

PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL AGENDA 21- THE MALAYSIAN EXPERIENCE¹⁴²

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ABSTRACT

Calls for increased participation in decision-making have gathered momentum in the past few decades, spawning a wealth of theoretical and practical literature and influencing approaches to policy-making by various levels of government. In Malaysia, as in many other countries, locally generated debate and action planning has sought to apply bottom-up participatory innovative techniques. In this process, local authorities worked together with the local community to develop community action plans for sustainability under Local Agenda 21(LA21). LA21 was promoted by the United Nations to deliver sustainable development (SD) at the level of local government. Participation in LA21 hinges upon the ability of policy makers and implementers to understand the key participatory processes that enable a more bottom up process to develop, such as motivation to participate, the principle of inclusiveness, matching the right participatory techniques with the objectives of participation and proper institutional design. This paper is an attempt to determine how participation was implemented in LA21 programmes in selective councils by identifying the key factors affecting the success of community processes. The rationale for the various questions posed was to identify experiences and challenges faced by councils and respondents participating in the programme and to provide insights and guidance to councils attempting to implement a bottom-up approach to participation within the LA21 programme. The research was conducted as a qualitative case study that made use of semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and document analysis as instruments of data generation. Samples of respondents were selected from the relevant stakeholders, council staff and councilors. The overall conclusion is that the councils were still implementing a top bottom approach to participation within the LA21 programme.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing consensus that people everywhere have a basic human right to take part in decisions that affect their lives. Its emergence coincides with, among others, the growth in education, the rise of democratic institutions and the spread of communications (Mathur, 1986). Although popular participation in the development process first appeared in more developed societies, experts and agencies of the United Nations and the World Bank involved in promoting development in the Third World are now arguing the case for more and more participation within these countries in the last three decades (Mathur, 1986; United Nations, 1975). Consequently, participation in the Third World countries is now being aggressively promoted by the United Nations agencies and their respective governments.

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The advent to the call for more participation is ascribed to the fact that people have in fact mattered nothing to planners and administrators all these years. Planners have always believed that they alone know all about development and that only their answers to development problems are the right ones. Local knowledge and capacity have been viewed disdainfully. But the truth is that the capacity of the people to contribute to development is immense. They represent a resource for development which has largely remained untapped. Therefore, the focus now is that the top down planning methods which have been in vogue need to be substituted by methods that seek the active involvement of people in all stages of development planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation (Mathur, 1986).

As such, planners are now beginning to perceive their task differently, and 'putting people first' in development projects has emerged as a major concern (Cernea, 1985; 1991). There is a growing awareness of the fact that people cannot be ignored anymore if their development is what the plans aim to promote (Chambers, 1983). The consensus which is emerging in terms of the goals of development, places people and their active participation in the decision making process, at the core or center stage of the whole scheme of things, because it is the happiness of the common man that ultimately counts (The Cocoyoc Declaration, United Nations Document A/C2/292, November, 1974; Gran, 1983; Korten & Klaus, 1984).

Today, it is widely acknowledged that sustainable development cannot simply be imposed top-down by rules and restrictions, but it is necessary to involve citizens and other local stakeholders if individual behaviour and organisational performance are to change to an adequate extent (Selman 1998).

In academia as well as among politicians, there is a general concern that public debates about climate or sustainable development may become dominated by experts and thereby may become decoupled from the average citizen's everyday life (Fischer 2002; Nielsen 2009).

Historically, public participation as an identifiable and organized movement can be traced back to the urban renewal experience in the United States of America in the late 1950's and early 1960's (Oosthuizen, 1984). In the United States, community control was at the heart of the nations' attempts to promote citizen participation in public policy making. It has also gained momentum in the western world in that it represents a new dimension in the urban development process which has become one of the strongest forces in shaping the future of urban areas. The Model Cities Programme and Community Action Programmes (CAP) require citizen participation in creating redevelopment strategies for distressed urban areas with a large concentration of poor residents. As Berry, Portney and Thomson, (1993) observed, each CAP had to be developed, conducted, and administered with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and members of the groups served.

