EFFECTS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN GOVERNMENTAL DECISION-MAKING

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•I AM neither a technician nor an academician, but one who wishes to share some practical experience growing out of efforts in Chicago to make real the concept of citizen participation. I am not an expert in this area, and I would suggest to you that, while there are many who have written and spoken on the subject, there are no experts in the area of public or citizen participation in policy-making and program implementation.

At the outset, let me make several statements. The first is that it is our fundamental belief that the participation of neighborhood residents in decision-making and in program implementation of government and private agency programs at every level is very critical. The second is that the concept of the involvement of neighborhood residents and local interest groups in decision-making is not new. It is a concept that is as old as democracy itself. It was not born in the early sixties with the invention of the phrase "maximum feasible participation." It was invented by the writers of our constitution in 1776. The third is that there are almost as many different concepts of what constitutes citizen or public participation as there are people who discuss the subject. There is much confusion as to what citizen participation really is. As a matter of fact, that confusion and the varied experiences of cities seeking to involve neighborhood people in planning and implementing programs funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and by others are the subject of a book by Moynihan entitled Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding. The fourth is that, while there are many models of citizen participation around the country, there is no model that is fully workable and without many problems. The fifth statement is that, in citizen participation activity, there is no substitute for good faith on the part of the public officials and neighborhood residents.

The past ten or fifteen years of history is replete with rhetoric on the subject of public participation. To one who has read all of the material and listened to the rhetoric, it is clear that disagreement and misunderstanding on the subject abound. Clearly, citizen participation is not an exact science. Answers cannot be arrived at as in solving a mathematical equation where one has 2 givens and 1 unknown. Citizen participation is an extremely emotional area, where there is much disagreement among many who normally agree. There is no liberal or conservative, rich or poor, black or white, Democratic or Republican point of view. Citizen participation is and means many different things to different people at different times.

Model city programs have had more than their share of problems in the citizen-participation area. This is so in part because of the very nature of the model cities program. Model cities is the one national program that has responsibility for generating program activity in virtually every area of human existence—from the building of highways to the development of reading and tutorial activities. Thus, in every community, model cities programs have had to deal with a range of institutions, organizations, and agencies, and with government at every level.

In Chicago, model cities, OEO, and other programs that have sought to achieve widespread participation in public programs have uncovered a number of myths. Regrettably, many of these myths form the basis for approaches of many program designers and operators. Let me identify some of these myths for you.

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1. The first myth is that in every community there are 2 groups—the citizens and the establishment—and that the citizens speak with one voice. Any of you who have dealt with citizens and with local community interest groups in deciding the location of highways or in determining other public projects know that this is simply not the case. There really is no such thing as a group of people confined to or existing within a geographical area who are in agreement on most issues. As a matter of fact, our experience indicates that there is usually greater disparity among and between groups within any given geographic area on any given project than there is between any one of those groups, no matter how far to the left or to the right, and the government agency responsible for program execution.

2. The second myth is that, simply because people live in a neighborhood and are affected by a problem, they have proprietary, more intelligent, more logical insights into the solutions to that problem than anybody else has, particularly the professional. Indeed, there are, in every community, people whose lives have been devoted to their community and who have the genuine interest and concern of the community at heart. There are also people who not only know what they want for themselves, but have the pulse of their neighbors. The problem is to systematically identify such people and provide opportunities and forums for them to express their views. Their views must be listened to with a critical ear tuned to the constraints and possibilities involved in their suggestions and to the range of different views that will almost always exist. With a national trend toward more and more bedroom communities in which there is increasing alienation, fewer and fewer people are neighborhood-oriented. Fewer people know the dynamics of the community in which they live.

3. There is the notion that those who are poor—whites, blacks, or chicanos—and who are obstructionists to the objectives of a given project are not intelligent enough to understand the issues. The plain truth is that even the least educated people among these groups and even the most underprivileged often have very clear desires that they want to accomplish and a very clear notion as to how they wish to go about accomplishing them. The problem is to find ways of reconciling those desires and notions with what may be feasible and possible. The fact that people in the path of a highway or the benefactors of other programs are not fully acquainted, for various reasons, with the range of constraints that preclude doing things as they would suggest is not to be misunderstood as an indication of a lack of competence for making a contribution to the design and implementation of the program.

