Public participation in China: sustainable urbanization and governance

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to focus on the governance aspects of China’s environmental policy making and the conditions for meaningful public participation in sustainable urbanization policy making. China is facing a big urbanization challenge. Rapid economic growth and inefficient use of natural resources lead to excessive pollution and rapid depletion of China’s natural resources. Water scarcity, especially in the north-eastern part of the country, already is a big problem. The Chinese government has formulated policies and legislation to protect the environment and to produce a more sustainable growth, but implementation is lagging. Moreover, rapid modernization of Chinese society also led to first experiments with the organization of public hearings on environmental issues.

Design/methodology/approach – Literature is presented on governance and public participation in environmental policy making supplemented with material from case study research and expert meetings in China.

Findings – The findings show the interrelatedness of environmental governance and public participation, which leads to policy recommendations for public participation in sustainable urbanization processes.

Originality/value – This paper highlights the potential environmental gains through public participation in sustainable urbanization strategy policy in China.

Keywords Economic sustainability, Citizen participation, Governance, China

Paper type Research paper

Sustainable urbanization

Urbanization has been the dominant demographic trend during the last half century especially in developing countries. Economic growth coupled with demographic changes is generally seen as the driving force for urbanization. Environmental degradation is often considered a direct effect of urbanization processes. The Asia-Pacific Forum for Environment and Development (APFED) states that the high pace of social and economic development in Asia results in lack of infrastructure, congested traffic, environmental degradation and a housing shortage as major issues faced by cities and towns in their sustainable development. (Ichimura, 2003). This is
Certainly true for the People's Republic of China. China is the largest country in Asia with a land area of 9.6 million square km and is situated in the eastern part of the Asian Continent. In 2006 China's population reached over 1.3 billion, most of them living in the eastern provinces:

The next 5 years will be critical for China to build a well-off (Xiaokang) society in a comprehensive way. More specifically, the path chosen for China's urban development will determine all aspects of environmental protection and resource use in China, and will also be of global relevance (CCICED, 2006, p. 2).

The above quote from the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development's (CCICED) Annual General Meeting expresses the serious concern of the Chinese government over China's rapid urbanization. The challenge China is facing is put forward very explicitly in its Overview of this November 18-20, 2005 Meeting held in Beijing. Here it says (CCICED, 2006, p. 2):

Urbanization in China has increased the living standard of urban as well as rural residents. However, serious problems resulting from rapid urbanization have emerged. Natural resources are increasingly in short supply. Problems such as pollution, excessive use of groundwater and waste have worsened the environmental situation and led to shortage of water resources. [...] Authorities have not done enough to raise efficiency standards. [...] Rapid growth in private vehicles will further exacerbate this situation. Air and water quality in cities is a major problem, with many negative regional effects. Industrial resource efficiency is still very low by comparison to international standards.

From the above statement we can conclude that sustainable urbanization is a real challenge in China. According to Lo and Yueng (1996) the past decade of rapid development of the Chinese economy and the unprecedented growth of the urban system is the result of interaction between economic reforms and the new Chinese "open policy". Consequently a registered 18 million rural people annually migrate from the countryside to its cities. Annually 8 million jobs, dwellings and accompanying infrastructures have to be built. Keeping up the speed of urbanization to support sustained growth is formal government policy and is believed to contribute to a higher GDP and to a more efficient use of space and resources. At the same time many authors (Chen et al., 2005; Lo and Yueng, 1996) observe that environmental degradation – the consequence of a massive housing development programme and heavy infrastructure construction – is an increasingly serious problem in China. As the quotes from the CCICED Update show, the Chinese government is well aware of this problem and has set out to develop and implement a sustainable urbanization strategy[1]. In order to advise the national government on such a strategy the Members and Experts of CCICED presented four main policy recommendations with the objective to promote urban centers that are viable from an economic, environmental and social point of view. These main recommendations are (CCICED, 2006):

1. plan scientifically for sustainable urbanization through policy setting, implementation and enforcement;
2. transform China's urban areas into resource-saving cities and towns;
3. significantly accelerate efforts to control the environmental impacts of cities and towns and continuously improve urban environment; and
4. public information and participation for sustainable urbanization.
These main recommendations were supported by other recommendations; amongst others the enforcement of environmental laws and regulations and the strengthening of the position of the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) and more stringent application of strategic (SEA) and environmental impact assessment (EIA) regulation. Part of the recommendations for accelerating SEA and EIA was the suggestion to formulate explicit targets and performance indicators for local and regional authorities, thus creating new incentives to motivate local officials to take proper account of environmental and social performance.