Although the concept of "citizen participation" evolved in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, the rumblings reached Britain only in the mid 1960's (Oosthuizen, 1984). Its debut in British planning literature came only in 1964 by means of an editorial in the "Journal of the Town Planning Institute". Full and official sanction for the term was not provided in Britain until the 1968 Town and Country Planning Act. In that year, the term was officially endorsed by the Mandate given by the Minister of Housing and Local Government to consider and report on the best methods, including publicity of securing the participation of the public at the formative stages in the making of development plans for their area (Damer & Hague, 1971). This led to the publication of the Skeffington Report (People and Planning) in 1969 which argued that effective planning required dialogue with local people. Planners must adapt to the changing needs of citizens. As Healey (1990:21) states:

"The major democratic movement of the late twentieth century challenges the capacity and desirability of politicians, bureaucrats and technocrats to act 'for' citizens guided by some superior

knowledge of what 'people' want and 'the public interest'. People no longer trust experts to define their interests for them."

The idea of public participation in planning also gained momentum in other democratic countries. In the Netherlands, for example, it is stated in the Annual Report of the National Physical Planning Agency that it would be true to say that in the performance of its planning task, the Government must arrange for the planning process to proceed openly and with sufficient opportunity for public participation (National Physical Planning Agency of the Netherlands, 1972). In India, the Panchayat Raj system and Pakistan's Basic Democracies are clearly examples of grassroots participation at the local level.

In Malaysia, the practice of allowing citizens to contribute to the formulation of town plans can be said to be nearly as old as the introduction of urban planning (Goh, 1990). The Town Planning Enactment of the Federated Malay States of 1927 provided for general town plans to be displayed for the public to make objections and to propose recommendations on how to overcome the objections. But in the past, the public was allowed to participate only after a draft had been completed.

Traditionally, development plans have been the principal planning instruments for achieving a healthy and a quality urban living environment. As provided for in the Town and Country Planning Act, 1976, structural plans are prepared for all the local authorities in Peninsular Malaysia. Structural plans have provided for strategic policies for land development within the local planning authority areas. Local plans, on the other hand, deal with detailed planning and urban designing for a particular area.

In terms of public or community participation, it is a legal requirement under the Town and Country Planning Act, (Section 13, Act 172) for the public to be consulted during the preparation of the Structure Plan and the Local Plan. In the Structure plan, public representation or examination is invited when the survey report has been prepared by the Local Planning Authority and when the Draft Structure Plan is completed. The same applies for the Draft Local Plan. Public objection is invited when the Draft Local Plan is completed. When the proposed development is located in an area not covered by the local or structure plan, public objection is invited from owners of the land adjoining the proposed development area. This is under Section 34A of the Environmental Quality Act, 1974. Under the current Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) reporting process, public participation is mandatory for preliminary assessment but forms of participation may differ for different projects and appropriate advice may be sought from the EIA Review Panel. Detailed Assessment also calls for public participation, whereby the planning of the proposed project can benefit by providing a better estimate of the magnitude of impacts, providing a better understanding of community aspirations and needs as well as providing additional environmental information. All public comments have to be made in writing to EIA Unit of the Department of Environment within 28 days of public notification (Report by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 2001).

The overall goal of this study was thus to determine how participation can best be implemented in LA21 programmes in selected councils in Malaysia by identifying the key factors affecting the success of community participation processes. The rationale for the various questions that were posed was to identify experiences and challenges of respondents participating in the programme; it was also to provide insights and guidance to councils attempting to implement a bottom-up approach to participation within the LA21 programme.

The study attempted to explore, examine and answer the following research questions:

1. What factors motivate people to participate in the programme?
2. What institutional factors facilitate or hinder the participation process?
3. Are techniques for effective participation developed and are these techniques related to the objectives of participation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agenda 21

Agenda 21 was adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992 (UNCED, 1992). It is a global partnership for sustainable development that sets out actions we can take to contribute to global sustainability in the 21st century. Agenda 21 identifies three important elements in progressing towards sustainable development: relevant national strategies, plans, policies and processes; the integration of environmental and development issues and active involvement of the populace in decision making.

Agenda 21 recommends that the broadest possible participation should be encouraged and in several places advocates a 'community-driven' approach. Principle 11 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development states that environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens at the relevant level. Each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process (UNCED, 1992).

Defining Local Agenda 21

Local Agenda 21' refers to the general goal set for local communities by Chapter 28 of the 'action plan for sustainable development' adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. Chapter 28 is an appeal to 'local authorities' to engage in a dialogue for sustainable development with the members of their constituencies. This dialogue seeks for a new participation process where the communication between local authorities and all local stakeholders goes beyond existing and traditional consultation. By nature LA21 is therefore a participatory reform. What is unique about LA21 as a participatory reform is that Chapter 28 of the Agenda was developed at the supra-national level. LA21 is being actioned in more than 6,400 local authorities in 113 countries (CSD, 2002).

