Social Justice and City:

Community Participation in Sydney's Metropolitan Planning

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ABSTRACT

Social justice is widely accepted as a normative goal in contemporary urban planning. Achieving this goal, however, is one of the major challenges for present cities and city planners. Planning authorities have attempted to address this challenge by creating opportunities for various stakeholders to participate in the planning process. There is, however, a limited understanding as to whether these stakeholders are able to effectively utilise this opportunity. The principal aim of this paper is to investigate whether creating opportunities for participation in plan making is likely to enhance socially just outcomes by increasing the voice of various community groups including society's disadvantaged groups. This study analyses community participation in the making of Sydney Metropolitan Strategy 2005 with Fairfield City Council taken as a unit of analysis. Primary data were collected through several field visits and informal discussions, while semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 randomly selected individuals having significant stake in the metropolitan planning. Secondary data were collected from relevant government agencies and library databases. It was found that there was no genuine opportunity for diverse social groups to effectively represent in the process of decision making. Attempts to increase community participation in plan making at Sydney's regional, sub-regional and local levels have largely maintained status quo with government officials and powerful businesses controlling major decisions. The opportunities to participate in the plan making process are therefore seriously flawed. It is concluded that if the goal of community participation in urban planning is to enhance creating a socially just city, there is need for urgent change in the way plans are made and implemented.

INTRODUCTION

Ensuring social justice is a major challenge in planning practice. This is especially relevant in the global and multi-cultural cities where disparities in socio-economic conditions are increasingly subject to the flux of economic change. In response to these changes the planning literature has emphasised the need for more effective community participation in the policy making process (see Davoudi, 2000; Gunder, 2006; Sandercock, 1997). The underlying assumption is that this will lead to community input into decision making which in turn helps to achieve sustainable outcomes. However, a critical question is whether participation really makes any difference to the representation of poor and disadvantaged groups in the decision making process? and do opportunities for community participation make any real impact to bring about a socially just city? This paper examines these questions through a critical evaluation of the planning process for the 'Sydney Metropolitan Strategy (SMS) 2005 and the Fairfield Local Environmental Plan (LEP). Sydney is a culturally rich city with Fairfield being one of the most culturally diverse Local Government Areas (LGA) in Sydney region.

The paper will answer the following key questions:

1. What were the opportunities for community participation in the planning process of Sydney Metropolitan Strategy 2005, West Central Sub-regional Strategy and Fairfield Local Environmental Plan?

2. Do opportunities for participation make any real difference in terms of gaining genuine representation in decision making by society's diverse groups, including the disadvantaged groups?

3. What are the implications of community participation to achieve socially just city?

The next section of the paper discusses key issues of community participation and social justice outcomes through a critical analysis of relevant conceptual and empirical literature. This is followed by a brief description of research methods employed in this research. Then a review of the Fairfield City Council case and the local planning framework is presented. Next is a brief description of the NSW planning system and the SMS 2005 and West-central Subregional Strategy. Research findings and analysis are then discussed in relation to the opportunities for community participation and its implications in relation to social justice. Finally, the paper concludes with ways to improve community participation in the planning practice.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN COMTEMPORARY URBAN PLANNING

Community participation in environmental planning was first introduced in the United Kingdom's Town and Country Planning Act in 1968 followed by the USA's National Environmental Policy Act in 1969, the Canadian Environmental Assessment and Review Process in 1973 and the Australian Environment Protection (Impact of Proposals) Act 1974. Public participation was introduced by the NSW government in the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 (Gurran, 2007). It is also a requirement of Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992. Agenda 21 prescribes a comprehensive plan of action for situations where human impacts upon the environment are likely to occur. The plan strongly advises organisations of the United Nations, signatory governments and major groups to engage with the public before adopting any local or regional plan (United Nations,

2004).