In this paper the focus will be predominantly on the fourth of the recommendations: the governance aspects of China’s environmental policy making and urbanization strategy and the conditions for meaningful public participation. In the next section we will discuss the close relation between public involvement and environmental governance. Then we will go into more detail into international best practices for public participation and subsequently describe and analyze the current practice of public participation in EIA in China. We conclude with recommendations on how public participation might support the implementation of a sustainable urbanization strategy.

**Governance and participation in China**

Successful implementation of sustainable rural-urban planning is based on the recognition of the interdependence of the parties involved. (de Bruijn et al., 2002) Only shared efforts of public and private stakeholders and exchange of resources, goals, and expectations will lead to realization of the demanding requirements of a sustainable urbanization strategy. This cooperation calls for good governance mechanisms for integrative planning and timely and actively informing and involving public and private stakeholders in policy processes and decision-making. (Montgomery et al., 2004, p. 65)

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1997) good governance is the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented. Good governance has eight major characteristics: it is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law (see Figure 1). It assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is responsive to the present and future needs of society (UNESCAP, 2005; UNDP, 1997). Clearly

![Figure 1. Characteristics of good governance](source: Unescap (2005))
China’s explicit policy for implementing a sustainable urbanization strategy and its official striving for a “harmonious society” (Zhuoji, 2005) are in line with the above principles of good governance. Participation is considered the cornerstone of good governance. Participation can be either direct by the public or through legitimate intermediate institutions or representatives. The Aarhus Convention on access to information, public participation in decision making and access to justice in environmental matters (United Nations, 2000) states (art. 3, par. 6) that countries should meet these three crucial obligations through legal frameworks. This means that participation needs to be informed and organized (André et al., 2006).

This implies freedom of association and expression on the one hand and an organized civil society on the other hand. Fair legal frameworks that are enforced impartially and information freely available and directly accessible to those who will be affected by policy decisions and their enforcement (transparency) are additional requirements for participation and good governance. It also means that enough information is provided and that it is provided in easily understandable forms and media. (UNESCAP, 2005; Gramberger, 2001) Finally, accountability is a key requirement of good governance. In general an organization or institution is accountable to those who will be affected by its decisions or actions.

In China local urban and rural communities have recently developed a number of participatory and deliberative institutions like consultative meetings and public hearings that fit in the socialist tradition of political participation. (He, 2004) The country is gaining more experience with public participation, for instance by the public hearings in Beijing with respect to the Yanmingyuan Water Retaining Project, which were instigated by the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA). At the same time the increasing size and frequency of rural and urban protest and labour unrest nationwide points to a situation that calls state governance into serious question. (Chung, 2004) The Panel on Urban Population Dynamics (2004, p. 363) mentions five major challenges or dimensions on urban governance:

1. *capacity* (with a focus on urban services and service delivery);
2. *financial resources* (with emphasis on generation of local revenues);
3. *diversity* (in particular issues of inequality and fragmentation, often leading to violence and a failure to regulate social conflicts);
4. *security* (involving crime and violence, and approaches to the preservation of public order and the alleviation of violence); and
5. *authority* (with a focus on decentralization and distribution of powers, local jurisdictional configurations and political participation).

From discussions in the CCICED task force on governance it was found that the key issues in the Chinese case on public participation and community building for sustainable organization were the attitude and capacity of local government, the level of community organization, the legal framework and a number of critical process aspects like: transparency, openness and accountability (see Table I).

We will focus on the issues mentioned in Table I and reflect on the Chinese and international practice and experiences with public participation in policy, plan and programme. First we will sketch the international perspective and then discuss and assess the practice in China.
Participation in strategic policy issues

Public participation (what)
Participation is the process through which stakeholders influence and share control over priority setting, policy-making, resource allocations and access to public goods and services (World Bank Group, 2005). Participation in planning is widely considered to improve the quality and effectiveness of decision-making as it widens the knowledge base, stimulates creativity and creates social support for policies. (Pretty et al., 1995; Pelletier et al., 1999; Monnikhof and Edelenbos, 2001; Burby, 2003; Leeuwis, 2004) Participation is the involvement in a decision-making process, of individuals and groups that are either positively or negatively affected by a planned intervention (e.g. a project, a program, a plan, a policy) or are interested in it. (André et al., 2006). It acknowledges that the public has the right to be informed early and to be pro-actively involved in a meaningful way in proposals which may affect their lives and livelihoods.

