# FACILITATING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION: AN EXPERIMENTAL COURSE FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION ADVISORS

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**ABSTRACT**

One of the issues facing those interested in implementing processes of citizen participation in decision-making is who will be able to conduct the implementation and what are the qualifications necessary for this. The issue arose recently in Israel because of the present climate, which ostensibly is favorable towards citizen participation. However, the reality in many cases is that while politicians, officials and professionals understand that it is politically correct to say that they are in favor of participation, they immediately continue the sentence with the word 'but' and all sorts of qualifications. Our concern was that in this climate, many minimal and non-professional attempts would be made at involving people, that these attempts would not succeed, and that as a result the response would be that citizen participation cannot work. In order to address this problem we initiated a course for citizen participation advisors that had a number of unique aspects. The focus of the course was participation in social and physical planning decision-making processes. The course was a joint project of the Technion Centre for Urban and Regional Studies and the Community Work Department of the Ministry of Welfare. Participants in the course were professional community social workers working for the Ministry of Welfare, which vetted them and subsidized their participation, and planning professionals from municipal and public agencies and from private planning firms. The content of the course included background lectures and exercises on each of the two professional areas, designed to provide a common base and to facilitate communication between the two groups, and then sessions on core and advanced knowledge and skills in citizen participation. The course met once a week for 16 weeks, 4 hours at a time, and over two years about 60 people participated. Our paper presents the rationale for this course, its structure, the lessons learned from its implementation and the advantages and disadvantages

encountered. We will also describe the direct impact of the course through actions taken by some of the graduates after the completion of the course.

## INTRODUCTION

*"I don't need to involve the public. I know what's good for them"*

*"They didn't like the Eiffel Tower at first either"*

*"Of course I'm in favor of public participation…BUT… the public isn't ready, or they don't understand, or it takes too long, or it costs too much"*

*"Who are you to claim that you represent the public?"*

*"Why aren't there more people here?"*

*"We've been working on this plan for you for 3 years, and now when it's ready you're against it!!"*

*"You're only interested in your own backyard and your own selfish interests, while I'm concerned with the larger picture and the common good."*

The above are quotes of statements made by elected officials and professionals with regard to the principle of public participation in decision-making. They illustrate some of the problems encountered by those who are interested in facilitating or promoting the principles of public participation, whether they are professionals or elected politicians, or part of the public itself.

Participation relates to people taking part in public decision-making processes or private initiatives with public implications.[1] The recent movement in planning and design towards more participatory and empowering decision-making processes is a significant step in the direction of accommodating the needs and preferences of different groups of people. Introducing disempowered individuals and groups into the decision-making process forces politicians, planners and architects to consider the micro-level and to meet the people, see their faces, and hear their voices. It can create a change in the power relations within the power structure.

**Participation**, in the sense that we are using the term here[2] relates to people taking part in public decision-making processes or private initiatives with public implications, not those

[1] The authors of this paper come from different backgrounds and our approach to the issue of participation reflects this combination. Churchman is an environmental psychologist working within a school of architecture and town planning. Sadan is a community practitioner working within a school of social work and social welfare.

[2] Situations where individuals (or groups) who are not elected or appointed governmental officials and are not professionals working for such officials, voluntarily take part in decision-making processes in order to influence these processes, change them, or improve them.

within an organization or a group of people. Arguments over what should or should not be considered participation illustrate both the ambiguity and the political nature of the concept. It is clearly a value-laden concept, which for some represents the very essence of democracy, a basic human right, and an ethical good in and of itself. Others value it as a pragmatic means to various ends, some instrumental and some strategic.

The concept of public participation appears in the writings of philosophers, theoreticians and practitioners in the fields of political science, sociology, planning, architecture, landscape architecture, community psychology, community social work, and environmental psychology. Since one of the basic tenets of environmental psychology is the importance of identifying the context of a phenomenon for understanding it, we will devote the next few paragraphs to identifying the historical, political, intellectual/theoretical, practical/professional, cultural and psychological context of public participation.