There is a growing body of literature that highlights the significance of community participation in urban planning practice. In the late 1980s and 1990s communicative planning theories emerged that placed participation as a central ideology of planning practice (Forester, 1987; Healy, 2005; Innes, 1996). According to these theories, planning practice is seen as a collaborative and negotiating process. These theories can be divided into three types; viz. a) Planning as power struggle process (e.g. Forester, 1993); b) Planning as collaborative process (e.g. Healy, 1995) and c) Planning as consensus building process (e.g. Innes, 1996). Forester (1993) argues that planners can modify the exertion of political power in planning process and that planners by proper use of information (which is considered as a source of power) can empower citizens through democratic planning processes (Forester, 1989). Healy (1999), on the other hand, explained communicative planning theory in relation to societal networks and institutional capacity. She defines institutional capacity as a combination of social, intellectual and political capital. As this capital grows and spreads through collaboration and networks, the 'civic capacity' of a society will grow and participants will be more confident with ability and competencies to solve their problems (Healy, 1999).

Innes (1996) draws upon the concept of consensus building with equality in the collaborative process. She argues that all types of stakeholders, that is public agencies, powerful private interests and communities no matter how marginalised they are, are supposedly treated equally within the process of collaborative decision making (Innes, 1996). According to this proposition, in consensus building process, learning takes place in the collaborative forum. Conflicts are resolved and innovations emerge which can be seen as a process of give and

take and joint problem solving (Innes and Booher, 2004). Critics argue, however, that equal participation of stakeholders with different interests coupled with unequal power and authority is seriously misleading (e.g. Hiller, 2003).

In terms of effectiveness of community participation, Arnstein's ladder of participation is widely used. Arnstein critiqued participation in terms of power relationships (Arnstein, 1969). In this seminal work, she developed a 'ladder of participation' in which she defined different degrees of participation in relation to the delegation of decision-making power. She ranked participation from lowest to highest according to the degree of power that participants can exercise to influence the outcome (ibid). Critics argue, however, that the 'ladder' concept ignores informal power and only considers the assessment of final outcomes in relation to equity, efficiency and sustainability (e.g. Painter, 1992). Assessing participation in relation to decision making power has been firmly accepted as a fundamental issue. Power relations among stakeholders clearly play a central role in participatory processes that aim to enhance socially just outcomes.

Social justice is conceptualised as "concerned both with individual empowerment and also with structural injustice; that is with questions of power and resources available to particular communities or sectors of those communities" (Griffiths, 1998, p.13). It is demonstrated that participation of local communities in resource management and urban development empowers that community (Islam and Mahjabeen, 2003; Jenkins, 2001) and helps in redistribution of natural resources which contribute to improve social justice outcomes (Leuenberger and Wakin, 2007). By meeting the needs of the poor, community participation is also seen as a vehicle to help achieve a socially just city and region (see Davoudi, 2000; Gunder, 2006;

Sandercock, 1997). Studies on whether and how community participation helps to achieve socially just city in an Australian context is not clearly established. This paper explores the case of Sydney Metropolitan Strategy 2005 in relation to three tiers of Sydney's urban planning in regional, sub-regional and local levels with a case analysis of Fairfield City Council within the greater Sydney region.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs an in-depth case study as a research strategy. The case study offers a method of learning about a complex instance through extensive description and contextual analysis (Yin 2002). It is a valuable method for identifying, linking and comparing issues of resource management (Howitt 2001). Primary data were collected by field-visits and observation of various sites in Sydney. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 randomly selected interviewees involving government officials, planning experts, community groups and researchers from universities. The respondents were asked about the reasons for their participation, their views in regards to benefits, problems, mechanisms and outcomes of the participation process. Secondary data were collected from various publications, and were also checked with research participants. Primary and secondary data were analysed through triangulation technique in such a way that the data collected from one source and method were checked and verified by the data collected from another source and method in order as to increase research validity and rigour.

FAIRFIELD CITY COUNCIL: A CASE STUDY

Fairfield City Council is located 32 kilometres south-west of the Sydney Central Business District and covers an area of 104 square kilometres. It has 27 suburbs (see Map 1) and is the home of 179,361 people (ABS, 2007). The income level is generally low with the median individual annual income being $16,558 and the median annual family income $49,192 in 2006. This represents one of the lowest income suburbs in Sydney. The rate of unemployment is more than double compared to other metropolitan city councils (e.g. 10 per cent in Fairfield City Council while it is 4.7 percent for Sydney in 2006) (Fairfield City Council, 2009).