Public participation (why)
It is widely believed that public participation contributes to better projects, better development and collaborative governance. However, traditional forms of (ex-post) public involvement like information and court appeal typical for so-called “decide-announce-defend” style policy making, have often proven inadequate, as they institutionalize hindrance power in legislative procedures and do not allow for (ex ante) constructive contributions to planning. In most Western countries more constructive and cooperative forms of planning, like consultation and active, early involvement are now supported and actively promoted, for instance by the EU among its member states (WFD, Art.14)[2]. Research has shown that these forms of participation can be advantageous for the speed and quality of implementation of planning decisions, but not without pitfalls (Davies, 2001; Klijn and Koppenjan, 2003; Enserink and Monnikhof, 2003; Pahl-Wostl, 2002) Especially for strategic planning; in discussions about plans, policies and programmes at a national level institutionalized and well-organized stakeholder groups are considered partners in the planning process and procedures for Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) have been institutionalized.

Public participation (when)
Environmental assessment is a “systematic process that consists of evaluating and documenting the possibilities, capacities and functions of resources and of natural systems in order to facilitate the planning of sustainable development” (Sadler, 1996,

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<th>Characteristics good governance</th>
<th>Key issues in China</th>
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<tr>
<td>Consensus-oriented</td>
<td>Attitude and capacity of (local) government</td>
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<td>Equity and inclusiveness</td>
<td>Level of community organization</td>
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<td>Effective and efficient</td>
<td>Quality decision-making process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participatory</td>
<td>Representation and level of socio-economic development</td>
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<td>Follows rule of law</td>
<td>Legal framework and incentives</td>
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<td>Transparency</td>
<td>Transparency, openness, accountability</td>
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Table 1. Characteristics of good governance and key issues in China
Andreé et al. (2004) expand this definition to natural and social system thus connecting it closer to accepted definitions of sustainability, which are based on ‘People’ along with Planet and Profit. Environmental assessment aims at incorporating the environment into the planning of the operations and the development of planned interventions. Strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is generally seen and promoted as a means to achieve sustainable development. (Thissen, 2000; Alshuwaikhat, 2005). SEA promotes full consideration and integration of environmental implications at the early planning stage of major strategic policies. (Kessler, 2000)

Public participation (how)
Public Participation Best Practices Principles are listed in many documents and websites[3]. From these an excerpt is made leading to the following list of core values for the practice of public participation:

- the public should have a say in decisions about actions that affect their lives or livelihoods, it has a right to be informed early and to be proactively involved in a meaningful way;
- participants should get all information they need to participate in a meaningful way to increase the interest and motivation to participate; including the promise that the public’s contribution will influence the decision;
- the public participation process should respect the historical, cultural, environmental, political and social backgrounds of the communities which are affected by a proposal, inclusive less represented groups like indigenous peoples, women, children, the elderly, and poor people; and
- the public participation process involves participants in defining how they participate and promotes equity between actual and future generations in a perspective of sustainability.

In respect to the governance principles previously identified, public participation should be:

- Initiated very early into the life-cycle of a planned intervention, and sustained during its entire life.
- Well planned and structured. All actors should know the aims, rules, organization, procedure and expected outcomes of the PP process undertaken.
- Tiered and optimized. Any PP program should take place at the most efficient level of decision-making, e.g. at the policy, plan, program or project level.
- Led by the neutral authority in its formal or traditional sense and follow rules known and accepted by all parties. PP needs to follow some rules of ethics, professional behavior or moral obligations.
- Focused on negotiable issues relevant to the decision making. Because consensus is not always feasible, PP needs to hear about values and interests of participants, and to focus on negotiable issues.

As we can read from the above and as is expressed well by Palerm (2000) public participation has been increasingly recognized as one of the most important assets of
environmental impact assessment. Different forms and levels of participation might be relevant for the different phases of these EA processes. In order to be effective public participation should be well organized and well managed.

**Environmental impact assessment in China**

The EIA Law of the People’s Republic of China has come into force since 1 September 2003, setting out the statutory requirements for EIA of plans and construction projects; and the legal liability in the EIA process. Before EIA was part of the Environment Protection Law of 1979. Within the latter framework local governments were empowered to adopt their own specific regulations for assessing projects. Its weakness being that it was an internal bureaucratic procedure and excluded almost any form of public participation in the process. From the mid-nineties political leaders and government officials at various levels recognized the weaknesses of the old EIA system and stressed the important role of public participation (Tang et al., 2005, pp. 8, 12) The new Law increased considerably the extent of public participation in EIA by requiring the disclosure of EIA information, allowing expression of views in public forums, and arranging for the early involvement of interested parties.