A democratic system is the basic necessity for the right and possibility of participation, because it requires inclusiveness, transparency and accountability on the part of those in positions of power. Participation is a multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary project that, in adopting it, we in Israel have been mainly influenced by theoreticians in political science, community practice and planning (Churchman & Sadan, 2003). The present discourse surrounding participation is rooted in the theories of Habermas and Giddens, which have been further developed in the planning context by Healey (1992) and Friedmann (1997), (See also Horelli, 2002). In the community practice context we have basic models of practice in which participation is a concomitant part (Rothman, 1996; Weil and Gamble, 2005; Popple, 1996). Freire too has had an important influence on our thinking in this area (See also Ledwith, 2005).

Recently, Putnam's theory of social capital (2000) has found its way into the discussion of the role of the civil society and of participation in present-day democracies. Taylor (2003) and Couto (1999) have critiqued this construct and reshaped it, so we have been able to use it in the context of disempowered communities without the reservations we had about it when we first encountered it.

We have also used the body of knowledge about participation within community psychology, both theoretical and empirical (Wandersman & Florin, 2000). Feminist ideas have been

another important theoretical influence. They are the ones who have spoken of the need for "integrated" participation, not only in the community but also in the workplace. This is a very important field that needs our attention, due to the way women and men are voicelessly abused in the workplaces of the global economy regardless of class and education (see the recent work of Dominelli (2006) and Bookman (2004)). As a result of all of these developments, there is also a growing interest in participatory research and participatory evaluation (see among many others Braydon-Miller & Tolman, 1997; Wolff, 2003).

On the other hand there is a considerable body of practice that has not been formally published, but is making its impact on the field. We know of professionals and activists concerned about the participation in decision making of their constituencies within the fields of community practice, social work, architecture, planning and environment-behavior studies, including, of course, environmental psychologists. Some of these get their inspiration from United Nation agencies and documents – The Convention on the Rights of the Child, Agenda 21, Habitat 2, and the Healthy Cities Program which strongly recommend and sometimes require involvement of the public. In the European Union, the Aarhus Convention, for example, emphasizes public participation in decision-making as a necessary component of governmental activity in the area of environmental policy.

The development over time in the approach to participation can be seen in the changes that have occurred in the language used to discuss the ideological bases for it – from democracy, participatory democracy and power, to justice- distributional and procedural, sustainability[3], empowerment[4], social capital, and participatory governance. These changes in language reflect changes both in the theoretical underpinnings of the concept and in the degree to which it is embedded within public decision-making processes. These reflect the change from the 1960's 'modern' and positivistic view of the professional and the needs based participation process, to our 'postmodern' times of reflective practitioners and the Foucaudian thinking that

[3] **Sustainability** – The goal for development that recognizes the interwoven nature of economic, social and ecological-environmental factors, and strives for inter-group and intergenerational equity.

[4] **Empowerment** - The process by which people achieve more control (perceived and actual) over their lives, destiny and environment. It is the process of overcoming powerlessness and its outcomes: despair, marginality and estrangement. The results of a process of empowerment can be detected in the individuals who take part in the process, and in the community that is enhanced or built in the process.

knowledge is not where (and what) it was traditionally believed to be (Sandercock, 2003), and that power has either to be shared, or at least viewed with suspicion.

In many countries and cities resident involvement now appears in the language of master plans as a basic requirement: in Australia, virtually all of Europe but particularly Britain and The Netherlands, Canada, the USA, Israel and probably others. In these and other cities and countries (e.g. Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, India, South Africa), there are examples of participatory processes of greater or lesser scope. Participatory processes have been conducted with adults and with children, with men and women, with poor people and with middle class people, with those with and those without formal education. Unfortunately, our knowledge is limited to those processes that have been documented and published in articles in English language professional books or journals.