Chapter 28 is addressed to 'local authorities' as one of the several 'major groups', that the Agenda singles out as particularly relevant for achieving the aims of the overall Agenda itself. It is because '*so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local activities*', that the participation and involvement of local authorities is viewed as 'a determining factor' in fulfilling the objectives of the action plan. The second argument for the key role of local authorities is their position as the level of governance closest to the people .

The Earth Summit at Rio however, marked a new beginning in the history of participation. At the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 in Rio De Janerio, following on from the publications of the Brundlant Report, 178 governments of the world signed up to Agenda 21. The main consequence of this for national governments is that they had to draw up their own Local Agenda 21 strategies showing how they will apply the principles set out in the main Agenda 21 document and promote sustainable development at the local level.

LA 21 regards sustainable development as a community issue, involving all sections of society, including community groups, businesses and ethnic minorities, (National Council for Sustainable Development, 2003) thus calling for inclusiveness (Tuler & Webler, 1999; Rowe & Frewer 2000) of all the relevant sectors of the community. In its broadest form, LA 21 requires local authorities to look at social, economic as well as environmental aspects and to do this in a manner

that is truly participatory, dynamic and interactive. At its most ambitious, LA 21 requires municipalities to encourage the community itself to participate in setting its own priorities.

Chapter 28 of Agenda 21, 'Local authorities' in support of Agenda 21, observes that because so many of the problems and solutions being addressed by Agenda 21 have their roots in local authorities, the participation and cooperation of local authorities will be a determining factor in fulfilling its objectives. Local authorities construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes, establish local environmental policies and regulations, and assist in implementing national and sub-national environmental policies. As the level of governance closest to the people, they play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development (UNCED, 1993).

The core idea of Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 is that local authorities should undertake a consultative process with their inhabitants in order to arrive at a consensus on an action plan or a 'Local Agenda 21' for the community. This emphasises that democratic participation is a necessary factor if the work aimed towards more sustainable development is to be successful. Hence public participation and consultation are central to Local Agenda 21 because public participation is seen to offer several advantages to the decision making process. Well designed participation processes can break down barriers of distrust and conflict of interest by giving participants better understanding of each others problems and joint ownership of the solutions (Petts & Leach, 2001). It is seen to increase feelings of trust and reduce conflict between the public and the local authority. Public participation can also increase the publics' feelings of efficacy and control over community problems; this can encourage the public to take more responsibility for community problems (Gatersleben & Uzzell, 2000). True participation is also one of the best ways to address issues of social exclusion (Frewer, 1999), representation and inclusiveness. Finally, public participation can result in a more informed decision being made, as the public can often provide information that the authorities are unaware of (Gibbs, 1997; Street, 1997).

Conceptual Framework for Participation

Theorists have basically identified two basic rationales for public participation. One is the normative or ends criteria and the other more common view is the instrumental or means view (Conyers, 1982; Benveniste, 1989; Buchy & Hoverman, 2000; Roe, 2000; Buchy and Hoverman (2000). It is also known in political participation as autonomous and mobilized participation respectively (Huntington & Nelson, 1976). According to Huntington, political participation is defined to include not only activity that is designed by the actor himself to influence governmental decision-making, but also activity that is designed by someone other than the actor to influence governmental decision-making. The former may also be termed autonomous or normative participation and the latter, mobilized or instrumental participation.

There is a key distinction between participation as a method or means for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of projects by using the resources of local people, and participation as an end or as a part (at least) of the purpose of the project (Oakley 1991). This has been described as a distinction between instrumental and normative (or developmental) participation (Nelson and Wright 1995).

Participation as a means is said to be indicative that power relations between those at grass roots, or the target community, and the governmental agencies, will be left largely untouched. Project design (including definition of project goals and targets) and management will be left largely in the hands of the traditional authorities, while the role of those mobilised to participate will simply be to rally around work for the predetermined goals of the project. The view of participation as an end suggests a transformation in power relations between government agency and recipient, with the latter empowered and liberated from a clientelist relation with the former (Partfitt: 2004: 539). Such different understandings of participation have different implications for the analysis of power

relations in the participatory process and for the way in which target/beneficiary community is viewed (Nelson & Wright, 1995: 1).

Benwell (1980), Oakley (1989), Rakodi (1991) and Lowenson (2000) all maintain the 'ends' and 'means' approach. Participation may be seen as either a means of arriving at decisions more efficiently or as a manifestation of the notion of participatory democracy. This categorization is based on the efficiency and democratic criterion. Similar distinctions are also made by Rifkin et al (1988), Bamberger and Shams (1989), Brown (1995), Brown, (2000), (UNDP, 2000) and Theron, (2005).