Fairfield City Council has one of the most diverse community groups in Sydney. More than half of the residents were born overseas (51.5 percent). Australia-born residents only comprised 41.6 percent and Aboriginal people 0.6 percent of the total population (ABS, 2007). Almost half of the residents speak a language other than English at home (NESB people 48.91 percent), the most common being Vietnamese, Arabic, Assyrian, Cantonese and Spanish (Department of Local Government, 2007).

Insert Map 1 here

Fairfield City Council (FCC) is the focus for this study because it has the highest concentration of ethnically and culturally diverse groups of people as local residents and lower than average family incomes. This shows it to be one of Sydney's most diverse and disadvantaged LGAs. The investigation of community representation in the process of regional and local environmental planning process can provide a snapshot of the social justice

indicators of planning process in Sydney.

CONTEXTUALISING FAIRFILED: REGIONAL, SUB-REGIONAL AND LOCAL PLANNING

The principal planning legislation in NSW is the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979.* Statutory land use and development is regulated and controlled through the Local Environmental Plan (LEP). These plans must be approved by the Minister for Planning and published in the Government Gazette. There is also a metropolitan plan 'Sydney Metropolitan Strategy 2005' which is a regional plan for greater Sydney titled "City of Cities" with a 25 year vision to the year 2031 (Department of Planning, 2005). It is a strategic document which sets out a raft of broad policies for the Sydney region. The Metropolitan Strategy is linked to the sub-regional strategies. Sub-regional strategies are the next step in translating the objectives for whole city into the strategies for each of the groupings of LGAs and many communities (Department of Planning, 2004). Currently, ten Subregional Strategies have been prepared by the Department of Planning. LEPs must be consistent with the sub-regional strategies and the Metropolitan Strategy. The majority of local councils are now in the process of preparing new standard instrument LEPs (Department of Planning, 2004). Fairfield City Council is linked to the Metropolitan Strategy 2005 through the West Central Sub-regional Strategy. Community participation opportunities are embedded in polices contained in the above levels of planning.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY PARTICIAPTION

Regional Level: Sydney Metropolitan Strategy 2005

The NSW Department of Planning consulted with experts, local governments, stakeholder representatives and community members. These bodies provided inputs to the planning process through a reference panel, two future forums, local government forum, and community forums (see Fig.1). More than 10,000 people were reported to be consulted and among them 1000 were seen as community members by the NSW government (Department of Planning, 2005).

Insert Figure 1 here

Twelve Community Forums were held across the greater metropolitan region of Sydney in November and December 2004. The participants were chosen on a 'random basis' for Sydney, the Central Coast, and Lower Hunter and Illawarra regions. The random sampling was assumed to represent a wide range of groups across the community. The participants were asked to describe what they valued most about where they lived. They were also asked to identify things which would make Sydney a better place to live over the next 25 years and to say what they wanted the Sydney region to be like in 25 years. Over 700 community members were reported to have participated in community forums (Department of Planning, 2005).

Sub-Regional Level: West Central Sub-Regional Strategy

The draft West Central Sub-regional Strategy had been developed by the Department of Planning in consultation with other state agencies, local governments, and industry. A series

of workshops were held by the Department of Planning with the West Central Councils, with input from local council officials. Consultations were also carried out with NSW government officials and the private sector representatives. There was no opportunity for direct input from community groups except through formal submissions.

Local level: Local Environmental Plan

Community participation provisions in the process of the Fairfield LEP were made during the exhibition period (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here

Currently, Fairfield City Council is in the process of drafting a new LEP. Community consultation has been conducted through retail study, employment land study, residential study, and open space study in the process of making the new LEP. There is no specific provision to represent diverse groups as part of the LEP making process.

RESULTS

The results from the field survey and document analysis indicate that the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy 2005 created some opportunities for community inputs into the decision making process through the Expert Reference Panel and Working Groups, local government level forums, and public submissions. Interests of the community groups, particularly disadvantaged groups such as Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) or aboriginal groups, however, were not directly represented. Their concerns were assumed to be

represented through socially or economically influential groups of people or through professional experts. However, these members were largely made up of elite representatives of government, professional and business groups. As a result a common concern among respondents was that "There was a very limited chance to provide inputs into policies" (Field Survey, 2009).