Furthermore, 'In the beginning' there was involvement, and even though the term used might have been participation, most of the discourse in the planning and architecture fields was about the activities of the professionals and how they should/could involve others. While once the discourse of public participation was dominated by professionals who were "doing it" and the voice of the participants was never heard, there is much more recognition now that as a professional, you are not responsible for the participation, but rather for effectively involving people in processes that you have until now controlled on your own. Thus, today, there is growing awareness that the participants, their motivation and their concerns, should be more in focus.

To use an image suggested by Kidder and Fine (1987), the lens used in planning is to a large extent a zooming-out one, while that used in environmental psychology is a zooming-in one. Public participation was usually discussed through the zoom-out lens, and this paper zooms in on it. The movement in planning and design towards more participatory and empowering decision-making processes is a significant step in the direction of accommodating the needs and preferences of different groups of people.

On a very basic level, many of the assumptions of environmental psychology (see Churchman, 2002) that are shared to some extent with community social work, such as: a) that the physical environment has implications for people's lives; b) that people are different and have different needs and therefore, that one cannot specify, identify, or posit one universal model of

the person-environment relationship; c) that people are active and not passive: they interpret, evaluate, and use their environment in ways that they wish to, or are able to; d) that freedom of choice is an important element in people's behavior; e) that aggregates (or groups) can be identified who have some needs and characteristics in common, for example, by age, gender, health status, socio-economic status, cultural background, etc. and f) that the purpose of the environment is to afford opportunities for achieving each individual's own subjective definition of quality of life, lead to the conclusion that participation is the best way to achieve the desired 'fit' between the environment and its users.

## THE COURSE – WHY, FOR WHOM, WHAT AND HOW

### WHY

Our analysis of the present situation in Israel led us to identify one of the weak links in the attempt to further the acceptance and implementation of participatory processes. Many politicians and professionals now feel it necessary to adopt the politically correct stance that 'they are of course in favor of public participation'. However, they immediately add, either explicitly or implicitly, a large 'but'…. reflecting an attitude of hesitation, reservation and even objection. In order to justify their position, they have begun to include some form of involvement in their planning activities. However, there is a serious lack of professionals with knowledge of the multi-faceted and complex nature of participatory processes. We were concerned that processes conducted hastily and too simplistically would not give the hoped-for results and would serve as proof to the skeptics that participation is impossible, unnecessary and useless.

### FOR WHOM

Finding a partner in the director of the Department of Community Work in the Ministry of Welfare, we developed a course that would attempt to fill this need. Convinced that people with different backgrounds could serve as advisors, the course was advertised to two groups of professionals – planners of different orientations and community social workers. The Ministry of Welfare subsidized the participation of their workers (mainly, community workers with social work degrees working for the local authorities in neighborhoods and towns), choosing them from the longer list of applicants that responded to the announcement of the course. The planners came individually from many different backgrounds – urban and regional planning, architecture, landscape architecture, transportation planning, environmental psychology,

organizational consultation and community activism. They were from the public and private sectors, from all parts of the country, and from all the religious groups in Israel – Jewish, Moslem, Christian and Druze. There were 34 in the first course and 21 in the second one.

**WHAT**

The course consisted of 4 modules:

1. Introductions to the two background fields – planning and community organization. These were the people who would need to work together and at present they do not necessarily even know of the others existence. Thus it was deemed critical that they understand the basic elements of these two professions.
2. Theories, approaches and methods of participation
3. Case studies of participatory processes presented by those who had conducted them.
4. Experiential exercises designed to sensitize the participants to the need for cultural sensitivity, for enabling real communication between all the stakeholders and recognition of the differences in power between the groups and the individuals.
5. A bibliography of resource material was provided for the participants, not as required reading, but rather as source material that they could use at their discretion, either during the course or after it. As much of the material as was possible was made available to them in a branch library of the Ministry of Welfare.