The normative view is related to democratic ideals and participatory democracy and is linked to values such as empowerment and ownership. Also known as the ends approach to participation, it views participation as a bottom up approach where decisions are made at the grassroots level and emphasizes the freedom and liberalization of the individual through participation (Bamberger & Shams, 1989; Hartig et al. 1998; Coenen et al 2002). This normative rationale relates to participation as a democratic right, is educative, provides opportunities for generating social capital and helps build local identity (Coenen et al 1998). Whereas the top bottom, means or instrumental approach is viewed as means to an end, the end of which is successful implementation of programs and projects (Roe, 2000; Rydin & Pennington, 2000), the instrumental rationale emphasizes efficiency, increasing trust in decision-making, avoiding public controversy and a useful source of local knowledge and information.

Role of local government in a state

There are two schools of thought on what the role of local government should be in a state. One is the classic school that sees local government as the bedrock of democracy whereas the other sees it as an administrative arm of the government (Rees, 1971; Orr, 1998). The former refers to the American or Jeffersonian tradition of democracy and the latter refers to the British system of local government with its emphasis on efficiency in the provision of services (Syed, 1966). The classical school views participation as normative and as an inherent right of the people whereas the Benthamite tradition views participation as instrumental and efficiency is the main criterion for encouraging involvement by the people. The comparative literature on local government highlights how the British conceptions of local government, which Malaysian local government is based on, is founded on the belief that facilitating interaction between politicians/officials and the communities they serve is of secondary importance to securing service delivery (Goldsmith, 1996; Wolman, 1996). It is the writer's contention that local governments have to reevaluate their role and shift towards a more democratic one in order to encourage participation and to enhance their effectiveness.

Institutional Factors Enhancing Participation

A prerequisite for all successful types of community participation is support, for as Checkoway et al (1995:137) state, "people cannot be expected to participate effectively if they lack knowledge, skills and attitudes conducive to the task". Wilcox identifies capacity building as an integral component of such support and has been defined as "training and other methods to help people develop the confidence and skills necessary for them to achieve their purpose" (Wilcox 1994, 31).

Information is also a critical ingredient for effective public participation (Praxis, 1988; Peelle et al, 1996; Sterne & Zagon, 1997; EPA; 2001; Anon, 2002). In fact one of the key factors that affect the success of any participatory program is the degree of access participants have to information (Syme and Sadler 1994; Ashford and Rest 1999; Tuler and Webler, 1999). In an information rich environment, citizens and stakeholders have information that can improve the quality of decisions (Fischer, 1993, 2002). The quality of the information is also crucial. It is important that the information is accurate, credible, balanced and comprehensive (MacMillan &

Murgatroyd, 1994; Sterne & Zagon, 1997). The information provided must also be manageable to avoid overloading participants.

It is vital that before the participatory process begins, all participants have a clear mandate of the process at the onset (Anon, 2002; CSA, 2002; Sterne & Zagon, 1997). This is because an ill-defined purpose of a participatory programme can create a mismatch in expectations, which can lead to misunderstandings that can threaten the success of the participatory process. Studies done reiterate that there should be little confusion and dispute as possible regarding the scope of a public participation exercise, its expected output and the mechanisms of the procedure (Halseth & Booth, 2003; Rowe & Frewer, 2000). These aspects should be clearly defined at the beginning. There should be clear and defined roles for the participants (Ochteau 1999). Once the participants are well-informed on process roles through formal or informal learning activities, they can carry out their roles effectively (Beierle, 1999).

In most community studies, communication is an integral part of the community development process (Ashford, 1984; Bierle & Cayford, 2002). According to Praxis, (1998), the essence of public involvement is a two-way communication. It is not genuine public involvement unless there is some information coming back from the public, although there may be times during a public involvement program when it is appropriate to be simply providing information. Effective public participation encourages collective learning and the sharing of knowledge which can enhance the quality of decisions (Bierle & Cayford, 2002).

One aspect frequently discussed in the public participation literature is the stage at which the public should become involved in policy matters (Rowe & Frewer, 2000, Brody 1998; Peelle et al. 1996). The consensus seems to be that public participation should occur at the beginning rather than at the end (Blahna & Yonts Shepard, 1989; Middendorf & Busch, 1997; Shindler et al, 1998). The 'early, often, and on-going can create a sense of ownership over a plan's content and can reduce potential conflict over the long term, because those involved feel responsible for its policies' (National Research Council, 1996; Chess and Purcell, 1999; Brody et al., 2003: 246). Thus, early involvement allows plan to reflect community views and preferences and they will be more satisfied with the results (Leino, 2002). Bierle and Cayford (2002) opine that in order for public participation to be successful, the public must have control over the initiation, design and execution of a public participation process.