4. The fourth myth that abounds on the subject of public participation is that the creation of formal citizen structures is inherently the best approach to public participation. I suggest to you that in city after city throughout the nation the creation of citizen structures, as required, for example, under the model cities program, that are representative of the views of the range of interests in the community has in some instances been as much a detriment of an effective working relationship between the people and the government as it has been a help. In the first place, people who are affected by most of the projects that we must carry out are not "joiners," and even when they do join, their participation is not often sustained over long periods of time. A formal public participation structure created for the purpose of advising public officials often becomes stagnant after a very brief period of time, and there is a dynamic that occurs within the structure that has the effect of obscuring the real consensus of the community and supplanting it by a new view that emerges as a result of the dynamics at work within the advisory group itself. In very few places have local government officials been successful in designing the kinds of mechanisms for public participation that make it possible for people to move in and out, to express their views, to be heard, and to have their opinions felt, but that do not impose on them the demands of sustained participation in meeting after meeting, week after week. It seems to me that this represents one of the great challenges we all face: How do we create the kinds of mechanisms that people can flow in and out of as their interests are affected, rather than the stagnant advisory councils that develop interests of their own and, after a period of time, no longer represent anybody but themselves.

5. Another myth is the notion that neighborhood elections are all that is required to ensure that all views of the community are represented in the decision-making pro-

cess. In the early days of the Office of Economic Opportunity programs, we saw a growing number of elections of neighborhood groups. Unfortunately, in some instances, people had to even declare that they were poor as a condition to becoming a candidate. Although in our democracy an elective system of government is fundamental, in the last analysis in public participation programs as in government, the election of a candidate depends on a variety of factors other than how representative he is of the views of the electorate. In elections related to public programs where regular public officials are not seeking public office and the traditional election machinery is absent, there is always the problem that many deserving people have limited experience in political action and limited resources, both of which affect their running for and being elected to office.

Aside from the fact that citizens, once elected, often do not act much differently from other elected officials in terms of their continuing responsiveness to the needs of their constituencies, public programs of the types being discussed here require the fullest participation of the widest number of groups. Thus, I personally favor either an appointive system through which a responsive elected official, such as a mayor, is charged with and held accountable for the appointment of groups that represent every conceivable range of interests, or at least a combination system of appointments and elections. In the early days of Chicago's model cities program, for example, all members of model area councils were appointed. They were then truly representative, or as representative as any councils can be. The response of some groups, including the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, was that there had to be something wrong with them because they were appointed by the mayor. As a result, we shifted from a system of total appointments to an approach of appointments and elections through which 50 percent of the persons to serve on the neighborhood councils were elected in an open election and 50 percent were appointed by the mayor. Everyone worked hard to get a big election turnout, with the result that more than 30,000 people voted. This was a third of the eligible voters, and the people who got elected were those who the critics said would not get elected. The mayor's appointments were the persons who the critics said could only have served on the neighborhood councils through an open-election process. Of course, the critics, filled with distrust and suspicion of any elected official, did not consider the reality that appointed councils could be more representative than elected councils.

6. The sixth myth is that it is always possible to have full partnership between locally elected officials and public participation groups. The fact is that our experience has revealed that there are few, if any, instances in which there can be a full partnership. Because mayors and city council members and governors and state legislators are elected and possess legally defined decision-making responsibilities, they must in the last analysis have the final decision-making authority. This inherently makes them senior partners to the neighborhood residents who are interested, more often than not, in a single project at a time that is generally terminal in nature and who are not concerned, by virtue of their own position, with the broader good. Thus, while a partnership is desirable between government and the people, it is very difficult, if possible at all, to achieve a full partnership any more than it is possible to achieve full partnership between professionals and citizens. That is particularly true if by full partnership we mean equal partnership. There is an inherent inequality in these relationships.