The underlying theoretical structure for the course was taken from the fields of environmental psychology and community practice. The relevant basic tenets were: 1) the definition of environment as an all-encompassing term, including all aspects of the world - the physical, ecological, social, economic, cultural, political, institutional, technological, and individual; 2) the emphasis on context and on the relationship between socio-physical aspects of the environment and human behavior and attitudes; 3) the knowledge that physical as well as social conditions can be acted upon, rather than accepted fatalistically as fixed and unchangeable; 4) the recognition of the differences in behavior and attitudes between different groups of people and the importance of this for the basic philosophy of participation; 5) the axiom that there is no one best solution to a design or planning problem – there are always alternatives; 6) that expert decisions are not necessarily better than lay decisions; 7) that a design or planning task can be made transparent. We believe in the principle that the environment works better if it is designed and planned in such a way that it fits the needs of the people affected by its changes. 8) These people should be actively involved in the creation

and management of their environment. 9) Our role is to focus the spotlight on the people themselves – on participation rather than involvement, on the people and their lives, rather than on abstract concepts.

**HOW**

The course was conducted once a week for 4 hours at a time for 16 weeks, a total of 64 hours. The teaching methods used were lectures, exercises in class, discussions and a final exercise in which they were offered the choice between a) analyzing and evaluating a process that they had been involved in and suggesting changes that they would now make in the process; b) proposing a detailed strategy for involvement in a particular place and for a particular topic.

The discussions were very lively, involving and enjoyable. Fortuitously, in each group there was one very verbal participant who was a skeptic. She enlivened and enriched the discussions, and challenged the basic and perhaps not well-thought out acceptance by the others of the value and legitimacy of participation. All of us felt that the heterogeneity of the group was very enriching and contributed significantly to the success of the course.

**ISSUES BEDEVILLING PARTICIPATION THAT WERE ADDRESSED IN THE COURSE**

In this section we address various issues that reflect the complexity of the participatory process; the discussion of which will also illustrate their interdependence. These were issues that constantly arose and that we grappled with in our discussions.

**A. Why Involve Others and Why Participate Yourself?**

If participation is seen as an end in itself, as a basic value, then perhaps the question of what it is good for is unnecessary. However, if one sees it only or also, as a means to other ends, then major questions arise as to whether it indeed can or does achieve these ends. Related to this question is the distinction between the process of involvement and/or participation and between the products or results of this process (Sadan & Churchman, 1997). For example, one could look at how many people participated, or who they were. One could look at whether participants improved their skills and abilities, whether there was individual or community empowerment, or whether there was a change in the level of trust between the involvers and the participants. Then one could look at the product of the decision-making process- is it a 'better' one (by whose criteria?), did it lead to an improvement in the quality of the

environment, and so forth. There are a number of issues pertinent to this distinction: Which is more important - process or product? For whom - involvers or participants? Under what circumstances? How does one measure and evaluate the elements of the process or the results (quantitatively or qualitatively; by effectiveness or efficiency, subjectively or 'objectively'), and how does one determine that particular results are directly related to the process?

Another question which arises is whether the adherents of participation are too ambitious or unrealistic in their expectations and goals. Are their assumptions or theories or hypotheses ones that can be achieved? Just as we have argued that architects and planners should not make deterministic statements that promise specific results from their plans, it may not be appropriate to promise too much from a participatory process and raise expectations that it may not be possible to achieve. When this happens, it may doom the project of participation to disappointment and rejection, both for the participants and the involvers. It would seem that what is needed is a) a careful analysis of what is possible to achieve, under what circumstances, b) a serious effort at implementing the process in a manner that has the potential for achieving those results, and c) research and evaluation that will enable us to learn what works and what does not. On the other hand, the participants have to understand and accept the fact that they may not be able to achieve all that they wish to, that compromise may be necessary, and that consideration for the views and needs of others is an essential part of the process.

If we focus our lens on the participants themselves, we can ask whether it is enough if the results are mainly on the psychological level, which is also the hardest level to demonstrate. If results happen on the behavioral level, such as attendance at meetings, how do we know that there are also results, such as personal empowerment, on the psychological level? In order to enable us to be sure that the claims for the results of participation are valid, we have to develop tools for evaluation that will include indicators and 'signs' of the psychological, educational and environmental impacts/outputs of participation.

