Analysis and Policy Recommendations for Public Participation in Urban Regeneration Projects in China

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Abstract. Urban regeneration projects mainly include demolitions and renovations to existing buildings, physical improvements of the deteriorating districts and the optimization of the industrial structure, which directly relate to public interests. Public participation mechanisms are widely used in urban regeneration projects to promote legitimacy and democracy of decision-makings. Public participation process of urban regeneration projects in China has been institutionalized and legal and political measures are taken by government these years. However, the implementation of public participation process in urban regeneration projects doesn’t achieve expected outcomes in China and there are some barriers for promoting the public participation process in urban regeneration in practice. This article aims to make up for the gap between theory and practice by synthesizing main problems and countermeasures for public participation by reviewing the relevant literatures and referring to the recent cases of urban regeneration projects in China. Firstly, this study analysed the development of public participation process in urban regeneration projects in China and presented the current public participation mechanisms. Secondly, major problems in participation process and the analysis of such problems are presented: (1) It’s still doubtful whether citizens are fully rational characters when making decisions on complex issues; (2) It’s still questionable whether adequate staff and other necessary resources (e.g. illustrating material) are supported by proper channels; (3) It’s still unknown whether there are a set of rules to answer the questions of participants selection, process facilitation, times and resources organization, etc; (4) It remains insufficient in terms of participation depth in the “participatory ladder” and rationality in the participatory mechanism. Finally, the study proposes suggestions accordingly for such issues to make the process of public participation more practicable.

1. Introduction
Urban regeneration means comprehensive improvements to the cities including demolitions and renovations to existing buildings, physical improvements of the deteriorating districts and the optimization of the industrial structure. Urban regeneration projects are complicated considering economic, physical, social and environmental aspects. There are diverse stakeholders and conflictual interests to be dealt with. Painful decisions are required regarding planning and implementing these urban regeneration projects. Conflicts may arise at times when the public are closed out of the decision-making, which further lead to suspension of the works and anti-social behaviours, bring financial loss and instability of the society. Social risks have become one of the most influential risks to be dealt with. The core solution to the problem is ensuring that the voice of the public to be heard...
This appears to be an important time for citizens to play a role in helping the initiator (the government) determine the best solutions for government and the society.

Public participation is defined as the process where members of a society engage in public affairs to make decisions with public officials [2]. The concept of public participation is originated from political participation in 1960s whose value has long been recognized. Public participation can improve efficiency of decisions, promote trust among stakeholders and maintaining legitimacy [3]. Though, public participation is constrained by many political, social, economic, and individual factors, if not carefully designed or implemented, it may delay decisions, increase conflict, disappoint participants, and lead to more distrust [4]. The process of democratization in China has been greatly promoted and legal and political measures are taken by government these years. However, public participation in China is still in its infancy, which is considered shallow and it mainly occurs after the issues are framed or most decisions are made [5].

The question of how to find out the barriers of effective participation and engender practicable and satisfying recommendations is the central issue in this research. Fortunately, an extensive base of research provided directions for design of public participation process. The relevant research is diffused across a diverse range of disciplines, including budgetary decisions [6], urban planning [7] and environmental protection [8], etc. The government are urgent for solving the problems and want the public to join in as a result of the frequent social conflicts in urban-regeneration projects in China. The citizens’ awareness of participation is strengthened at the same time and they are eager for voice their concerns. However, the both sides are not so satisfied with public participation process in urban regeneration projects in practice. This paper aims to synthesize the elements from literatures to find out the existing problems in public participation process in urban regeneration projects for overcoming the barriers of participation in urban regeneration projects.

Firstly, this study reviews the development of public processes in urban regeneration projects. Secondly, this study aims to identify the barriers of effective participation according to the literature and typical cases in China. Lastly, this study seeks to offer explicit evidence-based guidelines that have more practical value in urban regeneration projects to help practitioners design better participation process.