7. The final myth is that the federal government, in declaring that citizen participation must be a part of more programs, knows what it wants. The fact is that the actions on the part of the federal government have been confusing and confused, generating at the local level a proliferation of citizen groups that have been fighting against each other and tripping over each other. Moreover, the standards as to what constitutes good citizen participation are ambiguous at best. While this is not to be critical of the federal government, we cannot escape the reality that one of our biggest problems is to bring some order out of the chaos that currently exists and that, I regret to say, is growing.

Now let me turn to the subject of models of public participation. In discussing this, as in discussing any other subject, it is possible to construct many different kinds of models. I have chosen to construct three. The first is a conflict model, the second is the "cop-out" model, and the third is the coalition model.

The classic public participation model is, of course, the conflict model. Rooted in the philosophy of Saul Alinsky and others who say that the way to get things done is to "rub raw the sores of discontent," the theory is that progress only occurs through conflict and tension. Unfortunately, this model has been the most prominent model among citizen participation structures in model cities and other public programs throughout the country. The consequence of it has been that, while some gains have emerged from conflict, the wheels of progress have been slowed down enormously, and great antagonism has developed between the government and the people in the community and sometimes among people in the community and has escalated to irreparable levels of damage. The other problem with the conflict model is, of course, that usually it rises to a crescendo over a given issue, such as relocation for a highway, but then dies down, and the vitality of the community somehow fades into oblivion once the issue is dealt with but not necessarily resolved.

The second citizen participation model that may also be related to many programs in many cities is what I have chosen to call the cop-out model. In this model, essentially what has happened is that public officials have knowingly or inadvertently "bought off" neighborhood residents simply by giving them enough money to keep them stirred up and fighting among themselves for long periods of time while the public officials went about doing business as usual. By the time the citizens discovered what had really occurred, it was too late. Rather than increased citizen participation, the net result is no citizen participation.

The third model is what I have chosen to call the coalition model. Let me say that I believe in the coalition model because it has several characteristics that work for good. The first is that it is characterized by a situation in which the city and groups of people with divergent interests come together and indeed fight with each other. The city assumes the leadership role, acknowledges the need for compromise and the sharing of power, and seeks compromise among divergent forces, including itself.

Regardless of the model applied, whether it be the conflict model, the cop-out model, or the coalition model, one thing is true about citizen participation in public processes: The gains come slowly, though gains do occur. Gains come in small increments. They are not volcanic in their appearance and sometimes are hardly discernible, even at the time they are made.

There are those who would like to abandon the whole concept of citizen participation in public decision-making. They say it is cumbersome. They say it is nearly impossible to accomplish. They say that it sometimes creates more problems than it solves. To do so, however, would be a violation of the basic concepts and precepts of our democratic way of life.

In looking back over the past 10 years, it is possible for us to identify certain clear advantages that have occurred as a result of a commitment to citizen participation. The first of these is that, in many instances, local governments or state governments and local residents have come to talk together and to exchange views on issues about which they previously had little or no communication. The second is that in some instances there has been limited innovation in terms of approaches that would not have occurred to the professionals but which seemed entirely reasonable to the lay person. The third is that the principle of more detailed and intricate involvement of people in programs that affect their lives has been rather universally established. The governmental bureaucracies and professional societies, which have so long assumed that they were the fountains of knowledge and the possessors if not of all wisdom then at least most of it, have had to share with previously powerless people.

I submit to you, therefore, that citizen participation is not only a good thing in terms of values, but it is essential. It is at the very core of our democracy. Effective citizen participation is the kind of thing that you know you have when you have it but that you are not always sure how to accomplish.

From Plato to Kennedy to King, our efforts to acquire more insight into the role citizen participation plays in the function of the democratic process has got to be expanded. Robert Maynard Hutchins said that the death of democracy is likely to be not an assassination from ambush but a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.

We in model cities programs are firmly committed to the principles of democracy, a word that applies to rich and poor alike. We are constantly pursuing participation of all people, particularly those who have historically lacked participation and who have been described as being apathetic.

The answer is not in technical approaches. The answer is good men, acting in good faith to accomplish good objectives with each other.