



## Public participation in infrastructure and construction projects in China: From an EIA-based to a whole-cycle process

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### A B S T R A C T

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Many governments world-wide are increasingly encouraging the involvement of interested individuals, groups and organisations in their public infrastructure and construction (PIC) projects as a means of improving the openness, transparency and accountability of the decision-making process and help improve the projects' long-term viability and benefits to the community. In China, however, the current participatory mechanism at the project level exists only as part of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process. With an increasing demand for PIC projects and social equality in China, this suggests a need to bring the participatory process into line with international practice.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to identify the weaknesses of EIA-based public participation in China and the means by which it may be improved for the whole lifecycle of PIC schemes. To do this, the results of a series of interviews with a diverse group of experts is reported which analyse the nature and extent of existing problems of public participation in EIA and suggestions for improvement. These indicate that the current level of participation in PIC projects is quite limited, particularly in the crucial earlier stages, primarily due to traditional culture and values, uneven progress in the adoption of participatory mechanisms, the risk of not meeting targets and lack of confidence in public competence. Finally, a process flowchart is proposed to guide construction practitioners and the community in general.

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### Introduction

It is a truism that every decision or action made by a public agency affects citizens to a certain degree. This is particularly the case for public infrastructure and construction (PIC) projects, as the provision of these types of facilities can be controversial and may affect the interests of stakeholders in many parts of society. Therefore, it is very important for these stakeholders that the project initiators (e.g. government) do their best to convey their plans and solicit opinions before any PIC projects commence and right through to the end of the project cycle (Shan & Yai, 2011). A common approach to actively involving relevant stakeholders in the decision process is by public participation (André, Enserink, Connor, & Croal, 2006).

Public participation in advanced economies usually involves the collection and analysis of public opinions throughout the project cycle (i.e. the planning, design, construction, operation and demolition of PIC facilities) to help decision-makers establish the most apposite solutions satisfying the broad interests of society (IFC, 1998). However, public participation in developing countries is still in its infancy. In China, for instance, public participation is applied to urban planning only or those schemes entailing an environmental impact assessment (EIA) (Zhang & Jennings, 2009). In view of the macro nature of urban planning initiatives, the EIA-based public participation process is currently the only means available for the public to voice its concerns at the project level (Plummer & Taylor, 2004).

The current participatory process in China is unlikely to be thorough and flexible enough to realise the true spirit of public participation while it is bound by the EIA framework, however. As a result, there are many controversial PIC projects in China, such as the Nu River Dam and the Yuanmingyuan Lake Drainage scheme (Moore & Warren, 2006). Nonetheless, the experience accumulated from the existing EIA-based public participation process does provide a useful basis for the development of a more transparent,

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democratic and comprehensive participatory process to cope with the rapid expansion of PIC projects in the country and the increasing expectations of social equality.

This paper, therefore, considers the possibility of introducing a more comprehensive public participation for PIC projects in China by examining the practices and weaknesses of the country's current EIA-based public participatory process. A brief introduction to public participation is presented followed by an account of its emergence in China and the philosophy underlying EIA-based public participation for PIC projects. A series of interviews is then described in which the problems, and suggestions for improvement, of EIA-based public participation are extracted. Finally, a process flowchart of the various stages of a PIC project is proposed as a guide toward a whole-cycle public participation process in the future.

## Literature review

According to Arnstein (1969:216), public participation is a channel for “*the redistribution of power that enables the have not citizens ... to be deliberately included in the future*”. Consequently, public participation requires project initiators to acknowledge 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*” (Enserink & Koppenjan, 2007:463) and more importantly to involve “*the individuals and groups that are positively or negatively affected by a proposed intervention*” (André et al., 2006:1).

According to Creighton (2005), public participation in principle involves every person, although it may not be possible to reach all the individuals and some may not be interested in being involved. However, it is necessary to ensure that the participants that are involved represent those who are directly, or indirectly, are affected by the proposed project and those who can positively or negatively influence the project outcomes (Lizarralde, 2011). These include the (i) government/project initiators; (ii) lay public who are affected by, or have interest in, the proposed project; (iii) private organisations, such as the design institutes and construction companies; (iv) professional organisations and educational institutions; and (v) pressure groups such as the NGOs and mass media.

