

Key issues for enhancing citizen participation in co-constructing city futures

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Abstract: Co-constructing city futures (3C) is a new project addressing current problems in the development of cities. While participation may be a goal, levels of participation are often low, limited to certain sets of stakeholders, and the collaboration between them often poor. The project sets out to encourage and facilitate a shift from processes that intentionally or unintentionally exclude certain groups. Building on ideas about collective learning, it inquires and experiments with public debates and planning processes to enable citizens and other stakeholders to engage in the co-construction of ideas and visions for city futures. Case studies focusing on green mobility will be carried out in selected Norwegian cities in collaboration with planners, citizens, and other actors to identify their needs and interests, and to develop, test and evaluate ideas and prototypes for digital tools. Three critical questions are suggested as a point of departure for a CoPDA 2016 workshop discussion.

Keywords: Participatory design, co-creation, situated simulation, social media, cultures of participation, citizenship

1 Introduction

The existing methods used in participatory planning do not enable multifaceted and truly inclusive public involvement (Kahila-Tani 2016). While ‘citizen co-creation’ has recently become somewhat of a rallying cry in certain policy and planning circles (Hilgers & Ihl 2010), the reality is that integrating citizen perspectives into the development of urban futures has been an uneven process with mixed success. Significant organizational alignment within planning agencies is required in order to open up for community-based constructionist approaches, which would involve the agencies’ organizational structures, processes and practices (Boxelaar et al 2006).

Current pressures on making planning processes more efficient present a risk of ruling out the involvement of the peripheral voices (i.e. those not required by law or institutional guidelines), especially when time is a scarce resource. The current challenges of low levels of participation and genuine co-construction, and its limitation to

a certain set of stakeholders may therefore become more prevalent. Furthermore, planning procedures can generally be defined as step-by-step processes, where the starting point is a planning proposal setting certain agendas that may be difficult to modify. To address these issues and avoid exacerbating the static and linear planning procedures that may exclude citizens and burden future urban environmental sustainability, we view it as imperative to create better means for citizens to express and contribute to their views about urban futures. More importantly, tools that improve the process of genuinely taking these inputs into account must better fit the needs of planning practitioners.

One ongoing paradigmatic shift that may enable greater citizen engagement in planning processes is the increasing ubiquity and falling costs of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). In several arenas, ICTs are being used to increase the communication and interaction between citizens and governments, and involve civil society groups in policy and planning processes (Saad-Sulonen 2014).

A key technique for open innovation is crowdsourcing, which agencies may use to go outside their boundaries to find solutions to problems, issuing a challenge to a large and diverse group in hopes of arriving at new innovative solutions more robust than those found inside the organization (Seltzer & Mahmoudi 2013). There are several examples in the Norwegian planning context of using crowdsourcing. However, despite using participatory language, crowdsourcing has largely taken the form of information surveys and consultations, which correspond to tokenism in Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation. This is also the case for GIS data and maps, which are made public and used in experiments with public participation through the Internet. Public participation GIS (PPGIS) remains an expert system and thus bounded within the institution of urban planning and within the confines of employed expertise (Hemmersam et al 2016).

1.1 Key challenges of citizen participation

A key issue for the project is to improve the level of engagement and democracy in the decisions of how cities are developed, through enabling citizens to co-construct ideas and visions for city futures. The issue of democracy in planning is expected to become increasingly relevant and thus timeless, as a result of increasing political pressures to make planning processes more efficient. Early engagement of a wide range of stakeholders may also contribute to higher efficiency, by changing the starting point before practitioners make significant decisions that can only be modified through a complete transformation of the original plan.

A contribution to a transformed planning system through ICT resources. Part of the challenge of the 3C project is encouraging and facilitating a shift from a step-by-step planning participation, that intentionally or unintentionally excludes certain interest groups, into a more emergent, dynamic and responsive planning system, where shared and open representations are used actively in decision-making processes. The project seeks to make representations available and transformed into scenarios of what city futures might be. Due to the interactive and accessible ICT platform, these

scenarios will include inputs from the citizens, and will be constantly changing during the participatory process and based on the collected input. Scenarios may constitute primary material for citizens to visualize and understand the future consequences of current activities and decisions. The development of future scenarios, which are visualized, enacted, and co-interpreted in the context of real life conditions is a break-through concept.

In 3C, scenarios are broadly understood and will be represented by knowledge objects, which will range in complexity, from simple digital notes, images, texts, videos, visualisations and simulations (e.g. 3D environmental data), as well as relations between them. In this way futures can be represented in diverse ways. The knowledge objects are geo-located, and are therefore attached to places, structures, infrastructures, events, or phenomena in the city and will be visualised overlaying on the physical urban landscape. This will provide opportunities for experiences and knowledge building (Scardamalia & Bereiter 2014) that is collaborative and situated in the city. Citizens have shown willingness to participate in urban planning events using smartphones (Allen et al 2011), and 3C will go further in this work.

1.2 Critical questions to be addressed in the CoPDA 2016 workshop

There are key impediments to citizens and other stakeholder articulating their desires in often top-down, linear, or fragmented urban planning processes.

How may the silos of planning and governance be managed? Government intervention in local policy processes occurs frequently but may rarely be linked up to broader interests or effectively coordinated across bureaucratic ‘silos’ (OECD 2009; Entwistle 2007). Moreover, centralised government planning and policy-making may often fail to achieve effective, coherent and inclusive governance practices (Kokx & van Kempen 2010). Underpinning this challenge of participatory engagement by multiple stakeholders in urban futures is the fragmentation of institutions, governance structures and planning processes in dealing with collective action or wicked problems.

How may the complexity of planning be embraced? One way of dealing with urban planning as a wicked problem, is to divide tasks and themes as explained above, creating silos of knowledge within each stakeholder. However, there are also approaches to the challenges of dealing with complexity that seeks to embrace it rather than divide it into fractions. One approach is the “nexus thinking”, addressing the interdependencies, tensions and trade-offs between different domains (Royal Geographical Society, 2016). Rather than looking at issues as separated and consequently deal with them separately, the aim of nexus thinking is to be able to see challenges of resources holistically, and therefore achieve cost-efficient solutions.

How may the quality of dialogues and collaborative learning be improved? Goggin & Clark (2009) consider how mobile phones have been taken up by citizens to create new forms of expression and power, and how phones form a contact zone between traditional concepts of community and citizen media, and also form emerging movements in citizenship, democracy, governance, and development. Despite this uptake, 3C is also aware that Twitter and Facebook are somewhat limited both in

the scope of activities they offer as well as the kinds of tools they offer, but are excellent ways to reach out to citizens for deeper engagement or participation (Haller & Höffken 2010). A critical challenge is to foster environments where social media are used for ‘exploratory talk’ rather than ‘accountable talk’ in which participants prioritise development of ideas and issues over presentation and defense of their own positions (Michaels et al 2007). Such ‘co-constructive talk’ is fundamental for collaborative learning, and for more open-ended development of scenarios, which includes taking turns, asking for and providing opinions, generating alternatives, reformulating and elaborating on the information being considered, coordinating and negotiating perspectives and seeking agreements.

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