There were 12 community forums organised throughout the Sydney region. Little detailed information exists about which groups the participants represented. There was, however, a strong dissatisfaction among several community-based organisations for not having an opportunity to participate in these forums (see Save Our Suburb, 2004). Input from community groups into the planning process as a whole was equated to the input made by a few elites and peak interest groups. Hence input from the community groups, particularly who are disadvantaged in terms of language or socio-economic status, had limited direct influence on the final decisions in relation to the Sydney Metropolitan Strategy making process (also see Mahjabeen, Shrestha and Dee, 2008).

In West Central Sub-regional Strategy, there was no genuine scope for community groups to participate directly except through local government representation. From the analysis of governmental documents and field survey, it is found that the planning process was largely a state-dominated process. Local government officials who were supposed to be represent community groups in the SMS workshops also expressed concerns about the process being tokenistic from the part of the state government agencies. As one participant from the Council expressed:

We have many issues in Fairfield City Council such as poor social housing, public

space and public transport, but the workshop was not well facilitated workshop to be able to express such concerns (Field Survey, 2009).

There was a consensus that the West Central Sub-regional Strategy workshop was poorly organised. Even the workshop room was said to be congested. The presentations in the workshop were very hard to hear. Local government staff members were seen to be co-opted by politically influential personalities as one respondent said "[workshops] dominated by Mayors who wanted themselves to be staged" (Field Survey, 2009). Another respondent expressed a serious concern about persisting top-down authoritarian attitude of the state government officials during the participation forums; "This is what we want to do and we want you to agree with it" (Field Survey, 2009).

Insert Photo 1 here

In the process of making the LEP community groups were encouraged to participate. However their participation was marked by a number of problems (see Table. 3). A major problem of community participation was a lack of respect and value to community input by government bureaucrats as one respondent said:

… information gathered [by the state government officials] from people without a proper purpose. I think the role of the people is not truly respected (Field Survey, 2009).

Community as a Least Influential Stakeholder

In the above mentioned planning processes community groups have been identified as the

least influential stakeholders whether they participate by themselves or whether they were represented by local government officials (See Table 2).

Insert Table 2 here

Problems of Community Participation

Table 3 outlines the key barriers to meaningful participation of community groups at the regional, sub-regional and local levels as identified by respondents.

Insert Table 3 here

Problems depicted in Table 3 indicate a strong relationship between the effectiveness of community participation and government's policy constraints. Interestingly, the field survey clearly indicates that most of these problems are generated from government's limited understanding of and commitment to the value of community participation.

Views on Addressing Community Participation Issues

To overcome the problems of community participation and to make a smooth pathway for community groups to contribute their knowledge and ideas to regional, sub-regional or local level plans, a number of options have been put forward by respondents (see Table 4).

Insert Table 4 here

From the above tables, it is indicative that the existing planning process at local, sub-regional

or regional levels is insufficient for community participation to be reflective of the needs and aspirations of the diverse community groups (see Table 5).

Insert table 5 here

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Findings suggest that there were some opportunities for community participation in SMS 2005, West Central Sub-regional Strategy and Local Environmental Plan of Fairfield City Council. However community participation was tokenistic in all three tiers of government's planning process. There was no specific provision for the poor and disadvantaged community groups to provide input into the planning process. The SMS only created opportunities for community input into the decision making process through the Expert Reference Panel and Working Groups local government level forums, community forums and public submissions. Community interests, however, were not directly represented. There was no direct participation of aboriginal groups and Non-English Speaking Background groups. In the West Central Sub-regional Strategy workshop, community groups were even dropped as participating stakeholder. These findings contradict with Forester's (1998) assertion that the physical presence and meeting different stakeholders face to face is one of the very important factors as recommended by the equity planners to address power imbalance.