The basis of the participatory democracy theory and the LA21 initiative is that broad cross sections of the community should be directly involved in decision-making. Involvement strengthens the democratic system by developing civic-minded citizens, increasing efficacy, and theoretically generating a better and more appropriate result (Standridge, 2003).

An important component of developing a representative and accessible public participation process is identifying all potentially affected and interested parties (Praxis, 1988; Strene and Zagon, 1997; Brody 1998; Anon, 2002; CSA 2002). The public should be inclusive and comprise a broadly representative sample of the affected population (Rowe & Frewer, 2000; Webler, Seth & Krueger, 2001). Although representation by various groups is necessary, there is the danger that participation can be "captured" by certain groups (Beetham, 1996; Cochrane, 1996; Davis, 1997; Jeffrey, 1997; Leach and Wingfield, 1999; Lowndes et al, 2001). There is also the danger that the most marginalised in society are not heard through participatory mechanisms.

Furthermore people who are already active in society are more likely to engage in participatory decision-making processes (Deth & Leijenaar, 1994). On a practical level, decisions about how participants are selected and appointed can significantly affect both the perception and the reality of the fairness, independence, and representativeness of the participatory process. The issue of representativeness often arises in this context, especially with respect to large and diverse groups. The challenge consists in reaching a cross-section of all types of stakeholders, particularly those that tend to be excluded, in order to ensure that participants in the process adequately reflect

the full spectrum of interests in the affected communities (Moore, 1996). While there have been calls for more inclusive and proactive methods for broadening the base of public participation (Peelle, 1991; Chess et al. 1995), "best practice" has yet to be described.

Techniques of participation

There are a wide range of techniques that can be used to engage the public (Praxis 1988; McMillan & Murgatroyd, 1994; Dunker 1998). Most are one-way transmissions of information from public official to citizen or from citizen to public official rather than citizen engagement in dialogues and deliberations over public policy with fellow citizens and public officials (Roberts, 2004).

Each technique has its own strengths and weaknesses and works best when used in combination with others. Using a multiplicity of techniques also helps to capture the full range of impacted and interested publics as well as people having different comfort levels with specific methods of participating. In other words, successful public participation may require the use of a variety and combination of tools (NRC, 1996; Chess and Purcell 1999).

Leach and Wingfield (1999, p. 49-50) identify four broad types of public participation techniques used by local authorities in the UK:

- Traditional – which might include public meetings, question and answer sessions, issuing of consultation documents;
- Customer oriented – customer satisfaction surveys and opinion polls, complaints procedures, suggestion schemes;
- Innovative consultative methods to consult citizens – interactive web-sites, citizens' panels, focus groups and referendums;
- Innovative deliberative methods to encourage citizen deliberation – environmental forums, visioning exercises, planning cells and citizens' juries

Petts and Leach (2001) take this further, categorising potential participation methods in environmental decision-making into four different levels and three types of participation: traditional (T); innovative consultative (IC); and innovative deliberative (ID). They also set out their own criteria in relation to the choice, design implementation and evaluation of public participation methods (Petts and Leach, 2001).

An increasingly important sphere within which stakeholder involvement can take place is the Internet. While many individual local planning authorities are developing specific projects and technologies to support their use of e-planning, there is still a lack of widespread use of innovative methods and techniques for stakeholder involvement using the Internet. This is despite the fact that recent research has shown that collaborative approaches using e-planning can be achieved (Kingston 2002, Hudson-Smith et al, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

This study was an attempt to create a starting point, to paint a big picture of how a bottom-up approach to participation may be implemented within LA21 programmes in general and particularly in Malaysia. As this study is the first to address the issues related to participation in LA21 in Malaysia, nearly everything from conceptual approach to data collection methodology had to be performed without a prior participation specific model to follow, more so a model for a bottom-up approach to participation within the Malaysian LA21 context. However, this study was able to capture participatory practices as they existed within these LA21 programmes, establishing a baseline for further research and analysis.