Under the Ordinance, environmental assessments have to be conducted for land-use planning, regional planning and certain sectoral plans such as industry, agriculture, energy and transport during their planning stages. Those projects without environmental assessments could no longer obtain authorities’ approval. For projects with significant potential environmental impacts, public comments have to be consolidated with public hearings before submitting environmental assessment reports to the relevant authorities for approval. In practice, however, comprehensive application has not yet occurred and only a limited number of case studies are available. Moreover public participation is still rather limited. (Che et al., 2002)

Recently, in December 2004, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) of People’s Republic held its First International Forum on EIA in Bo’Ao, Hainan to promote the implementation of the new EIA Law in China[4].

**Community participation**

As Arnstein (1969, p. 216) stated in her famous article on citizen participation: “There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process.” In other words: meaningful participation is not a matter of course, but of deliberate intention. With society getting more complex, more open to the world outside, by people getting better educated and able to express their ideas, meaningful participation has become a requirement for successful implementation of government policies and at the same time a real issue for those in power. Arnstein devised an eight rungs ladder for levels of participation ranging from manipulation through consultation to citizen in control. She clearly juxtaposes powerless citizens with the powerful. A simplified and modernized version of his ladder can be found in Figure 2 (left side). From this figure it can be read that information is the basis of any form of participation. Meaningful participation implies a real say for the stakeholders involved in the process; consultation where stakeholders are allowed to express their concerns, issues and ideas and where the initiator of plan, programme or policy takes their remarks seriously is the mildest form of real participation. Even in Europe and the United States real co-production and
co-decision is scarce; co-production being the almost exclusive domain of technicians and specialists; co-decision claimed by professional politicians. (Bayne, 1995; Enserink and Monnikhof, 2003)

Plummer and Taylor (2004, p. 42) argue that in China the rhetoric of participation has become a problem in recent years and for that reason Arnstein’s ladder needs a reinterpretation for the Chinese context going from notification through to initiative. Like information in the left column, notification and attendance cannot be considered real forms of participation; they are prerequisites for meaningful participation; the latter only starts when a community is given the opportunity to express their views. This form of participation can be interpreted as confirmation, when project officials seek community affirmation of their own views as is reported by Chen et al. (2004). This practice seems to fit in the traditional Chinese socialist culture of acquiescence.

Currently discussing ideas in their formative stage is experimented with throughout China, both in urban areas as is illustrated by the public hearings in Beijing with respect to the Yuanmingyuan Water Retaining Project, as in rural areas as described by Ren et al. (2004). In the Yuanmingyuan project local stakeholders are informed and invited to express their concerns with respect to works that had been undertaken to diminish the water losses form the Old Summer Palaces Lake. In this case civil protests forced the authorities to hold the works and to organize public hearings on the environmental impacts of putting an impermeable membrane on the bottom of the lake (see Plates 1 and 2[5]).

As indicated participation can be either direct by the public or through legitimate intermediate institutions or representatives. The latter is referred to as stakeholder participation; stakeholders being “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Stakeholders are seen as social entities or groups who have the power to affect the organization’s future (Eden and Ackerman, 1998). Stakeholder analysis therefore is crucial to find out who to involve as is for instance discussed in Grimble and Chan (1995) and Bryson (2004).

Important stakeholders in urban planning in China are community organizations and neighbourhood committees (Yu and Chen, 2004) as well as the rapidly growing
number of so-called “civic associations” like trade unions, consumer associations, business and professional associations, leisure groups and foundations (Wang and He, 2004), which are generally seen as major factors influencing community participation. Their power is growing as claimed by Lei (2001): programs run by well-established, trusted community groups were more successful than most government initiated and sponsored programs. We will come back to this issue in the recommendations when we discuss the attitude of government with respect to participation. This is an important issue, as according to Xu (2004) central and local governments, led primarily by the Chinese Communist Party, seem to be concerned about participation in community programs as they fear that participation in programs with a political intention could empower local communities and challenge their fundamental authority. This objection shows a remarkable resemblance with the objections of many Western politicians
claiming the primacy of politics over contentious planning issues rather than affirming the power and interests of consulted and/or involved stakeholders.

**Policy recommendations**

Within the policy mix needed to enhance public participation in sustainable urban planning in China the main recommendation is enhanced implementation of the EIA law and its requirements for public participation and extending this law to policies, plans and programmes. The concrete policy measure contributing directly to this main objective is the institutionalization of an independent regulatory authority.

