

A public private people partnerships (P4) process framework for infrastructure development in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Public private partnerships (PPPs) have been widely adopted to provide essential social and economic infrastructure and services. However, there is currently no systematic mechanism governing how social concerns should be captured at different stages of a PPP project. This paper, therefore, advocates a rethinking of the pragmatic issues underpinning public engagement and suggests a process framework that puts people as a major stakeholder for implementing PPP schemes. This public private people partnerships (P4) process framework embraces the bottom-up participative strategies which bring the public engagement clearly visible for infrastructure planning and policy making. With this newly developed framework and associated engagement strategies, decision-making power can deviate from policy makers, who are traditionally holding the ultimate decision authority, towards the citizens through proactive engagement. Such strategy can help improve the development process by moderating the risk of unforeseen oppositions, building clear responsibilities and rights, and creating opportunities for public inputs. It is anticipated that formulating such effective and genuine public engagement framework for PPP projects would assist government bodies, not only in Hong Kong but also other parts of the world, to better realise the changing public aspirations and demands for infrastructure planning and policy formulation.

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Introduction

The adoption of public private partnerships (PPPs) for the delivery of public infrastructure facilities such as roads, hospitals, schools, power plants and sewers has been a worldwide trend. However, various challenges have been encountered in some PPPs initiatives causing undesirable project failure. Of the challenges identified, stakeholder opposition was found to be the main cause for failure (El-Gohary, Osman, & El-Diraby, 2006; Siemiatycki, 2009). For some PPP developments such as schools and health care projects, the public's expectation for information and participation may not be very demanding. When it comes to projects of highly controversial nature such as railway or heritage conservation schemes, the engagement process is considered inadequate for the sake of governing democratically (Krawchenko & Stoney, 2011; Lui, 2008). The interests and views of the general public are often overlooked in the delivery framework of PPP (Akintoye, Hardcastle, Beck, Chinyio, & Asenova, 2003; Majamaa, Junnila, Doloi, & Niemistö, 2008).

In anticipation that the private sector, with its efficiency and flexibility, may fit well in partnering with the public sector, the involvement of the private sector in public works might inevitably

raise public concerns of rate hikes, social welfare, quality assurance, and dispute over transfer agreement (El-Gohary et al., 2006; Reijniers, 1994). Scholars (e.g. Bennett, Seldon, & Grohmann, 2000; Mumtaz & Wegelin, 2001) expressed the importance of involving people in PPPs scheme, i.e. public private people partnerships (P4) rather than a two-way partnership between the public and private sectors (Fig. 1).

Public engagement is interpreted as getting the affected and/or interested stakeholders fully involved in the decision-making process (Renn, Webler, & Wiedemann, 1995; Tang, Zhao, & Coleman, 2005). In Arnstein's (1969) well-known ladder of citizen participation, she emphasised that a real engagement is a full partnership with citizens. In other words, public engagement is a redistribution of power to a certain extent (Bloomfield, Collins, Fry, & Munton, 1998; Burgess, 1998). This notion aims to facilitate an information flow among different parties, balances their interests, and allows citizens to express their concerns (Booth & Richardson, 2001; Creighton, 2005). Their input is essential to ensure that all critical issues are carefully deliberated and the decisions made have strong support from the community (Bagaeen, 2006; Goven & Langer, 2009; Treatmann, 2007).

Although the context of infrastructure development planning has intended to be transparent and a consensus-based decision, Hong Kong lacks an effective and robust framework for engaging the public during the development planning process so as to better safeguard the interests of all stakeholders (Anex & Focht, 2002; Li,

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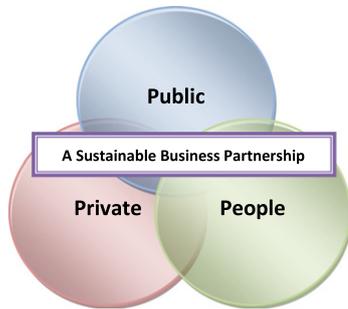


Fig. 1. Public private people partnerships (P4).