2. Development of public participation in urban regeneration projects

Urban regeneration projects in China display unique characteristics due to the special history background. Profound social and economic changes have taken place in China turning from planned economy into market economy in 1990s. Land use policy for land leasing was revised by the central government and the housing market are commercialized gradually. In this period, urban regeneration projects are mainly led by developers [9]. Urban regeneration process entered a stage of rapid expansion. Massive amount of housing and building infrastructures are demolished and reconstructed and even those houses with good conditions are demolished to meet market demand. The major driving force behind these regeneration projects are profit-oriented, which fail to take the willingness of the community or citizens into full consideration [10]. Citizens’ willingness was neglected and social conflicts occurred occasionally. Social net-works in the neighbourhood were broken due to the reconstruction of these districts [1]. While policies are enacted about reducing the conflicts, public participation mechanisms are stipulated such as public hearings, public deliberations, etc. As a result of this, social conflicts had a sheer decrease. However, regulations and law often lack behind citizens’ actual needs. The public participation process at this stage is considered shallow or symbolic. Citizens are informed and somewhat consulted and at times their interests may be neglected. The most common participation mechanism is public hearings. In contrast, however, government and developers have the dominant power to determine whether to conduct a certain project or not. Citizens are not empowered to participate in core of decision-making in urban regeneration [11].
Urban regeneration projects proved new characteristics nowadays after rapid development of urbanization in the past 10 years. Meanwhile, complexity of urban regeneration projects is evolving. Significantly, the goal for urban regeneration is transitioned from simply urbanization to industrial transformation and sustainable development. As a result, traditional decision-making approach dominated by government or developers of decision-making may not be appropriate for the complex situations in urban regeneration projects nowadays. To better support decision-making in urban regeneration projects, there witness numerous of evidence in regenerations projects in China using public participation mechanisms. Zhang and Li [7] studied Enning Lu districts renovation in Guangzhou and pointed out that non-government organizations (NGO) is a critical component in the urban regeneration projects. Li and Wang [12] applied Qinghe experiment group in Beijing to illustrate how citizen participation can benefit community renovation. Li and Zhu [13] established a decision-making model of responsive subject between government officials and citizens to innovate public participation mechanisms and applied it to Shanghai Tianzifang regeneration project. And Dong [14] emphasized the importance of community empowerment in promoting public participation in urban regeneration projects using comparative cases. Urban regeneration at this stage emphasized the sustainable relationship between cities and citizens. So how to innovate the mechanism of public participation in urban regeneration projects in China becomes necessary. The characteristic of the small-scale, gradual mode of regeneration gives a chance for the public to participate. Down-top activities arose such as the Enning street renovation which is initiated by the university students who have relevant knowledge about urban planning and historical protection.

3. Analysis and recommendations for public participation in urban regeneration

Tracing back the development path of public participation in urban regeneration projects, we can see that China is paying more and more attention to the role of diverse stakeholders in decision making of urban regeneration projects. Efforts are made to promote the democracy and efficiency of decision making and different public participation mechanisms are employed in urban regeneration projects. However, social conflicts in these projects still exist and public participation is thought to be symbolic. In order to find out the gaps between theory and practice, this study analyses citizens’ competence of participating in urban regeneration projects, necessary resources supported by authorities for participating in urban regeneration projects and a set of rules established for public participation and depth of public participation.

3.1. Citizens’ competence of participating in urban regeneration projects

Citizens’ competence of participating in urban regeneration projects is analysed and policy recommendations are offered to overcome the barriers of public participation process.

3.1.1. Analysis of the problem. It’s still doubtable whether citizens are fully rational characters when making decisions on complex issues. Citizens’ competence of participation is a major concern among the scholars. Citizens have a relatively low level of knowledge regarding urban planning and it may be difficult for them to persuade others in the participation process as a lack of special training and targeted resources. Some citizens may be rational and make calculus-based decisions while others rely more on intuitions and make irrational decisions. Some citizens may not have the necessary respect in deliberation and cooperation with other participants and may lack a full understanding of specific restrictions of the local authorities. Citizens’ motivations to participate has been discussed in the literature. Their motivations to participate is their interests on the issues and the extent to which it relates to them [15]. They may be likely to focus more on narrow self-interests instead of public interests. Citizens often pay more attention to issues related to their direct interests, such as resettlement compensation plans after demolition of their houses. It turns out that if they feel their concerns are being considered and they can influence the final decisions, they are more willing to participate. Citizens participate actively when the issues relate to their community’s immediate interests [16]. Citizens may need some material incentives such as money and gifts on issues related
to wider interests. For example, in the case of urban village reconstruction in Guangzhou, citizens are mainly concerned about the "property ownership of illegal buildings" and "relocation compensation and resettlement issues", but there is insufficient understanding of the protection of historical streets. Under the traditional “up-down” governance, citizens may think decision-making may be the government’s responsibility rather than their own and they may hope someone can represent their opinions. In particular, in the old deteriorating areas, citizens have relatively low levels of education and income, and their role in participation is very limited. In the public participation process, the conversation may be dominated by those who possess more resources and the marginal group may have less chance to voice their concerns [17].