The investigation was conducted using a qualitative research strategy, employing the Grounded Theory approach. Two councils involved in the LA21 programme were selected as the setting for this study. Data was collected over an eight month period due to time, resource and financial constraints. However, the validity of the data collected (sometimes with great difficulty) and the endeavor to produce a more realistic description of the motivations to participate; the right participatory mechanisms to use in fostering participation and the proper institutional design were addressed by triangulation procedures embedded in the research design. The integration of interview data with observations, review of documents and field notes, proved to be a fruitful approach for this study. Despite the relative novelty of the subject and limitations which may affect the interpretation and applicability of the results, some useful implications are given below. Taking a constructivist- interpretivist stance towards the subject under scrutiny this study was conducted by the researchers by being in close contact with the participants to elicit the necessary data. A questionnaire would not have been able to provide the indepth information that was required to aid in answering the research question that was posed. Interviews, observations and review of selected documents were carried out in a branch campus of a local university. Interviews with council staff, councilors and the community were conducted to obtain the necessary data. The samples were selected using the purposive sampling techniques. Once the data was obtained triangulation and the constant comparative technique was employed to interpret the results which is elaborated in the next section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study has shown that participatory initiatives attempted in the LA21 programmes are a complex and multidimensional phenomenon which requires systematic exploration. Any attempt to integrate the knowledge available today about implementing participation within LA21 programmes faces inevitable difficulties stemming from the fact that theoretical knowledge about participation in LA21 has not or may just be beginning to develop. This study extends current knowledge regarding implementing a bottom-up approach to participation in LA21 programmes. The overall conclusion is that the council played a domineering role in the LA21 programme and did not engage a bottom-up approach which is against the basic tenet of the LA21 programme. This could be due to the fact local councils in Malaysia follow the Benthamite tradition (Goldsmith, 1996; Wolman, 1996) which views participation more in instrumental terms. Therefore it is safe to conclude that normative participation did not take place within the councils in implementing the LA21 initiative.

In answer to the first research question, the study showed that the prime drivers for respondents participating in LA21 were instrumental or mobilized in nature rather than normative or autonomous as most participants in both the cases cited instrumental rather than normative reasons for participating in the programme. In other words, public participation was hampered by a general apathy of the public on their democratic rights to participate in the programme. Hence, respondents did not exercise their democratic right to participate in the programme reiterating similar findings in the EIA approval process (Report by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 2001). Functional aims such as getting more knowledge on the programme and improving the efficiency of the services provided by the council was seen more relevant than individual freedom and rights to participate. It therefore is concluded that participation in both the cases, is not being embraced as a democratic right but as a management tool for promoting predetermined plans and minimizing conflict (Oakley 1991; Rydin & Pennington, 2000; Roe, 2000). This supports conclusion in much of the literature which points to praxis as the dominant reason for participation happening on the ground (Bloomfield et al, 1998; DETR, 1998; Wilson, 1999). This is also against the ideals of LA21 which is the empowerment of the individual in the decision making process.

With respect to the second research question, the researcher discovered that there was no written description that prescribed the tasks and role definitions for the respondents therefore not

being well designed for an effective participatory process because it creates mismatch and misunderstanding among the participants who were not sure of their role and presence therefore threatening the success of the programme and supporting Halseth & Booth (2003) and Rowe & Frewer, (2000). In the much-used Arnstein's ladder (1969) it rates as 'phony participation'. Meaningful participation would require providing clear mandates down to the lowest practicable level at the earliest possible time and giving people the right to say 'no' to interventions that make perfect sense technically, economically and environmentally. Well designed participation processes can break down barriers of distrust and conflict of interest by giving participants better understanding of each others' problems and joint ownership of the solutions (Petts & Leach, 2001).

The respondents did not feel that they owned the process (Moore,1996) and took a conservative position on their role in LA21. This could have severe implications for enabling a more bottom-up approach to participation within the programme since for real participation to take place, participants must feel that they own the process (Schachter, 1995; Freeman et al. 1996; Wilkinson & Marmot, 1998).

Lack of adequate notice is considered to be a potential barrier to fair and effective public participation by a number of authors (Praxis, 1988; Sterne and Zagon, 1997; Anon, 2002; Sinclair and Doelle, 2003). Participants, except for a few who were 'previlged', were not given fair notice of meetings. Hence there was favouritism where notices for meetings were concerned. The council should be wary of such personal favouritism and its consequences. Inadequate notice for meetings can leave participants unprepared and unaware of the opportunity to participate.

