰¹ Hong Kong's Harbourfront Commission is chaired by an independent, respected member of the community, and vice-chaired by a high-ranking official to help push ideas through.





Conclusion

Public engagement has become a key ingredient for effective governance. Yet, its success is very much dependent on the crafting of innovative ideas that bring together the diverse opinions of the many interest groups with the strategic needs of society, and ultimately, the resolve to translate these ideas into realisable solutions – implemented in a timeframe that still upholds the credibility of the government to deliver the goods.



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