By involving the public effectively in the decision-making process, the chance of project success may increase due to (i) a reduction in project time and cost (Creighton, 2005); (ii) the development of more innovative plans and solutions through the incorporation of the collective wisdom of the community (CCSG, 2007); (iii) the accomplishment of the needs or concerns of a cross-section of society without sacrificing the project goals (Woltjer, 2009); (iv) an acceptance of the community, which can increase the legitimacy government decisions (Moore & Warren, 2006); (v) an opportunity to promote mutual learning (Manowong & Ogunlana, 2008); (vi) a desire to protect individual and minority rights (Plummer & Taylor, 2004); (vii) an achievement of sustainable project lifecycle management (Varol, Ercoskun, & Gurer, 2011); and (viii) the promotion of collaborative governance (Enserink & Koppenjan, 2007).

Despite its merits, public participation can be challenging to implement when it is newly introduced, as some authorities can have a cynical attitude of the value of participation, and worry that an overactive citizenry could lead to social disorder and conflict (Shan & Yai, 2011). However, the success of public participation depends not just on the genuine attitude of the project organisers in soliciting public opinion, it also requires the careful planning and organisation of every participatory activity (IFC, 1998). In the absence of appropriate methods and targeting of the right groups of people, the participation process can be administratively costly and meaningless as the decisions made are open to challenges and criticisms (Creighton, 2005).

While public participation may take different forms – not least public hearings, surveys, workshops, advisory committees, etc., participatory activities can be classified according to different levels of participation (Plummer & Taylor, 2004; Rowe & Frewer, 2005). Arnstein (1969), for example, recommended that public participation be divided into eight levels, ranging from the most elementary level of ‘non-participation’ to ‘tokenism’ and ultimately ‘citizen power’. According to this classification, informing and consulting the public fall within the ‘tokenism’ level, whereas attaining the ‘citizen power’ level would require the development of a partnership between the project initiator and the community. Since public participation is still a relatively new concept in China, it usually takes the form of informing members of the public of their rights, responsibilities and options rather than inviting them to voice their opinions (Shan & Yai, 2011). Viewed in this way, it is clear that such a “tokenism” participatory approach does not guarantee that public views will be heeded by those in power (Arnstein, 1969).

## Emergence of public participation in China

The well-known ‘principle of mass participation’, long established by the Chinese government and Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is fundamentally different from public participation in international discourse: the former imposes an obligation on the people to cooperate with and support the government in the implementation of policies, plans or projects, while the latter emphasises the rights of people to be informed, consulted and heard in the decision-making process. According to the Western notion of public participation, the government is not only responsible for informing people about proposed policies, plans or projects and supervising their implementation, but also obligated to ensure public access to information, decision-making and judicial redress (Zhao, 2010). However, such differences may not necessarily lead to an insurmountable gap: theoretically, there is no conflict between the international notion of public participation and China's political regime, in which the country is purportedly for the people and where the government represents the people's wishes (Chen, Zhang, & Ekroos, 2007). Chinese law also makes possible the development of the international practice of public participation as, according to the Chinese Constitution 1982, “the people manage state affairs, economic and cultural affairs, and social affairs through various means in accordance with law” (Zhao, 2010).

Public participation in the built environment development in China started in the 1980s with development projects funded by international financial organisations, as it is a fundamental requirement of these organisations to conduct a public participation exercise as part of their EIA (Plummer & Taylor, 2004).

### *Institutionalisation of public participation*

It was in the *Circular on Strengthening the Management of EIA for Construction Projects funded by international financial organisations* issued in 1993, that public participation was first expressly emphasised in China. Public participation became a formal component of EIA in the *Regulation on Environmental Management of Construction Projects* that was adopted in 1998, in which developers of construction projects were required to solicit the views of the work units and residents in the vicinity of the proposed projects when preparing the environmental impact report (Zhao, 2010). To further emphasise the importance of public participation, an updated version of the EIA Law was passed in 2002 and became effective in 2003, in which the participation of relevant units, experts and the public in the environmental impact assessment is encouraged. In 2006, the Ministry of Environmental Protection promulgated the *Provisional Measures on Public Participation in*

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