Ng, & Wong, 2009). Local government remains keen on maintaining conventional top-down decision-making approach which has led to poor accountability and even political impasse (Lo, 2002). The recent debates surrounding a multi-functional development as well as an express rail link project have exposed the weaknesses in the public engagement strategies in Hong Kong (Tsang, Burnett, Hills, & Welford, 2009). If inputs from the community are to be successfully integrated into infrastructure development projects, a public engagement framework is needed to promote a more collaborative approach.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to establish a holistic public engagement process framework for PPP projects. The proposed framework was developed based on an extensive literature review and case study, and verified rigorously by an expert panel. A novel P4 model is established where the public participation is clearly visible for infrastructure planning and policy making. The current public participation practice in Hong Kong is first portrayed, which is followed by the research design. The development of the P4 process framework and its features are then discussed. Concluding remarks are drawn in the last section.

Public engagement practices in Hong Kong

Infrastructure planning and development is a complex regime because it covers multifaceted policy issues, such as regulations, land acquisition, as well as resource extraction and allocation (Kumaraswamy & Zhang, 2001). For any infrastructure planning in Hong Kong, the responsible authority is statutorily required to undertake public consultations and hearings, as the decisions

made will have short to long-term impacts on the community at large. Formulating a 'draft' development plan, therefore, entails the input from the community for its legitimacy. The local government employed various forms of public engagement approaches including exhibitions, public forums, focus meetings, community workshops, etc. in order to capture the views of the community and to gain legitimacy under the political system. About 300 advisory and statutory bodies (ASBs) have been set up in the territory to acquire advice on government's policies, resolve any quarrel between the government and influenced parties, and deliver the public facilities or services.

Fig. 2 demonstrates the public engagement process of a redevelopment project of the old airport site in Hong Kong – the Kai Tak Development. The original draft Outline Zoning Plans (OZPs) attracted strong opposition on a large scale to land reclamation involved in the development. A new feasibility study was then relaunched in November 1999 to develop a master development plan, followed by engaging the public in the preliminary layout plan. Subsequently, a set of revised zoning plans was amended by the Town Planning Board in 2001 and later gazetted in July 2002.

The area of land reclamation was substantially reduced in the revised OZPs. The plans were therefore generally accepted by the public in late 2002. During this phase of public consultation, a number of issues concerning the plan, including the links between the development and basic community facilities, heritage preservation, and economic contributions were discussed. However, the ruling by the Court of Final Appeal in early 2004 asked the government to amend the development plan in the harbour-front area. Subsequently, another series of development planning featuring a three-stage consultation process was implemented in September 2004 and was concluded by late 2006.

The first stage of the public engagement for this development included public forums involving the general public, commentators, as well as representatives from different ASBs, local community groups, to deliberate on the project scope and approach (PlanD, 2005). The envisioning acquired in the first stage public consultation was critically examined and synthesised into three alternative Outline Concept Plans (OCPs). District forums and open forums were held in the second stage to formulate and improve the OCPs (PlanD, 2006a). Eventually, a preliminary outline development plan was developed through the third-round consultations. Altogether 15 forums and workshops, along with 60 briefings were

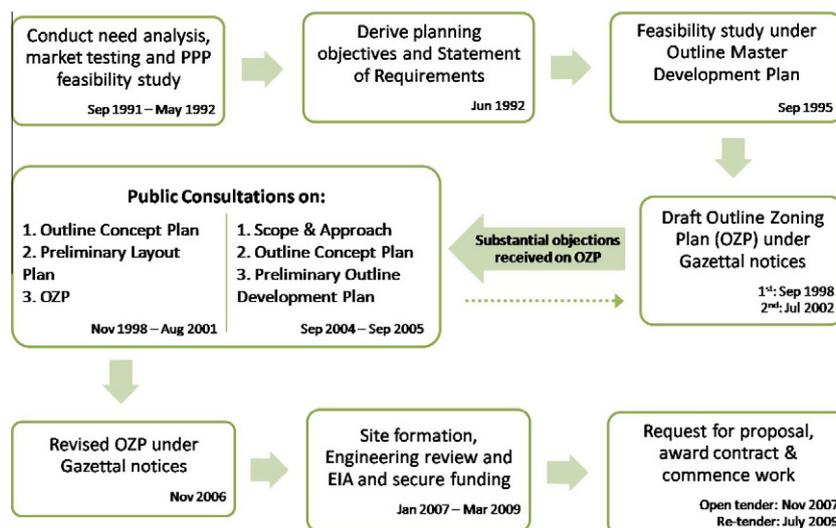


Fig. 2. Public Engagement of the Kai Tak Development Process.

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