Even the local government officials, who are considered as representatives of their local community groups, were marginalised in the planning workshops for Sydney Metropolitan Strategy and West Central Sub-regional Strategy. They were seen as subjects to be informed.

This is consistent with what Arnstein (1069) referred as tokenistic participation.

In the regional level and sub-regional levels planning process, community groups as an important stakeholder had to cope with a lot of challenges and pressure from their traditionally powerful counterparts including officials from state government agencies, local governments, commercial developers, institutional investors and some environmental groups. Even in the local level planning where the community members had a greater possibility to influence the decision making process, local community members could not participate effectively because of the lack of expertise knowledge, skills and capacity required to provide useful input into the decision making system. It is particularly concerning to the community groups of Fairfield because their culture is different than many local government city planners, and that English language ability is limited. Although there were options for a translator, language acted as a major barrier to conduct participatory practices as expressed by the local council staff (see Table 3). However, expressed (but often mis-interpreted) views were claimed to be collected by professional planners and final decisions still remained with bureaucrats and politicians at the state level. This is the traditional top-down approach to decision making and has largely remained intact. Clearly there is no specific mechanism put in place to address the issue of cross-cultural barriers to participation in planning practice.

Fairfield City Council was expected to be actively participating in the Metropolitan Strategy and West Central Sub-Regional Strategy. It is perhaps even more critical for the Fairfield community groups to participate because of the nature of multi-cultural community groups and relatively poor socio-economics of the community. However, these groups were found to be ignored in the regional and sub-regional planning process. A commonly held view was

expressed by one respondent: "I am happy that they asked, there are lots of times when state government officials will not even ask you anything" (Field Survey, 2009). When community groups are asked to participate, but the final decisions are still controlled by the state officials, there is no meaningful decentralisation and devolution required for effective community participation (see Fisher, 2000). The consequence from this practice is that top-down status quo is maintained, while it also legitimized the status quo through the superficial consideration of community participation. This is clearly a potential danger to participatory planning if it aims to improve social justice outcomes.

Arnstein's ladder of participation (1969) explains the lower rung of participation as tokenistic because the participation is essentially not intended for providing significant input into decision making process. The participation of community members in Sydney's three tiers of planning processes can be referred as tokenistic. The level of participation fits precisely within the rung of 'placation'. The degrees of placation depend on the factors such as technical assistance offered to the participants and the extent to which the community has been organised. Considering these factors it is clear that the levels of participation in Sydney's regional, sub-regional and local levels of planning processes were a much lower level of placation. Community members were consulted to maintain status quo.

Rawls's political liberalism provides a fundamental basis for social justice in a range of fields including urban and regional, planning should be pluralistic to achieve socially just outcomes (Stein and Harper, 2005). However the corollary in this case study is that planning in the regional, sub-regional and local level is centralised and controlled by the bureaucrats, large business industries and social elite groups. The opportunities of community participation are

used only to ticking the box for making the plans legitimate.

CONCLUSION

The case from Fairfield City Council reveals that community participation in Sydney's regional, sub-regional and local levels was largely tokenistic. There was no real power sharing process between traditionally powerful government agencies and large business groups and the community groups, particularly the disadvantaged groups. This type of community participation in urban planning is unlikely to enhance social justice outcomes of the Sydney city. The results of this study also indicate that the community participation process for regional, sub-regional and local level planning process is still very much dominated by the interests of executive government with little real and effective input from community groups. To ensure social justice outcomes in the plan the whole process of stakeholder participation requires rethinking. There is an urgent need to shift planning practice from bureaucratic apparatus to a real democratic approach.

Based on the above analysis, the following suggestions are offered for effective community participation to help achieve a socially just city: 1) Government should understand the values and benefits of community participation in planning process and should have genuine commitment for that; 2) Establish an independent agency backed by legislation to set the terms of specific reference for the participation of diverse community groups; 3) Provide a set of guidelines backed by legislation for the management and organisation of specifically targeted community participation forums for different groups in regional, sub-regional and local levels; 4) Provide funding and a realistic time frame for appropriate expert input and

resources to enable the participatory forums to carry out the tasks required of them; and 5) Provide appropriate training and facilities in local level to enable diverse community groups to participate effectively.

