

## **Participatory Planning in Japan: international comparative perspective**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Public participation in planning is becoming more and more popular among politicians, policy makers, and citizens in Japan, the U.S. and around the world. However, it seems that the populist look of participation often allows policy makers and practitioners to take a participatory approach without much reflection on the real meanings of participation – “why is participation necessary?”, “what can be achieved through participation?”, and “how can participation achieve it?”. Meanwhile, studies on participatory planning practices in Japan have had a tendency to focus on the analyses of methods for participation without questioning these fundamentals of participation.

A brief reflection on participation theories in this study has provided some ideas about what we can expect from participation, such as collaboratively constructed public values and norms and democratic citizens, all of which can be achieved through public deliberation. Those theories, however, have addressed little about how public participation and deliberation work in a concrete situation. This study, therefore, focuses on describing and analyzing what actually happens in a process of participation, e.g., how people talk and understand each other, build working relationships and make judgments when they are engaged in a participatory project. To do this, I conducted twelve interviews with planners, public officials, civic leaders and citizens in Japan who have gone through one or more participatory projects, and used extensively the quotes from these interviews for the analysis.

The living stories from the practitioners and participants have vividly illustrated that participation processes can actually influence the way people communicate with each other and think about others when they are engaged in public decision-making, indicating that participation often encourage people to be more proactive in their community.

One of the key elements for a meaningful public deliberation is that participants' recognition of difference among individuals. In learning the differences, the importance of knowing what a person really wants was also highlighted. It is only after people realize their own ego that they can realize that others have their own egos, too. This awareness of differences, diversity of ideas and concerns, gives public deliberation a solid foundation. Another key component for good deliberation is a space for dialogue. In planning setting, power differences among meeting participants often prevent people from a having a free dialogue and mutual understandings. Willingness for mutual learning, an atmosphere without hierarchy or social status, joint fact-finding and informal place for gathering are discussed as significant aspects in creating a space for dialogue.

While many officials in Japanese local governments expect creative solutions from public participation, the results of the interviews have indicated that, they will not achieved unless ensuring diversity and receptiveness among participants. The key elements to achieve creativity are closely linked to the things, which make up the foundation of deliberation: such as the importance of recognizing differences, willingness for learning and collective learning.

When engaged in public deliberation, public interests are the things that we can find and realize through exercises and experiences gained from grass-roots civic

activities, and talking about public interests in abstract terms will do no good for developing good conclusions.

Lastly, the stories from practitioners indicated that participation could bring in such democratic values as making individuals pro-active, raising the awareness of the local issues and control. Many practitioners are struggling with the issue of imperfect representation participatory processes, while awareness of imperfectness and responsibility of making decisions, continuous efforts of improving the decisions might reconcile this imperfectness. Democracy, which participation is trying to and could achieve, might not attain a perfect form but be rather something that people should all keep working on.