3.1.2. Policy recommendations. Non-Governmental Organizations in urban regeneration projects are groups which voluntarily formed by the citizens, lawyers, quantity surveyor, etc. and somehow supported by the government. Citizens are expected to promote their interests more effectively in groups rather than working as individuals. Multiple, diverse, and autonomous advocacy groups such as housing committee and relocation group in urban regeneration projects exist to centralize multiple interests among the citizens and provide staff and resource support. While such organizations relate closely to the government institutions and may be not so attractive and influential to citizens. Establishment of such groups supported by universities and professionals may help citizens to express their opinions. Community planner is also helpful for explaining professional knowledge to citizens and getting them more involved in the decision-making process.

3.2. Necessary resources supported by authorities for participating in urban regeneration projects
Necessary resources supported by authorities for participating in urban regeneration projects is analysed and policy recommendations are offered to overcome the barriers of public participation process.

3.2.1. Analysis of the problem. It’s still questionable whether adequate staff and other necessary resources (e.g. illustrating material) are supported by proper channels. Necessary resources may be an important component when citizens participate. Participants need time and energy to learn about the issues and they need such skills as communication skills and team working skills. However, the costs of gaining the knowledge, information, and expertise for citizens to participate effectively is high [18]. As a result of this, it was difficult for citizens to maintain participation efforts and there was a tendency to rely on a few committed individuals in participation. There is some evidence that the government officials’ attitudes and behaviours relate to resources supported to citizens. Institutional arrangements, performance incentives, perceptions towards participation, time and resource limitations are salient variables affect government officials’ attitudes and behaviour towards participation in urban-regeneration projects. Government officials may think that the public participation process slows down decision making which add an extra stage to the process [2]. Cost of participation are important variable limiting the government officials’ behaviours. Resources from local authority may not be able to meet the actual needs [8].

3.2.2. Policy recommendations. Adequate staff and other resources necessary are needed for an effective public participation process in urban regeneration projects. When inviting everyone to the table to deliberate on certain issues regarding urban regeneration, authorities are ought to give citizens the tools and resources they need. Use of the social media via internet may help. Information materials should be offered to participants to make sure transparency of public participation process and the quality of information materials should be high. Information materials should have credibility and can’t be biased to any group. Visualization technology such as GIS can help to communicate information to participants. Many citizens are eager for more information about how to contact the government and they need more ‘eye-catching’ information on services and activities regarding participation. The questions of citizens’ awareness about opportunities to participate and perceptions
about influence on the final decisions need to be further investigated. It’s still unknown the extent to which they know the existing institutional channels and existing tenants’ associations or other informal associations in their area. Institutional channels including China’s petitions (xinfang) system, the residential committees or juweihui, the Party committee or dangweihui, people’s congress system at the national, provincial, city, county, and township levels, people’s congress representative etc play an important role in public participation for citizens to express their opinions.

3.3. A set of rules established for public participation
A set of rules established for public participation is analysed and policy recommendations are offered to overcome the barriers of public participation process in urban regeneration projects.

3.3.1. Analysis of the problem. It’s still unknown whether there are a set of rules to answer the questions of participants selection, process facilitation, times and resources organization, etc. Legal requirements mean the requirements stipulating the ways of participation which can constrain or enhance participation outcomes [19]. In Hangzhou, for example, the ways of making opening government decisions are dictated. The literature shows that formalization of the participation process also affects the outcome of the participation. Government officials are constrained by institutional arrangements such as red tape and hierarchical authority [20]. They may not have the authority to decide the mechanism of public participation. Their behaviours are constrained by political control and manipulated by the higher authorities [21]. The government officials in authoritarian regimes may need to follow upper-level mandates when making decisions thus legislation and formalization of the public participation process is crucial.

3.3.2. Policy recommendations. Participants selections methods, process organization ways, information disclosure, and feedback to citizens need to be clarified and formalized. Participants selection procedure need to be stipulated to guarantee representativeness of the participants. Whether those who participate in the process can be truly representative of those who don’t participate is a major concern. In the urban-regeneration project, the developer, tenants, and consultants such as urban planner hold different beliefs. The developer may seek profits and want to shorten the demolition periods. The tenants may seek sufficient compensation. The consultants are in a neutral position which seeks to attain the balance between social and economic goals. Platforms and venues for participation are needed and the initiators, sponsors and facilitators ought to be clear when designing participation process. Much of the research has focused on disclosure of the information. Different information materials are offered to participants based on different mechanisms and only if the participants have access to sufficient information can they participate well. Feedback mechanisms may be an important variable in the process design according to the research. Timely respond to the questions, comments and requests proposed by participants and they will make sure they are being heard and their concerns are considered. Participants may fail to link the results of consultation with decision-making processes if they don’t receive timely feedback. Citizens need to be informed of the outcome and the reasons why final decisions didn’t take their concerns into account or the decisions even go against popular opinion.