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Appendices: Maps, photos and tables (to be inserted in the text)
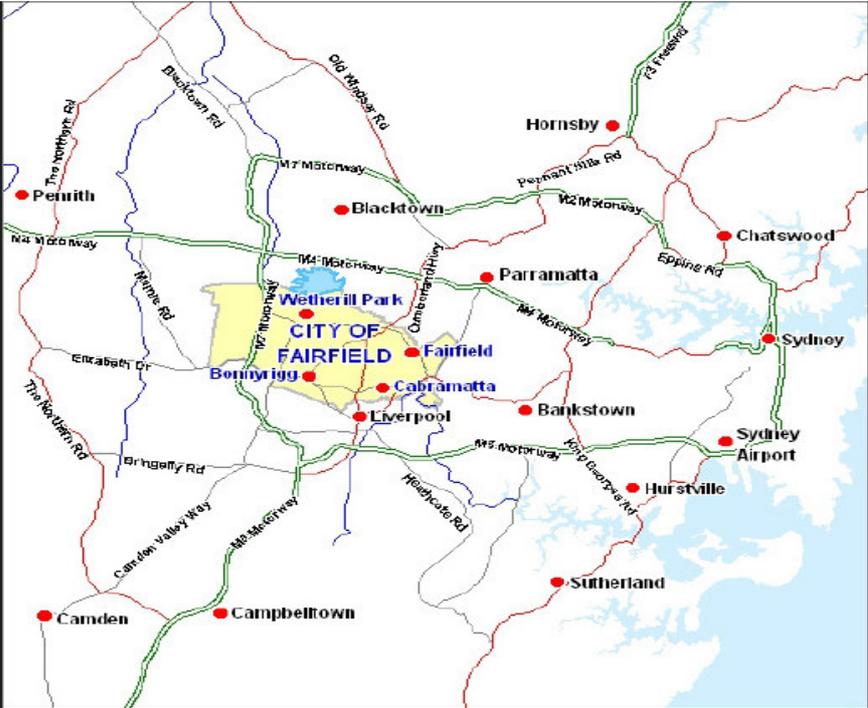
Map 1. Fairfield City in Greater Sydney (Source: www.fairfieldcity.gov.au, 2009)

Photo 1: Community consultation by the council staff
(Source: Authors)

Sydney Metropolitan Strategy 2005

Sydney Future Forums

| Announced | Discussion Paper | Launched |

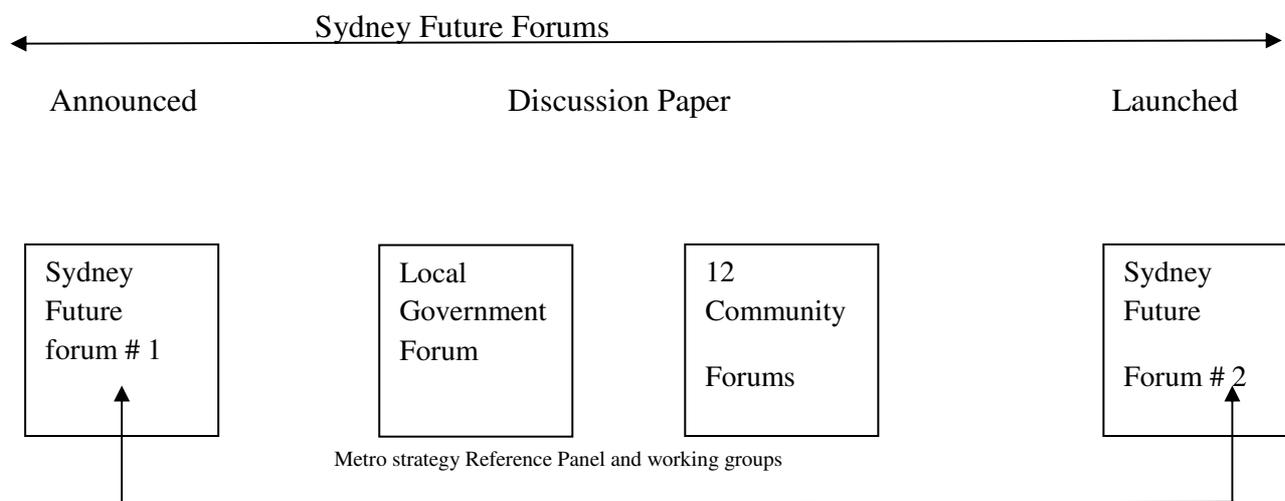| Sydney Future forum # 1 | Local Government Forum | 12 Community Forums | Sydney Future Forum # 2 |