**B. Why is Involving Others so Difficult?**

Many of those who discuss participation or practice involvement are unaware of the complexity of the concept and of the variety of ways in which it can be implemented. A one-dimensional approach to involvement, such as public hearings as the sole medium, ignores the various possible goals for involvement and participation and the differences among the

participants themselves. We have already noted that some see participation as an end in itself, while others see it as a means toward other ends. Some of these other goals focus on the participants and on the manner in which through participation they can achieve personal and group change. Other goals focus on the decision-making process and the manner in which participation can change this process and its results. Different professions focus on different goals, although it is important that all are cognizant of all of them. For example, environmental psychologists and architects and planners may focus mainly on the goal of achieving environments that better fit the needs and preferences of the various users; while community psychologists and community workers may focus on the manner in which the participatory process leads to more community cohesiveness, empowerment, or personal skills. However, if the former ignore the fact that participants have personal and group motivations that may drive their willingness to participate, and the latter ignore the fact that participants are also concerned with tangible results, then each may fail to achieve their goals. Until now, those working in this area have not really examined systematically whether individual goals are realized - for one they're too busy doing participation to do this. For another, one faces the dilemma of how one can 'prove' that there is a cause and effect relationship. In order to gain the trust of the people, one must be honest about the constraints within which the process will be operating, and be careful not to raise expectations beyond what is likely to be possible.

Part of the problem stems from a lack of understanding of the complexity of participatory processes - that there is no one way appropriate for every context/situation. Furthermore, many lack knowledge as to how to work with people; it is perceived as something easy that anyone can do. If one 'really' wishes to involve people, one must make sure that one has the necessary skills of listening, knowing how to talk to lay people, honesty, perseverance, and understanding of their needs and interests. It must be a process that people will be able to participate in and will want to, and that allows them to make decisions on questions that are meaningful to them. One must demystify the professional process, avoid jargon, and exemplify the essence of better communication, namely simplicity, clarity and adaptability.

**C. Who Is The Public?**

The issue of how to define the public concerns the involvers, who wish to have some assurance that those participating 'represent' the public at large. Considering the fact that every 'public' contains many different groups, with diverse and sometimes conflicting

interests, this is not a trivial demand. It raises the issue of the possible conflict between what is called the common good versus the self-interest of individuals or groups. There are a number of answers to these questions. One is that there is no objectively defined common good – it is always a value judgment as to which interests to prefer over others. Second - self-interest is not necessarily selfish-interest. Recognizing self-interest can be seen as helping to advance distributive justice. The more groups and interests participate in the deliberations, the more differences can be clarified and conflicts addressed. Third, those who participate can be viewed as informal representatives of those who do not attend, particularly if serious efforts have been made to inform all those relevant to the topic of the possibilities for participation.

While the participants themselves may not be particularly concerned about this issue of representativeness, it does affect the degree of legitimacy of their claim to attention and their ability to influence the process. Some address the issue in quantitative terms: how many attend a particular event or process; others in more qualitative terms: how varied or how serious are those who participate. (On this issue see also Taylor's (2003) discussion about reconciling leadership, participation and representation).

In a situation where there are professionals or decision-makers who initiate the participatory process, it is incumbent upon them to make sure that there are no initial stumbling blocks to the participation of as many people as possible – things such as meetings at inconvenient times, in inconvenient places, notices that people cannot read or understand and so forth. In some situations, it requires preparatory work within the neighborhood or surroundings, so as to raise the awareness and interest of people in the problems being addressed. The process itself must be a welcoming one that speaks to people in ways that they understand, that does not condescend or mislead, and that enables the empowerment of the participants. They must be provided with the information relevant to the questions being addressed, both those considered by the involvers to be relevant and those considered so by the participants.