Public participation in environmental assessment is a guarantee for social and environmental sustainability in urban planning as it focuses attention to stakeholder and public interests. Creating the institutional conditions ensures more effective use of existing legal provisions by introducing checks and balances for policy making and a provision to give a voice to community based organizations, non-governmental organizations, effected parties and individuals. The analysis showed a lack of accountability with regard to the implementation of the existing EIA law. Therefore this regulatory authority should be independent from agencies involved in planning and project development. Examples of independent authorities can be found worldwide like in Canada, South Africa, Hong Kong and the Netherlands. The institutional conditions to be created should provide at least an independent check on the quality of the reports and give provisions for objection and appeal by effected parties.

Enhanced implementation of EIA Law includes defining a set of criteria for policies, plans and programmes that require SEA including formalized public and/or stakeholder involvement. SEA does not just mitigate negative environmental impacts of projects (like EIA) but aims to integrate and facilitates policy formulation. Using SEA procedures will put sustainability and environmental impacts of plans and policies on the political agenda. So will enhanced implementation and execution of EIA law, for projects that require Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedures. Consequently all large scale projects will be scrutinized and alternatives considered. Mitigation and compensation of environmental effects will get due attention.

A public-participation-friendly atmosphere within government is one of the prerequisites for successful public participation. There are, however, institutional barriers that prevent the development of public participation practices. With regard to government organizations and officials there are limiting factors such as a lack of transparency and accountability, the attitude of governmental officials, the existing top-down planning tradition, lack of experience, methods and expertise, absence of legal provisions and lack of safeguards and trust. In order to develop public participation practices the following measures should be considered to fulfill the basic requirements for public participation practices:

- Formulate legal requirements for informing and involving stakeholders and general public in urban planning.
- Formulate and implement procedures for public involvement that specify rules to be followed, that are known and accepted by all parties.
• Define a code of conduct for government officials with requirements on how to conduct mandatory information, documentation and public consultation when putting up policies, plans, programmes and projects for public participation. The framework should protect stakeholders and public from abuse or retaliation by government.

• Establish safeguards for participants and stakeholders to assure freedom of expression and respect of their core values. These may include provisions for legal protection, the right to express objections, the right of appeal and arbitration by an independent authority.

• Invest in training and courses on public participation and facilitation of group meetings for public servants and policy makers.

• Establish a training center for community building and active involvement in local and regional planning, that could serve both local and regional authorities and public servants and provide training to local and regional non-governmental/societal stakeholder organizations and the general public to allow for meaningful participation in planning processes and EIA and SEA procedures.

Participation is thought to generate ownership and agency, which contribute to social sustainability, community building and harmonious society. Experiments with various forms of public and stakeholder participation will lead to social learning and better understanding of the dynamics of public participation processes. Successful experiments may lead to a change in the current practice of relative non-participation. Local and regional stakeholders and the public will be better informed on plans, programmes and policies as well as on projects. Better (sustainable) decisions can sprout from public consultation as decisions will be based on better (local) information and social acceptance of the project outcome. City layout, infrastructures, amenities and services (to some extent) can take into account the wishes of the population. It will make people happier; social cohesion (community building) will grow. Ideally, people will feel more responsible for the project, the environmental quality, and will be engaged and active in environmental monitoring and follow-up.

Conclusions
As a reaction to numerous protests by farmers and land-owners against expropriation, absence of compensation and preferential treatment of project developers by local politicians, China’s central government is cautiously exploring the relation between governance and public participation. Meaningful public participation will only come about when there is trust and equity; therefore public participation should be institutionalized, and authorities should show to be committed: to be responsive and accountable. First experiments with public hearings are being organized, especially in the field of environmental impact assessment. Although environmental legislation is in place, the institutional setting, the political culture and current incentive structure inhibit fast adoption of sustainable policies and impinges on the quality of public participation in environmental policy making. Transparency and accountability in public policy processes can be improved by institutionalizing EIA law, involvement of
experts and training and education of stakeholders, and by establishing an independent authority that guards the quality of the public participation process.

Urbanization in China intrudes on the natural system and leads to shortages in natural resources, especially fresh water. For more sustainable urbanization the stakes and perceptions of the stakeholders should be taken into account. Only then socially supported sustainable solutions can come about and social support for a sustainable urbanization policy can grow.

Notes


2. See: http://forum.europa.eu.int/Public/irc/env/wfd/home – all guidance documents on the implementation of the Water Framework Directive, including the guidance on public participation, and other information on the common implementation strategy.


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**Further reading**


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