ABSTRACT

The challenging nature of public participation in planning has been well-documented and there are frequent observations that this does not go far enough. Accordingly, since the turn of the century attention has turned to the ways in which public participation might be strengthened and improved through e-participation methods. This article aims to explore the extent to which e-planning methods address the long-standing challenges of traditional participation approaches. The article discusses some key themes within the planning theory literature relating to public participation and focusses on two important challenges which are summarised as: 1) Whose voices are heard within participatory processes, and how can less articulate voices be supported? And 2) Who controls participatory processes and to what extent, and in what ways can power be devolved to public participants? Developments in e-planning go some way to addressing these challenges; for example in opening up new channels for public participation and removing barriers to participation. However, e-planning certainly does not represent a panacea and requires critical reflection to ensure that it does not aggravate, rather than alleviate, these problems. For example, reliance on ICTs may risk leading to new inequalities in access to planning systems. Furthermore, questions relating to who participates, and who controls participation in planning processes remain relevant and pressing.

Keywords: Crowd-Sourcing, E-Planning, GIS, Planning, Planning Theory, PPGIS, Public Participation

INTRODUCTION

There is a long history of discourse and debate relating to public participation in planning within (and from time to time between) academic, policy and practice spheres. These debates have been on-going since at least the 1960s (Brownill & Parker, 2010) and reflect tensions between vocal commitments to democratic principles within planning processes and concerns about the practical value and limitations of public participation.

The underlying presumption is that greater public participation in decision-making pro-
cesses will lead to more socially acceptable and hence sustainable outcomes (e.g. Buchy & Hoverman, 2000; Chilvers, 2008). However, there is some debate as to the extent to which participatory processes in fact satisfactorily reflect public interests or give public participants meaningful and influential roles. Supposedly ‘participatory’ approaches can conceal undemocratic or unjust processes (see Cooke & Kothari, 2001). All too often while “planning processes are described as open and participatory […] Tension exists between commitments to public participation and desires to control decision-making processes (and outcomes)” (Aitken, 2010: 249). Participatory approaches to planning are often fraught with difficulties and challenges. As March (2004: 412) contends; ‘Democratic planning must reconcile a complex of precepts which are desirable, but which pull in different directions’. Ultimately; ‘an inclusionary collaborative process does not necessarily guarantee the justice of either process or material outcomes’ (Healey, 2003: 115).

The challenging nature of public participation in planning has been well-documented and there are frequent observations that this does not go far enough. Accordingly, since the turn of the century attention has turned to the ways in which public participation might be strengthened and improved through e-participation methods. As Kubicek (2010) notes there has been much excitement that with the advent of Web 2.0 and the huge potential for greater active user-involvement online that new forms of participation will emerge opening up planning processes to wider citizen involvement and more meaningful, empowering forms of participation.

This article aims to explore the extent to which e-planning methods address the long-standing challenges of traditional participation approaches. The article begins by setting out some of the key challenges in relation to public participation in planning. In particular; a theme in the planning theory literature relates to exploring means of making public participation more meaningful and more empowering for public participants. Important questions relate to how participatory processes are controlled, and by whom, and the extent to which control is devolved to public participants. A further consideration is who participates - and therefore who does not participate. An important challenge for planning is finding ways to open up planning processes and foster participation of wider publics. The second half of this article will explore the potential for some of these challenges to be (at least partly) addressed through advances in e-planning.

**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING**

The planning theory literature, whilst engaging with the challenges that participation presents, has extolled the potential value of public participation. Advocates of participatory planning have argued that: ‘From our modernist reliance on state-directed futures and top-down processes, we have to move to more community-based planning, from the ground up, geared to community empowerment’ (Sandercock, 1998: 30). Incorporating the views of members of the public into planning decisions is seen to give greater legitimacy to those decisions (Buchy & Hoverman, 2000). ‘Collaborative planning’ has come to be something of a buzz word since the mid-1990s (Healey, 2003) and it has been contended that: ‘The participatory approach in the public planning domain has become institutionalized as a method of good planning practice’ and that ‘democratic principles and public participation have become increasingly accepted as means for balancing and rationalizing multiple interests and preferences’ (Kaza, 2006: 256). Within planning theory there is said to be a ‘new orthodoxy [which] clusters around the idea that the core of planning should be an engagement with a range of stakeholders, giving them voice and seeking to achieve planning consensus’ (Rydin, 2007: 54, see also Masuda et al., 2008).

Recent planning policies have reasserted commitments to public participation (e.g. in the UK: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005; Scottish Government, 2010) reflecting a wider
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