As far as the location for meetings is concerned, participants in both cases were dissatisfied with the choice of venue (Healey 1992). The overall feeling among respondents was that meetings should have been held outside council premises so as to encourage greater participation by all. The use of community centres within specific housing estates could have been employed by the councils to encourage a more give-and-take stance on its part. Nevertheless, the provision of free food and car parking to respondents who attended at council premises was a right move on the part of council to encourage higher attendance. To move towards more authentic or normative participation, the councils need to change some current practices. One change may be to go where the people are rather than asking the public to come to them. King et al, (1998) also tend to reaffirm that venues other than the council's would be more appropriate in the search for more authentic or normative participation.

The timing of meetings had enabled the council to play a domineering role in LA21 since meetings were usually held during office hours (Healey, 1992; Story, 2000). Webster and Lavers (1991) provide further evidence of the difficulties faced in the participation process. They conclude that few individuals can represent themselves at public local enquiries purely because these meetings are usually held during normal working hours.

Public meetings can also be intimidating and uncomfortable. Respondents identified information overload as a key challenge in their efforts to be informed as participants (Franklin & Ebdon, 2002; Mac Millan & Murgatroyd, 1994; Sterne & Zagon, 1997). Another issue was the need to digest too much technical information in too short a time. This points to the lack of cognitive enhancement (Webler et al, 1995).

Training was also identified as a weakness. Although most respondents received training, the timing was inappropriate, for example, only at the beginning and it was found to be neither substantive nor concrete. Efforts must be made to incorporate training throughout the process rather than relying on brief, stand-alone sessions at the beginning of the programme (Praxis, 1988; Sterne & Zagon, 1997; Anon, 2002; EPA; 2001).

The lack of a holistic approach to LA21 within the two councils was also observed. Respondents in both councils spoke about the silo mentality of the council staff in preventing the

spread of LA21 to other departments in the council (Littlewood & While, 1997; Selman & Parker, 1999). LA21 did not have the identity or the autonomy to influence other departments within the council and this affected the importance of LA21 and its contribution towards community development.

The principle of inclusiveness and representativeness was not adhered to in the program as the LA21 program did not include all the relevant groups and there was poor communication between the representatives and their constituent members (Rockloff, 2003). Specific groups were missing such as the youth, women, children and the handicapped contradicting Moore (1996) and reaffirming studies done by Dahl, (1989) and Sanders (1997) on the lack of participation by specific groups. Private sector representation was also lacking. This goes against the very principle of inclusiveness as in Rowe and Frewer (2000) and Webler, Seth and Krueger, (2001). There was also lack of councilor representation in the program.

There was also preferential treatment within the councils in inviting organizations into the programme thus reiterating the mobilized and non autonomous view to participation embraced by the councils. Not all who wanted to take part were invited. Some consumer groups which were keen to participate were not invited. It is therefore important that "stakeholders should be left to self select in an open participatory process, suggesting that stakeholders are those who believe themselves to have an interest or stake, not those which the agency deems to have a stake, or would like to include" (Jackson, 2001:140).

It seems to be generally recognised that traditional modes of involving citizens in environmental policies to a large degree have failed in reaching a broad group of stakeholders (Carpini et al. 2004).

The citizens who most often are reached in environmental initiatives are the rather few segments already interested in environmental issues. The experiences from Denmark on how to involve citizens in sustainable development may serve as an inspiration for reaching new participants that have not formerly been part of the environmental agenda. In many ways, Denmark and its Scandinavian neighbours have been regarded as frontrunners when it comes to involving citizens in local environmental projects (Lafferty 2001). Denmark has a long tradition of experimenting with citizen involvement in planning (Gottschalk 1984) and in environmental projects (Gram-Hansen 2000). Consensus conferences and scenario workshops developed by the Danish Board of Technology are some of the more comprehensive participatory deliberation methods that are now used around the world (Andersen and Jæger 1999).

There were concerns over the lack of reporting back and lack of action by community representatives in the programme as in Rockloff (2003). This is because only those at the helm of the organization were invited to the program, such as the President or Chairman of the Resident Associations. This led to complaints that, besides the President and office members, the rest of the members were "in the dark" regarding LA21. This was because members of NGOs and CBOs were said to have limited membership. Most of these organizations were accused of being "little napoleons" and controlled by one or two families. This does not speak well for overall representation because one of the main purposes of LA21 is to have its members spread news about LA21 to their members.

The general conclusion is that the people were not involved right from the beginning of the LA21 process contradicting Brody (1998), Franklin and Ebdon (2002), Peelle et al.(1996) and Rowe and Frewer (2000). If communities are consulted near the end of a process to decide on planning options, there is the risk that members will feel that the consultations at this point are merely "window dressing" for a decision that has already been made. This will have adverse consequences for the capacity building and ownership component of the program and have negative consequences in creating a more autonomous nature of participation. If the council was interested in a truly bottom up approach, they should have let the community decide on the initial

stage in deciding issues (Rowe & Frewer, 2000). One respondent added, " We were not involved in the initial identification of issues, these were decided by the council. We wanted safety to be one of the issues, but the council decided otherwise".