3.4. Public participation in terms of depth
Depth of public participation is analysed and policy recommendations are offered to overcome the barriers of public participation process in urban regeneration projects.

3.4.1. Analysis of the problem. It remains insufficient in terms of participation depth in the “participatory ladder” and rationality in the participatory mechanism. The “ladder” of empowerment includes eight rungs: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and finally, citizen control [22]. These can be summarized into three categories: to inform, to consult, to empower [15]. Citizens are just informed or consulted in public participation process in
urban regeneration projects and they don’t know whether their opinions affect the final decisions. Government officials’ trust on the citizens may affect the officials’ perceptions toward participation. They may have concerns about sharing powers with citizens on complex issues of urban regeneration projects and perceive citizens to be ill-informed or incapable of providing sound suggestions. Government officials may feel that citizens already have sufficient access to participation [17] and are not willing to empower the citizens to promote the process of public participation. If they have a better understanding of public participation and they have more trust on the citizens, they tend to be in favour of public participation.

3.4.2. Policy recommendations. The characters of the issues and objectives of certain issues determine the depth of participation. The literature shows that clarity about the purpose of the participation process in important for designing participation processes because it can help avoid unnecessary or unwise expenditures of efforts and resources. Clarification purpose is not one-off, because the context may change and it may be desirable to involve citizens in producing the purposes of participation issues. The form of public participation takes are a major concern among the scholars and practitioners. Different mechanisms are adapted to different objectives. Mechanisms may vary during different phase of the project. Public hearings, focus group meetings may be normal channels when it comes to urban-regeneration projects in china. Participant selection, communication and decision, authority and power are three crucial dimensions of public participation. Practitioners have developed many techniques to recruit participants such as self-selection, selective selection, random selection, lay stakeholder selection, professional stakeholders etc. Different participation method may be used according to different issues. Public participation processes can employ one-way, two-way and/or deliberative communication modes. Participants may only be informed when the plans are made. However, when the compensation plans are made, they may need to deliberate with the citizens. The level of empowerment should meet expectations of the participants. Different characters of the issue and different participation objectives determine whether to participate and how to participate. Participation mechanisms need to fit with the goals and multiple mechanisms may be used during different phase of the participation.

In summary, this study analyses the reasons why public participation processes in urban regeneration projects didn’t perform expectedly and propose guidelines for practical use, as shown in following Table 1.

| Items                | Analysis                    | Recommendations                  |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Citizens’ competence | Relevant knowledge          | Non-Governmental Organizations   |
|                      | Self-interests oriented     | Community planner                |
| Necessary resources  | A lack of resource support  | Information technology           |
|                      | Restrictions from authorities| Proper channels                  |
| A set of rules       | Vague stipulations          | Clarification of process design  |
|                      | Hierarchical authority      | Information disclosure           |
| Depth of participation| The “ladder” of empowerment| Clarity about the purpose         |
|                      | Trust from authorities      | Proper participation mechanisms  |

4. Conclusions
In China, urban regeneration projects have arisen along with the fast-paced Chinese urbanization rate, which is different from urban regeneration projects in developed countries according to their urbanization process. Public participation is widely applied to urban regeneration projects to promote the legitimacy and democracy of decision-making. However, the current public participation mechanisms in China have failed to well address real needs.
To narrow this research gap, we analysed public participation processes in current urban regeneration projects from four aspects: (1) Citizens’ awareness of public participation is gradually forming and ascending and their capability to participate in public affairs have constrained the performance of the participation to some degree. Institutions such as NGOs or community planners may help citizens get more involved in decision-making process; (2) The government’s role in fostering NGOs and providing necessary resources to equip the community with sufficient tools and a channel is crucial for promoting public participation exercises in urban regeneration projects; (3) A set of rules to answer the questions of participants selection, process facilitation, times and resources organization need to be established. Formalization and careful design of the public participation process may be helpful; (4) Citizens are not fully empowered for decision-making and that public participation practice is still dominated by the government, while citizens or the community remain peripheral. One potential solution is to adjust the existing top-down participation mechanism to a more citizen-friendly bottom-up approach so that the voices from the community can be heard and valued.

There is increasing enthusiasm for public participation in public affairs and interactive activities among the stakeholders both in theory and practice. Though current public participation mechanisms haven’t well addressed the new problems of urban regeneration projects, it does not mean that public participation is not necessary. Instead, it emphasizes the importance to develop better mechanisms to meet the real needs in urban regeneration projects. There are still some limits in this article to be further explored in the future using empirical methods. Different opinions among stakeholders may need to be further investigated.

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