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Univer(city) - Exploring the Role of Higher Educational Institutions in Promoting Public Participation in the City Planning Process.

Abstract:

Public Participation becomes a deeply embedded concept in decision-making related to cities as it can help generate better ideas, exploit local knowledge of the public, and assist in better execution of plans. Higher education institutions have a huge potential to help catalyze new public participation approaches, which can lead to societal shifts and better communities. The paper examines case studies of pedagogical approaches adopted by higher education institutions, involving the public in the process. The paper argues that higher educational institutions can exert societal influences through their knowledge repository and can aid in better public involvement in the city planning process. The university-community collaboration can prove a promising ground to achieve better Public Participation and provide insights for higher education institutes based on ground realities. The collaboration between citizens and institutes is full of challenges, and education must continue to serve as a bridge between them.

Keywords:

Public Participation, Pedagogy, Community, University.

1. Introduction:

Public Participation is a process that engages the Public in decision-making and duly considers the opinion of the Public in making those decisions. The citizens are directly engaged in service delivery or decision-making. Over the decades, both literary and on-ground studies have repeatedly stressed the importance of Public Participation, including a better sense of ownership and stakeholder commitment. Some of the core values of Public Participation from IAP 2 International Association for Public Participation include :



1. Public Participation is relying on the belief that those affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.

2. Public Participation assures that the Public's contribution will influence the decision.

3. Public Participation advocates for sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision-makers.

4. Public Participation understands and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.

5. Public Participation takes input from participants in designing how they participate.

6. Public Participation gives participants the information they need to participate meaningfully.

7. Public Participation gets back to participants on how their input affected the decision. (IAP2, 2007).

Considering the benefits of Public Participation, higher educational institutes are increasingly engaged in the discourse regarding the university-community relationship, so the student's sense of moral and civic responsibility is heightened. Many universities abroad, mainly in the cities, constantly engage with the communities. This aids the communities and students, making the university-community initiatives more compelling. The paper explores the various dimensions of university-community collaborations and discusses how public Participation can be improvised through these collaborations.

2. University and Community Collaboration

The U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has developed a taxonomy for various university-community relationships. It contains seven categories: (1) service learning, (2) service provision, (3) faculty involvement, (4) student volunteerism, (5) community in the classroom, (6) applied research, and (7) major institutional change (Soska et al, 2005).

Service Learning

These are cases where the university curriculum allows students to engage with the community and benefit from the learning process. The projects here include studying neighboring demographics and finance to develop visions for the community. Students collaborate with the community to create sustainable and inclusive communities, which helps build trust in the community.

Service Provision

This involves faculty and student initiatives shaping long-term projects for a specific community. The examples here include cases where the university is also investing in local housing restoration, lighting installations for the community, and incentives to entice the university members to reside in these communities.

Faculty Involvement

This includes instances where the faculty becomes the driving force behind certain community activities. The faculty are involved in building local community capacity from data. The faculty also



advises the local government on strategic planning issues.

Student Volunteerism

Unlike service learning, the students engage in community activities voluntarily. These include tutoring programs for underprivileged children etc.

Community in the classroom

This involves the design of courses within the university to increase capacity building within society. Examples include using information

Applied Research

This involves research initiatives by the university staff and students in data collection and identifying best practices.

Major Institutional Change

These initiatives are designed to bring about internal cultural changes and involve reframing the institute's vision, mission, and objectives to facilitate the university-community partnership.

Service learning projects are the most common endeavors involving public engagement and offer the student and faculty an opportunity to nurture the relationship with the community. One of the best practice examples is such an initiative is found in the works of the Department of Community and Regional Planning at Iowa State University to support neighborhood planning. The students and the faculty were involved in a long-term collaborative relationship with the selected Des Moines, Iowa

neighborhoods. The main objective of neighborhood planning involved:

- Supporting transitional neighborhoods.
- Stabilizing and improving neighborhood quality.
- Preventing further decline in the distressed neighborhood.

In the first year, the university was involved with Beaverdale, a middle-class neighborhood. This was already quite an engaging neighborhood, with the Beaverdale Neighbourhood Association (BNA) established successfully. The students conducted public meetings, workshops for the Public, and online outreach activities through apps and newsletters. These measures, however, allowed a few voices to be more dominant in the discussions related to the neighborhood. Besides the members of the BNA, no new partners were involved in formulating new relationships.