On the other hand, those who are to be affected by the decisions taken must be willing to be part of the process, to understand that it is not only their right, but also their responsibility to take on the role of participant. It is to their advantage to do so, in terms of the personal and social capital that they can accrue, and in terms of the manner in which they can work towards changing both the system and its decisions to better reflect their needs. However, such participation requires skills that not everyone has, and it may be necessary to help them

acquire those skills and through this enhance their self-confidence and self-efficacy. Furthermore, it must be accepted that there are those within the public who are not interested in the topics or in the process, and that too is their right; some have such serious problems of various types that they have no time or energy to devote to other interests.

**D. Whose Values Are Primary?**

Very often in participatory processes there is a conflict between the values of the professionals and the decision-makers and between those of the public. The former, particularly in the environmental quality area where some of the issues seem to be more clear-cut, feel that they cannot leave the decisions up to the 'ignorant' public. These environmental issues are ones in which there is an agenda that they want to push, where there are ostensibly more objective kinds of issues to deal with, and the professionals are convinced that they have the answers. The fact that at present people are likely to mistrust the statements and pronouncements of politicians and professionals makes their task much more difficult. One way of gaining, or re-gaining, trust is to conduct a sincere participatory process.

However, there is a general value that should be recognized – one that agrees to disagree, and that understands that the dialogue itself is important. The involvement/participation process should acknowledge the conflicts between various groups, and instead of denying them and deciding that the powerful will have their way each time, encourage the democratic participation of others involved in the decision making process and enable the expression of the differences of opinion that exist in the social arena. This is the whole purpose of what Couto (1999) calls – 'making democracy work better'. Rather than a question of whose values are primary, it is a question of representing the diversity of values involved in the issue. Sandercock (2003) calls this working for a society in which differences can flourish based on principles of social justice, of multiple citizenships, of heterogeneous publics, of coalitions building bridges across differences.

**E. How Does One Involve Others?**

Happily, at present there are a number of excellent sources that present many different techniques for involving the public, some more detailed than others but all extremely valuable for illustrating the variety of techniques available and thus expanding the way in which participation is thought of. These include but are not limited to: (in alphabetical order) Chambers, Driskell, Horelli, IAP2 Public Participation Toolbox, Sanoff, Sarkissian et al, and

Wates. Many of these publications are useful not only in presenting the techniques, but also in spelling out the pitfalls to avoid in involvement processes. In addition, there is growing use of GIS and internet techniques, although limitations on their use with groups who may not have access to computers or the internet must be taken into account; just as the use of plans or models raises questions as to whether or not non-professionals understand them.

**EVALUATION OF THE COURSE**

How does one evaluate the success (or failure) of such an experimental course? On one level there is the question of whether or not the participants were satisfied with the course and felt they had increased and expanded their understanding and knowledge, both theoretical and practical. An evaluation of the course was conducted using a questionnaire prepared and administered in the middle and the end of the course by an outside agency. This revealed a high level of satisfaction among all of the participants, although there was dissatisfaction with some of the teachers and some degree of frustration expressed by some whose expectations were not fully met.

Another criterion for evaluating the course is the degree to which the participants made use of what they had learned and changed the way that they worked with the community, or initiated participatory processes. Some of the participants started this process even while the course was in progress. Others did so afterwards. We do not have a full account in this regard, although some of the participants did tell us of the ways in which they applied what they had learned and the processes that they experienced. For example, the transportation planner initiated a participatory process in the preparation of a master plan for public transportation in a Bedouin town – a first both in terms of the subject matter and the population group. Another participant became a community activist in her town and organized her neighbors to object to plans for the routing of the railway line near their homes. (As a result she was fired from her job in the municipality). One of the landscape architects admitted that she previously had never heard of the field of community practice, and after the course initiated in her kibbutz a process of social planning with a group of community workers and members that began with an open space event and continued with committees for a full year. These reports were very encouraging.

Unfortunately, due to budgetary cuts we have been unable to continue the course. However, we feel that it was a positive experience for those of us who were part of it, and that it has made a difference, even if it is one that we cannot measure.

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