

Public participation process in urban planning: Evaluation approaches of fairness and effectiveness criteria of planning advisory committees by Kamal Uddin and Bhuiyan Monwar Alam

New York, Routledge, 2022

Athena Nicole Last

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BOOK REVIEW

Public participation process in urban planning: Evaluation approaches of fairness and effectiveness criteria of planning advisory committees, by Kamal Uddin and Bhuiyan Monwar Alam, New York, Routledge, 2022

There is ample literature investigating various forms of public participation in urban planning and aiming to find a type that offers the most effective and fair process. Some of the literature finds Citizen Advisory Committees (CACs), boards composed mostly of experts, to be a unique form of public participation that offers greater inclusion compared to other models, such as public hearings, workshops, and surveys/polls. In *Public Participation Process in Urban Planning*, Kamal Uddin and Bhuiyan Monwar Alam add to the literature on CACs by focusing on Policy Advisory Committees (PACs), which are a less widely discussed option. PACs differ from CACs in that these groups consist of nonprofessionals as well. Uddin and Alam have masterfully crafted a “theoretical framework for evaluating public participation in urban planning” (p. 37) and applied the conceptual model to evaluate the propensity of PACs to achieve fairness and effectiveness in public participation.

In the 1990s, the Australian government employed PACs (aka, Local Area Planning Advisory Committees [LAPCs]) as a result of social movements organizing for greater participation and representation in urban planning decisions. LAPCs are task-level advisory committees composed of various stakeholders, including nonprofessionals, who participate in the decision-making process of urban (re)development. These stakeholders include lay citizens, community leaders, business leaders, developers, government officials, planning experts, and other relevant actors. Uddin and Alam carefully selected six LAPCs in Canberra, part of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), as a single case study to evaluate public participation of PACs. The authors selected Canberra first due to the uniqueness of its PACs compared to other PAC versions in Australia. A few committee members are elected and appointed by lay citizens and community organizations, something that is not present in other PACs. Second, Canberra’s primary planning committee has six subcommittees, which means these committees can be compared to establish credibility in one single case study.

Uddin and Alam blended theoretical frameworks for evaluating public participation in the planning process offered by several authors to create their own conceptual model to determine if the process is fair and effective. The model consists of a list of 10 criteria to evaluate the public participation process, five of which are used to determine fairness and the other five to research effectiveness. The evaluation criteria are gathered from the perspectives of committee participants. This includes whether they were satisfied with the level of involvement in the process, access to information to make informed decisions, representation, influence over the direction of the process and decisions, communication and trust among committee members, and the roles and objective of the committee and its members. The authors explain each criterion in-depth and use the same format to assess the participation process of the PACs in Canberra.

The strength of this book derives in part from the authors’ use of a narrative approach to present the findings. Uddin and Alam provide rich background and experiences, sharing perspectives, often excerpts of interviews, from various types of stakeholders. This collage of perceptions informs the authors’ analysis and creates a well-rounded understanding of the process, ensuring that all viewpoints are accounted for.

The authors conclude that the PAC process was a good platform for expressing the community’s concerns but limited in terms of actionable input. The process did not satisfy the criterion of fairness because there was inadequate opportunity to be involved in the process, lack of representation, and insufficient feedback and responsiveness. Committee members said the process was unfair because (1) committees were not involved in the early stages of the plans, (2) only select groups and community members were a part of the PACs, and (3) the community had limited power in determining the

direction of the process and the outcome of the project (e.g., setting the agenda and minute-taking). For instance, there was no monitoring system to assess whether the planning agencies took the PACs' advice into consideration.

Uddin and Alam found the PAC to be largely ineffective because it did not promote learning, relationships were adversarial, members lacked good communication, and there was confusion as to the role and objective of the PAC and its members. The PAC was broken up into two factions, one consisting of residents and community groups and the second comprising business and government leaders. These groups differed in their opinions of the role of the PACs. Residents and community groups wanted greater authority over the decision-making process, whereas business and government leaders wanted committees to serve in an advisory role. Residents and community groups found that the business and government leaders failed to understand the process of public participation; alternatively, business and government leaders asserted that the community groups and residents lacked knowledge about the urban planning process. These views of one another created additional conflict between the groups and added to their mutual lack of respect and distrust.


Based on the findings from the Canberra case study, the authors produced a list of categories and questions practitioners can use to analyze the process of other planning advisory committees. They shared barriers to achieving fair and effective public participation, offering recommendations to overcome these challenges. Some of the challenges include fostering a bottom-up decision-making process, and ensuring the transparency and accountability of the PAC.

This study is broadly relevant to the United States because of its history of social injustice and rich legacy of community organizing to participate in and benefit from urban planning decisions. These social movements have led to the government implementing programs and policies intended to include citizens in the decision-making process, but they often fall short.

The authors' approach is meant to be used by practitioners, including in the United States, to evaluate public participation in existing planning committees and as a template to create innovative models giving citizens more control over the urban planning process, in contrast to top-down decision-making. This book is useful for professionals and students in urban planning who are seeking to more fully grasp diverse forms of public participation and the criteria needed to achieve a fair, representative, inclusionary, and effective process. Lastly, it serves as an exemplar of qualitative research for multi-disciplinary students who are studying community and economic development, public participation, and public policy.

One of the drawbacks of the book is that the authors focus solely on the process and fail to address the outcomes of the projects on which the PACs consulted. Although this is the authors' intent—and, presumably, having a fair and effective operational process will most likely lead to more equitable outcomes—I am left wanting to learn more about the results of the development projects. I encourage future researchers to examine if the projects attained both procedural (i.e., process-based) and distributive (i.e., outcome-based) justice, particularly from the community's point of view. It is crucial to include the wider public's opinions of the process and outcomes of development projects to have a well-rounded understanding of the fairness and effectiveness of the process.

The book is exceptionally clear and detailed, and the authors use a variety of visuals, such as diagrams and tables, to provide further context and strengthen the readers' understanding of the content. There is some repetition, but this overlap is done constructively to reinforce the main themes and findings. I encourage practitioners and academics alike to read this book. I predict that Uddin and Alam's theoretical framework for evaluating public participation will become highly influential in future research on citizen participation.

Athena Nicole Last
Syracuse University
 alast@syr.edu

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