In answer to the third research question the following were observed.

The councils did not identify the purpose of the techniques used and relate it to objectives of participation (Sewell & Coppock, 1977; Glass 1979; Fiorino 1990). Methods such as the community talks, workshops and seminars were able to achieve only subsidiary objectives of participation such as exchange and dissemination of information and thus fail to achieve the three subsidiary objectives (Sewell & Coppock, 1977). There were less techniques relating to interaction of information. Although the work groups were interactive and promoted a two way communication between council and the community it fell short of citizen control (Arnstein, 1969). The community talks, also labeled as 'window dressing' by some, served only as a one way tool of communication and not as an interactive mechanism. However, the workgroup meetings were able to achieve all three objectives.

The councils placed too much emphasis on traditional information strategies as a central tool to reach the participants such as community talks and workshops and workgroups confirming studies done by Bickerstaff & Walker (2001) and Wang (2001). There was very limited evidence of innovative techniques which seek to encourage greater citizen deliberation. The visioning exercises allowed some level of citizen empowerment in decision-making indicating some form of normative participation taking place since the participants are given the opportunity to decide on the future of what their town should look like (Oakley, 1989). It would approach delegated power on Arnstiens' ladder (1969).

The interactive websites on the other hand, had a restricted audience and there was no follow-up to what was being deliberated. The website was also used as a launching pad to voice members' grievances against the council. However, care must be exercised that use of the web does not eliminate or substantially reduce the involvement of people who do not have access to a computer or are untrained in using computers. However, these modes are still relatively new and carry tremendous implications for public involvement (Noveck 2004).

Task forces or workgroups as participatory techniques were convened to examine the issues at hand, providing ongoing advice and making recommendations on specific issues. Participants in these types of techniques had the advantage of meeting over time, allowing for more in-depth examination of issues. This has enabled the creation of relationships and the development of mutual understanding, respect for differing views and common ground. But concerns regarding these types of techniques relate to their limited inclusiveness (Webler 1997; Rows 2000; O'Neilly, 2001), degree of autonomy and independence from the sponsoring agency (Fairhurst and Williams 1997; Wiedemann and Femers 1993), high level of commitment required of members, the need for technical expertise, and agency use of the groups recommendations (Tuler and Webler, 1999).

Surveys have been used to complement other public participatory techniques. Both councils used surveys to elicit information from the community on matters such as sustainable development. Although they have the advantage of obtaining views and opinions from a broad range of "publics", they were not representative of the wider community and do not advance the idea of a democratic processe taking place (Folz 1996; Milbrath, 1981). They also did not allow for an interactive process between the public and the council (Kathlene and Martin 1991).To avoid potential misinterpretation of the findings in a survey, it must be carefully designed to ensure that the respondents accurately represent the wider community as a whole (Scott & Ngoran, 2003).

More interactive methods should be considered to expand stakeholder involvement in the context of LA21. Mechanisms that could serve as a tool to empower the members could have been used such as citizen juries and panels (Crosby et al, 1986; Kathlene & Martin, 1991). This is

important as Brody, Godschalk, and Burby (2003) have demonstrated that the more interactive participatory mechanisms employed throughout the process, the more stakeholder groups participated in the process.

Overall the study identified the most popular methods utilized to involve the local community were Consultation documents such as LA21 brochures and pamphlets, exhibitions, public meetings, interactive websites, workshops, seminars and surveys.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that LA21 is a crucial component in ensuring sustainable development. Hence, community participation becomes an important ingredient in LA21. Ensuring effective community participation in sustainable development programmes is the responsibility of the local governments as entrusted by the LA21 initiative. The ability to harness effective participation is also greatly dependent on participants' willingness to contribute towards the programme. It is clear that effective participation in LA21 requires effective planning on behalf of local government. The setting of objectives, the institutional factors such as the conduct of meetings, selecting the right participants and choosing the appropriate methods are all part of that planning. Greater awareness of the community and the right to be involved in the program can help to enhance the program. The way forward for LA21 lies in greater openness between councils and public, a detailed assessment of the capacity needed to deliver participation and a commitment on behalf of all stakeholders to work together for their mutual benefit and for a sustainable future for all life in this biosphere of which we are a small but potentially very destructive part.

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