E-Participation in Urban Planning: Getting and Keeping Citizens Involved

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses an often neglected perspective on e-participation in urban planning: the citizens’ perspective. Usually, the debate focuses very much on the planners’ perspective. In a case study, two issues are analysed: First, what are the motives of participants and non-participants; second, how citizens’ perception of influence and equality in the process affect their satisfaction with it. It is concluded that getting more people involved requires addressing three different types of motives, and that e-participation easily scores high on the perception of equality, but that citizens’ perception of influence requires particular attention of the planners.

Keywords: Citizens, E-Participation, Motives of Participation, Spatial Planning, Utrecht

INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR A CITIZEN’S PERSPECTIVE

Public participation in urban planning basically builds on the idea that citizens take part and stay involved in the decisions and decision-making processes. If citizens don’t take part or are dissatisfied with the process, public participation fails (Mickel et al., 2005; van Coenen et al., 2001). Public participation is without doubt an important element of the processes in urban planning (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004), taking into account the citizen’s perspective is therefore essential. Shipley and Utz (2012) analysed the academic literature on public participation pointing out crucial research gaps in this field: the motives of residents needs to be further explored – in particular supported by quantitative research. It need to be investigated how participation can be set up to make it “comfortable and appropriate” for citizens; and the role of e-participation

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requires particular attention (Shipley & Utz, 2012). Many contemporary discussions focus on the participation tools, as Leino and Laine ascertain: ‘Public participation has forgotten one basic principle, namely that the people are taking part in the planning process because they are interested in a particular issue’ (Leino & Laine, 2011).

This article therefore explores two questions: First, what are the general motives of citizens to participate in urban planning processes; second, how does a process need to be set up to keep citizens involved. These two questions are elaborated empirically with a case study in the Dutch city of Utrecht. The case study involves the analysis of e-participation tools. Since the 1960s and in particular the invention of the internet, e-participation holds the promise of improving participation in many respects in particular because of the low individual transaction costs of both, getting and keeping involved (Becker & Slaton, 2000). The emergence of Web 2.0 applications such as Facebook, Twitter, other social networks and content sharing tools created new opportunities for e-participation (Brandl & Francq, 2008). But e-participation requires quite a lot of engagement of citizens and governments (Loyens and7 van de Walle, 2006). Therefore, the second research question on how to keep people involved in the process looks in particular at e-participation.

To make the inherent notions in this research explicit, the following two assumptions have been applied:

The first assumption is that citizens have different types of intrinsic motives to take part in participation and if a participation process triggers these motives, citizens are more willing to take part in the participation process. Recognising why citizens do or do not participate in urban planning processes is crucial for getting them involved (Leino & Laine, 2011). Bekkers and Meijer (2010) identify three different types of interests in participation in urban planning: a general interest in the public realm, a particular group interest, and self-interest. Those three types are also in accordance with types derived from theoretical deduction from Cultural Theory, where the rationalities hierarchism, egalitarianism and individualism underlie the three types (see Hartmann 2012)1.

The second build on the hypothesis that if citizens are not satisfied with the participation process, they do not keep involved in the process (Bergeijk et al., 2008); moreover, a higher satisfaction of citizens about the process leads to a higher support for e-participation (Boedeltje, 2009). Edelenbos (2000) confirm this assumption: the more positive a process or policy is perceived, the higher is the support for it. This statement explicitly stresses the subjective character of ‘satisfaction’ (Kokx & Kempen 2010). Analysing satisfaction therefore requires knowing the factors that influence the positive perception (satisfaction) of a participation process. Boedeltje (2009) identifies personal factors, such as previous experiences, trust, but also education, or age. In addition, external factors can play a role, such as societal trends, economic events etc. (Graaf, 2007). But some factors refer to the process itself, most importantly the perception of having a say (influence) and the equal chance to give input in the process that is treated in a fair way (equality) (Boedeltje, 2009, but also Bergeijk et al., 2008). Satisfaction with the process depends on factors; so, the second assumption is if a process takes the most important factors into account, citizens are more likely to stay in a process.

This contribution adds two aspects to the already lively and well-established academic and professional discussion on public participation in urban planning. One important aspect is the analysis of the motives of participants and non-participants. This perspective of non-participants is barely addressed in previous research. Despite all the statistical constraints with the sampling, this perspective enables addressing those motives based on a more informed empirical basis. The methodology how this is conducted is shortly outlined and may be applied in other case studies. The other aspect is that the empirical analysis of satisfaction with the participation process reveals the importance of the two factors, and the influence and equality of the e-participation tools, enabling
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