Metro strategy Reference Panel and working groups

Figure 1: Stakeholder Consultation Process in Metropolitan Strategy 2005
(Source: Department of Planning, 2004, p. 25)

Table 1

LEP making Process and Community involvement Provisions

Preparations of LEP	Community involvement
Council resolves to prepare a plan and notifies Department of Planning	Meeting and Proceedings open to the public
Local Environmental Study (May involve community workshops/Focus Groups)	Public Consultation
Consultation with public authorities	×
Public exhibition (Plan may be revised or re-exhibited)	Public exhibition
Public Hearing (if required)	
Plan submitted to Minister and made	×

(Source: Gurran, 2007, modified)

Table 2: Community groups as a least influential stakeholder groups

Most influential Stakeholders	Least Influential Stakeholders
State agencies (1), Department of Planning (1) (1)(1)(1)	Individual community people (1), Local Government/Local communities (1)(1)(1)(1)
Representative business groups, Local Government who are well resourced, organized and politically connected (1), Development Industries and major owners of big parts of land (1)(1)	People of the community who are disadvantaged in terms of asset, wealth, education or language(1)
Local Government (1)	Some environmental groups (1)
Not sure (1)	No group (1), Not sure (1) (1)
Total: 10	**Total: 10**

(Source: Field Survey, 2009)

Table 3: Barriers of Meaningful Community Participation

Planning Processes	Barriers of Community participation
Metropolitan Strategy 2005	• Balancing of the stakeholders' needs • Very tight time line • People are not informed or experienced to make a meaningful response • Limited resources • Participants are not likely the representatives of community groups • Limited techniques for disseminating information for disadvantaged groups of people • Not enough facilities like child caring • Lack of commitment in state level to engage community, limited understanding of the value • Fear of loosing power from bureaucratic side • Using the plan as political showdown • Lack of people's passion for participation
West Central Sub-regional Strategy	• Very tight time schedule for preparation of the submission • Domination of politically influential personalities • Lots of debate and chaos • No facilitator • Uncomfortable meeting room and ill equipped presentation • Non response to the voice of the participant
Local Environmental Plan	• New people turning out through the consultation process of any project • People raise the irrelevant issues • Difficulties in conducting in English for NESB people • Not honouring people's views in decision making

(Source: Field Survey, 2009)

Table 4: Recommended Way outs for Community Participation

Planning Processes	Policy Alternatives
Metropolitan Strategy 2005	- Allowing enough time and opportunity for voicing - Great openness from bureaucracy for different ways of working - Translation of all materials into community languages - Different design of process for aboriginal and different cultural groups of people than the process of main stream Australians; More locality or place based planning process - Providing transportation or money for physically disadvantaged people - Training and supporting people to participate - Making community consultation as a continuous process - Separate forum with local government making them small groups - Post strategy consultation process; Feedback after consultation on what is going on
West Central Sub-regional Strategy	- Lot more consultation - Supported with facilitator - Feedback after consultation
Local Environmental Plan	- Allowing more time and resource - Providing training how to response

(Source: Field Survey, 2009)

Table 5: *Perceptions of the Participation Process*

Planning Processes	Different Views
Metropolitan Strategy 2005	- It was not an ideal consultation process - It was compromised in terms of ideal process for time, bureaucratic decision making and resources - Good process, but as the nature of the planning exercise, there was limited influence from the community
West Central Sub-regional Strategy	- Session was not constructive - It was like a show or courtesy
Local Environmental Plan	Important but very hard to collate with developers and resources

(Source: Field Survey, 2009)