

Public Participation in Post-disaster Reconstruction Plan of New Beichuan Town

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1. Introduction

Public participation derives from the modern western theory of republican democracy. Its origin that can be traced back to ancient Greek city-states era and it mainly consists of theories such as direct democracy and participatory democracy, etc. It is of the opinion that citizens should be directly involved in the decision-making of public affairs. As a public policy, urban planning itself is an authoritative distribution of social value (David Easton)¹, and its intrinsic value is oriented at publicity. Therefore, it is the development process and features of western civil society between state authority and individual freedom that determines the inevitable emergence of public participation. Its earliest embryonic form was discovered in the formulation course of The New York City 1916 Zoning Resolution, in which a counseling commission of 18 members was formulated and led by Lawyer Bassett in the purpose of controlling over-development of the city by means of opinions of the commission. Later, public participation gradually grows to be an important means and content of city planning in western countries.

In modern times, as a public policy, urban planning itself has the function of social values' authoritative allocation. The formulation and implementation of Property Law, as well as the principles of public participation, clearly specified by Urban and Rural Planning Law in 2008, all contributed to the progress of democratic ideology in urban planning. The growth of western civil society accords with the de-politicization of economic life, however, social development in China is highly correlated to political systems, and the growth of civil society and participation techniques is not mature enough, which results in the "bottom-up" planning of participation being mostly superficial. In accordance with western social practice in the past one hundred years, social integration brought by public participation is better than other methods such as policy or specific technology. Gradually, urban planning is now shifting from professional techniques to social politics, thus public participation in China shall be explored and pushed forward in the practice of planning process.

2. Background of Public Participation in Reconstruction plan of Beichuan New Town

In retrospect of the post-disaster construction plan experienced by the author, the planning and its successful implementation can be seen as a powerful evidence for the feasibility and effectiveness of public participation conducted in China nowadays.

However, its inception and implementation process still undergone a series of obstacles.

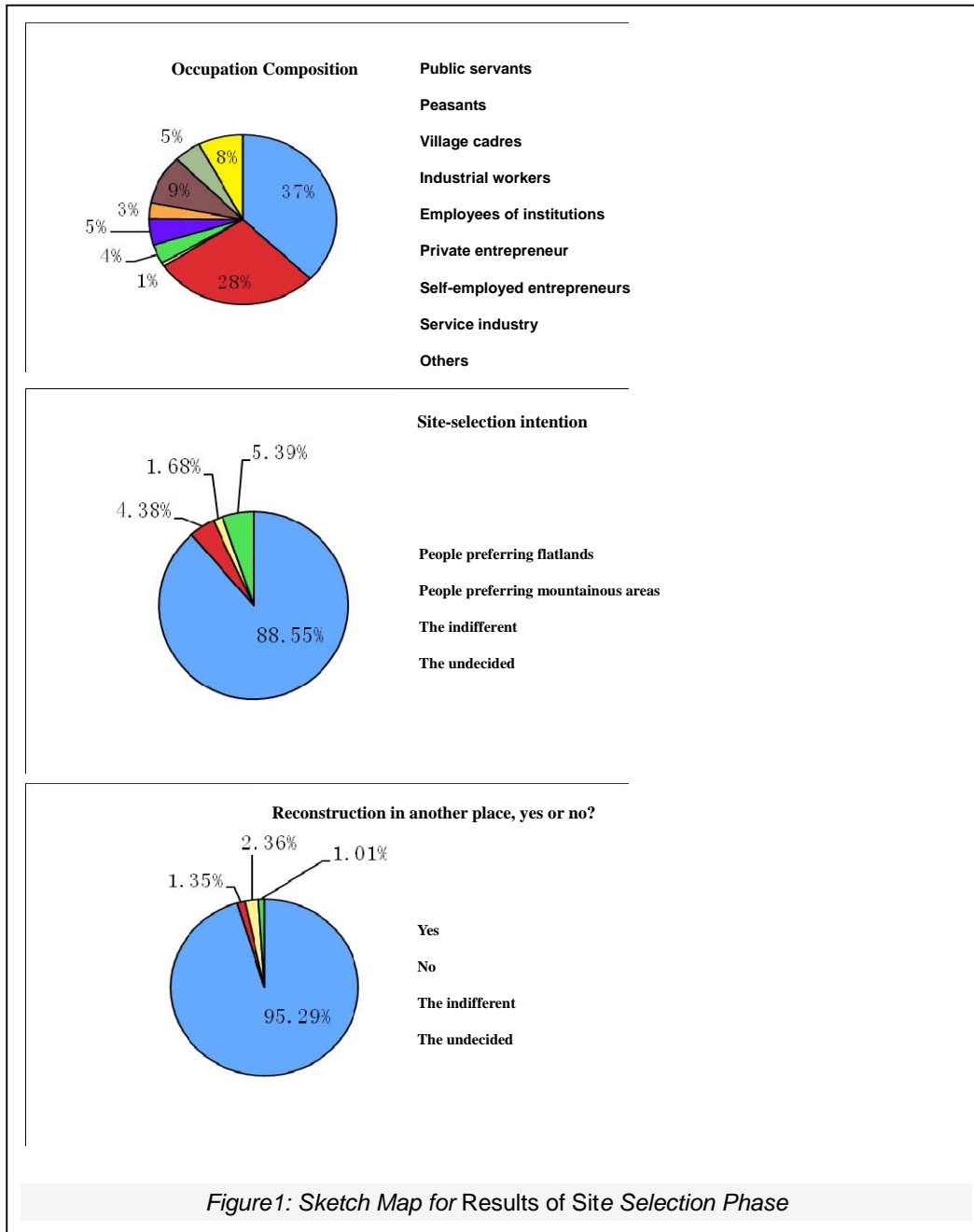
The May 12th earthquake in 2008 resulted in devastating damages to the society and economy in Beichuan County, and the reconstruction of the new county town has become critical as the priority for post-disaster work. In order to avoid unnecessary and huge losses likely to be brought by aftershocks or secondary disasters to the property and people, the reconstruction has been carried out based on scientific planning under the guidance of the State Council of the central government. However, the first difficulty confronting the construction of the new county was the question of whether we needed to rebuild it in another location. And opinions from the central government and the local government diverged _as well as those of the main construction assistance party and experts. Without solutions to the problem, the plan was impossible to be enforced; leaving thousands of victims in emergent need of settlement homeless, therefore, the planning sought for breakthroughs beyond traditional practices.

