

Engaging citizens in Nottingham, Stuttgart and Shanghai – a comparative perspective on the role of citizens' surveys in urban governance

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Abstract

Public participation is considered an essential part of sustainable urban governance, where citizens are being included as partners in shaping understandings of the priorities and pressures of urban development, service delivery, and the future of the urban area. Public participation is predominantly thought to improve democratic processes and increase the legitimacy of the local state, although many critical accounts are pessimistic about the role assigned to the public in these exercises. However, public participation continues to be popular in urban policy formulation in cities around the world, although the rationale, motivations and methods of such practices vary in different socio-political and economic conditions. Citizens surveys, which are the focus of this paper, represent a specific, widely adopted mode of public participation in urban areas globally. In this paper, the citizens survey is conceptualised as a technology of democracy and governance that is highly “mobile” (Peck and Theodore 2012). The empirical investigation into the deployment of the citizens survey in three case study cities aims to explain “assumptions about political reality and particular imageries of democracy which are inscribed in the devices by design” (Ezhari cited in Voss and Amelung 2016: 750). Therefore, the manner in which the surveys are designed, implemented and disclosed to the public reveal “social and ideological contexts of the policy-making process” and “the politics of policy knowledge production” (Peck and Theodore 2012: 23). This paper provides an early discussion on the emerging findings of this ongoing research project.

Adopting three cases spanning two continents, Shanghai, Nottingham and Stuttgart (Germany) offer a context of sharp contrast regarding urban scale, administrative and political culture, understandings of urban sustainability, economic development and public resources. This article aims to understand the rationales and outcomes of public participation in these highly varied cases, through the lens of the citizens' survey. The journey of the citizens' survey method from Western European cities to urban China will also be considered. The case studies involve secondary data analysis of the survey results, policy analysis, and semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders in the three locations.

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