In the second year, the students studied Capital East, an old lower-income neighborhood with overcrowding, higher unemployment rates, lower educational attainment, and low social cohesion due to the immigrant population. The Capital East Neighbourhood Association (CENA) had few members with little capital. As a takeaway from BNA, the studio strived to make Participation more inclusive by having more face-to-face interactions and engaging organizational stakeholders. The door-to-door survey helped the students gain a nuanced understanding of the community. In this case, the meetings were organized with CENA, and regular meetings were conducted with a broad cross-section of neighborhood stakeholders. The students held several



stakeholder meetings, focus group discussions, and surveys at high-footfall places or events and involved school children in competitions related to neighborhood improvisation. The students constantly kept returning to the people they had already interacted with, thus reinforcing the thought in the residents that their opinions mattered. In this case, Participation was not dominated only by the CENA. Still, it also opened the floor for the new residents to take ownership of the neighborhood, take ownership and push for better implementation strategies. In the third year, the students worked in the River Bend neighborhood, a low-income neighborhood with historic and architecturally significant properties in the city's urban core. Recently individuals, mainly white middle-class professionals interested in restoring these buildings, began moving into the neighborhood and leading the River Bend Neighbourhood Association (RBNA). A similar approach to citizen participation was employed in Capital East Neighbourhood. Engagement methods also involved neighborhood walking tours, presentations, and steering committee meetings at feasible locations and timings. The outreach activities included face-to-face surveys with local business owners, community events at local churches, parks, and schools, and also door to door surveys. In this case, the priorities of the RBNA did not align with the larger neighborhood ideals, and the students had to mediate the situation. They identified the areas of conflict, developed a sound understanding of specific issues, and became a vehicle of communication between the various groups. The university rightly served as a bridge between different interest groups and organizations. This case proves that public

engagement requires a multidimensional approach and claims that the right kind of engagement occurs when planning endeavors must seek to answer the challenges identified by the community in ways the community has identified them (Rongerude, 2020).

Indian cities also witnessed public participation efforts through university community collaborations recently. In the year 2022, 'Breaking the Viscous Cycle: Planning Water Security in Low-Income Neighbourhoods through Co -Creation' was a project initiated by PRIA (Participatory Research In India) in collaboration with Sushant University, City's Domestic Union, and - National Institute for Research in Environmental Health (NIREH). This funded project aimed to understand the water security issues in two low-income neighborhoods of Delhi through the lens of community participation. The students mapped the blue and green networks and documented housing quality and materials. They also conducted art-based discussions with the youth of the neighborhoods to educate them regarding the role of climate change and how it affects the availability of quality water and health. A community-university interaction session was organized so that the students and the community could collaborate and understand local experiences and practices. Posters in the local language were distributed to educate the public regarding the issues. Through this exercise, the team could unearth the community's significant issues. The student's learning process was greatly enriched as they gained first-hand experience on how planning decisions taken in closed rooms affect the everyday lives of the people for whom these decisions are made.



3. Conclusion

As enticing as the subject of university-community collaboration might seem, it is not devoid of challenges. Constrain in time and funding becomes a critical component in such collaborations. These require frequent meetings to develop a good relationship with the stakeholders, which requires time and improvisations in pedagogical approaches to how this kind of studio is run. A well-articulated agenda with clear outcomes which must be set in advance is a mandate in such collaborations. If not, the studio cannot produce the desired result. It also requires good synergy between community universities and government agencies. The knowledge assimilated through these collaborations must be visible to the masses and not just restricted to academic circles. The role of technology in creating better synergy between university and community can be explored; however, one must decide the usage of technology based on the context.

Paucity of time became a major concern in the project lead by PRIA as co-creation requires lengthy interaction with the stakeholders. The pedagogical approach used in the Iowa University spanned for three years thereby allowing the university to improvise their understandings and thereby have better outcomes. In the Indian scenario, we are still in the embryonic stage of the process, and through the learnings from developed countries, we can enrich these collaborations. However, the scenario posed in our country is much more challenging and more complex than in developing countries owing to the myriad of stakeholder groups. Recently government agencies have also realized the potential of these collaborations and

encouraged and incentivized the universities to conduct such collaborations. This proves a win-win situation for the students as they deal with issues based on experiential learning and helps improve the community. SDG 4 aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" Besides the primary access to education, this also deals with access to various forms of experiential learning, which positively impacts the student. The above discussion clearly emphasizes both the importance and need for such collaborations in India, which can seamlessly satisfy the aspirations of the students, community, and government.

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