

Public Participation and “Good” Urban Governance

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Abstract: In the 21st century, with the development of globalization and urbanization in the whole world, and the economic and social advancement, the managing structure, and methods of the urban governance are changing rapidly. This situation shows that the good urban governance is facing a wide variety of challenges and issues to serve the contemporary cities. Among those numerous challenges and issues, public participation is a key factor that should be well considered if the urban governance wants to be a good one in the future. The reason for this statement is that almost all of the decisions, policies, and regulations made by the urban governance are relevant to the daily life of people living in the city. On the other side, good urban governance should connect well with all the relevant people, organizations, and government sections, and consider all advices and needs of them to make sure that the policies could serve public in the maximum range. That means the residents in the city are the majority service object of the urban governance, and providing the needs of the public can help the urban governance turn to a positive image to the residents. Under that situation, public participation offers the chance for urban governance to make correct and satisfied decisions for the residents, and it is being accepted that public participation takes a vitally important position in a good urban governance in the contemporary ages. In this essay, the importance of public participation in urban governance will be exhibited in detail firstly and then discuss the problems of public participation and increase engagement of public participation in urban governance. To compare with the bad governance, the redevelopment process of Liede village could be used as an example to discuss the benefits of the good urban governance with high-level public participation in China. Finally, the conclusion would be given out at the end of the essay.

Keywords: *the importance of urban governance; governance methods; public participation*

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0 Introduction

In the contemporary age, the public awareness of participation in the urban governance is stronger than before. It is because the public found that this is a civil obligation to attend decision-making process and a practical way to voice their need for the urban governance. A good urban governance is willing to receive the opinions from the public and promotes the decision-making ability to serve the civil^[1].

1 Public participation method

The public participation method is not completed yet, and there are three vitally important problems to be considered carefully in the implementation process of public participation. The problems are as follows: Who should be involved in the participation, how to exchange information between urban governance and participators, and how to link the result of the public participation to the policy actions. These three problems restrict the development of the public participation and reduced the power of the public participation^[2].

In general, for most public participation projects, there are fewer restrictions on selecting the people who attend the public meetings and hearings. Actually, most of the people who choose to participate are wealthier and better educated or have interest for certain particular projects, and their opinions have less representatives for the projects in most time^[3-5]. To resolve this problem,

there should be a participators selection mechanism to ensure the selected participators are relevant to the project and really interested in the project. At the same time, the selected participators should be willing to spend a lot of time and engage to represent the people who have similar benefits^[6].

The current method for the urban government to communicate with the participators is public hearings and community meetings. In that information imparting events, the officers of the urban government have the freedom of speech, and the participators only have the chance to ask questions and are not allowed to discuss the decision and policies with the urban government^[7]. This is not a good way of exchanging information between the urban government and the participators, and also, it does not benefit the participators to illustrate the information to other relevant stakeholders. It is essential to have effective interaction between participators and the urban government, which helps the officers and participators exchange the relevant information about the projects clearly and quickly. Meanwhile, the participators who understood the decisions clearly also could agree with other stakeholders regarding the decisions. It is useful for spreading the information about the decisions^[4].

In most public participation venues, to influence the decision-making process of urban government is not the real expectation of most participators. Actually, the reason most people who attend the public participation is because it could let them feel a sense of performing the obligation of civic, and also, some participators are driven by the good edification. To change this situation, an efficient method is to let the officers communicate with the participators, and discuss the decisions directly with them. Meanwhile, participators also should monitor the implementation of the development process of projects or policy actions^[8].

To discuss the relationship of the public participation for “good” urban governance, the experience of redevelopment of urban villages in Guangzhou could be used as an example. Before the urban government realizes the importance of the public participation, the decisions made for the redevelopment is not reasonable and satisfactory to the local residents in urban villages. After implementing the public participation mechanism, the assessment of the urban governance moved toward the positive direction^[9].

As a country during the governance transition period from centralization to decentralization, there are a lot of

cities in China facing the challenge of how to be good at governance, especially in land administration. In the process of urban development, the scope of urban land construction spreads fast and merged many villages close to the urban area in China, villages of those kind are called urban villages.

Most urban villages are all in terrible situation without enough public facilities, which are identified as a kind of slum. To keep the image of the city and to maintain increased land value in the city, most of the urban villages are to be redeveloped and upgrade quickly. In the redevelopment process, the urban government will sell the lands of the urban villages to the developers, and legally set up compensation policies to compensate the financial loss of the local residents in the urban villages. The developers would support compensates and distribute it to the local residents. In this process, the local residents in urban villages have little chance to voice their opinions. The community meeting for public participation is just like a conference, and there are no ways for the local residents to discuss about the decisions made by the urban government. Some residents who really disagree with the compensation policies and feel being treated unfairly in the redevelopment process do not accept the decision and do not move out from the urban village^[10]. They use this method to protest the decisions and try to voice their opinions. To circumvent this situation, the developers choose a barbarous and unreasonable method - forced releasing - to dispose of the nail houses. This kind of news reports was popular in the last several years, and the criticism for the disappointed urban governance is serious. It also destroyed the public trust in the urban government and created a terrible influence of urban governance in the world for the city.

To reverse the negation image in the redevelopment process of urban villages, the urban government of Guangzhou developed a phenomenal public participation mechanism. This participation mechanism considered all the issues mentioned above and gives out a resolving scheme. This mechanism was first implemented in the redevelopment of the Liede village. Nearly 18,000 people lived in this urban village, and using the new public participation mechanism to make compensation decision is a great challenge for the urban government^[11]. In the participators selection section, the village committee turns to the main body to select the relevant participators who should attend the community meetings, as the village committee is well acquainted with the situation of the village and familiar with

governance processes. Meanwhile, the members of the village committee have the same interests with the participators. As a result, the participators who attend the meeting know the requirements of the local residents in the village very well and have a high enthusiasm to attend the meeting organized by the government. The upgraded selection process of participators gives the local residents a way to voice their opinion about the decision, and it also creates a reasonable communication way for participators and the urban government^[8].

For the information exchange mechanism, except the original information passing method, such as announcement, poster, and hearing, the urban government also conducts special meeting for answering the questions of the participators. This special meeting enhances the understanding of the policies by the participator and also the participators who attend the public meeting convey the facts to the people who did not attend the meeting. This advantageous communication method advanced the passing of policies of the urban government, promoting the understanding between the urban government and the local residents^[12]. To enhance the linkage of public opinions and the policy actions, most of the meetings are organized by the officers in the urban government, and the officers could get the first materials of what are all the needs of the local residents so that they could change the decisions quickly and efficiently to satisfy the local residents. For the other meetings which are not organized by the urban government, such as the meeting for the developers and the participators, there are also some officers attending the meetings to listen the requirements of the participators. The attention of the government officers enhanced the passion of public participation and let them realize that the results they discussed could influence the final decisions created by the urban government^[9].

The result of the public participation mechanism is beneficial. Using the high-level public participation method, the urban government resolved the negotiation problems with the local residents in a reasonable and efficient manner. This public participation method changed the “bad” and barbarous image of the urban government and acquired public trust. Even though there are still many problems that are not solved, it is pleasant to see the urban governance of Guangzhou have already in the transfer process from the barbarous figure to a “good” urban governance^[2].

2 Conclusion

Public participation generally turns to a vitally important part in the “good” urban governance. Even though more and more people are appealing to promote the level of the public participation, the public participation method is still not completed. It is clear that the public participation could help the urban government create a good image and enhance the trust of the government. Meanwhile, a high-level public participation could advance the civil obligation and help the government annihilate mistakes. It is no doubt that the public participation is a key challenge for a good urban governance.

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