The relationship between interest groups involved in Beichuan New Town are complicated and are faced with various choices, the planning team are determined to adopt the means of public participation in the purpose of seeking solutions to the site-selection of new Beichuan New Town. As a result, the intention of reconstruction in another place won public opinion as high as 95% through public participation for the first time, which enabled the planning to be carried out smoothly.

3. Stage and methodology of Public Participation in Reconstruction Plan of Beichuan New Town

The earthquake destroyed functions of the urban system within Beichuan County. Difficulties blocking the post-disaster reconstruction were as follows: barriers to access basic local literature materials; inability to acquire accurate knowledge of people's livelihood; inability to conduct field investigation due to breaking down of transportation in mountainous villages and towns; part of citizens' failure to objectively face up to the reality because of unbalanced minds resulting from psychological trauma and loss of social capital after the earthquake. But there also exists favorable aspects. For example, in a relatively long time after the earthquake, a large number of people losing jobs were stranded in the victim resettling area, ensuring the number of participants as well as the convenience of participating time arrangement, etc.

In order to ensure that the planning can comprehensively weigh requirements and considerations of interest groups to reach a consensus, and in view of the achievement gained by public participation in the site-selection phase, the project group decided to enforce public participation in successive work of the whole construction without hesitation for the purpose of backing up decisions of the planning.



3.1 Participation Stages

According to important problems involved in the planning process, seven public participations were successively carried out by the planning work team through in-depth investigation, and three phases can be divided in line with the planning contents and time order:

- Macro stage-comprehensive planning
- Meso stage-policy research
- Micro stage--detailed planning

From the macroscopic level in the early stage to the microscopic level in later stage, the importance of “public participation” as a technical means is gradually promoted because it was “forced” to apply in the planning at first while finally it was actively chosen and become a mature technical method. Public participation in the whole process enables the integration and realization of requirements and desires of stakeholders on the planning platform, ensuring great achievements to be made in the reconstruction plan of post-disaster of Beichuan New Town.

3.2 Methods and Technical Measures

The fundamental technique of public participation lies in:

1) Popularization and publicity of urban planning conception. Appropriate publicity is aimed to make participants better understand the contents of the planning, which is of special importance to people with relatively weak understanding of technical drawings as well as educational level in inland China.

2) Consultation and aggregation of stakeholders’ intentions can form objective judgment of contents of the current planning based on the public’s understanding of the plan. And it is the delivery and recovery of planning information between the planner and participants as the two main means that contribute to the formulation of the final decision.

Assurance of the smooth connection of the two parts lies in the knowledge of the public’s participating ability and the formulation of effective and feasible technical schemes. The organization, implementation, as well as problems encountered and experiences gained during the public participation are of great significance to China’s future urban planning.

	Overall planning		Policy research				Detailed plans
Stage Arrangement	Site-selection of the new county	Overall planning Publicity and opinion-solicitation	Housing policy		Relocation policy for land-lost peasants		Protecting blocks of the residential area
Participation time	August 4, 2008 (start date)	December 11, 2008 (start date)	February 8, 2009 (start date)	February 23, 2009 (start date)	March 13, 2009 (start date)	March 29, 2009 (start date)	August 13, 2009 (start date)
	August 7, 2008 (finish date)	December 16, 2008 (finish date)	February 11, 2009 (finish date)	February 26, 2009 (finish date)	March 17, 2009 (finish date)	April 17, 2009 (finish date)	August 14, 2009 (finish date)

Participants	Residents of Former Beichuan County and its suburbs	Townspople of former Beichuan County	Relocated villager for land appropriation in Huangtu County	People of former Beichuan County	Land-lost peasants in surrounding areas of former Beichuan County	Land-lost peasants in various villages and towns within the former county	Community representatives of the former county. Members of various village committees to the city
Coordinated	Members of various departments of Beichuan County Members of relevant departments of reconstruction in Beichuan County Cadres of local villages and towns as well as principles of the relocation						
Work cruxes	Difficulties in determining the number and property of samples	Deficiency of technical-drawing knowledge Shortage of feedback channels for	Deficiency of technical-drawing knowledge Unstable emotions of earthquake victims Deficiency of reading ability		Inconvenience of transportation and contacts Deficiency of reading ability Difficulties in recovering questionnaires Unstable emotions of earthquake victims		Urban-rural disparity Social class differences
Investigation priority	Relocation intention Site-selection principle Neighborhood relationship	Spatial layout Residence and employment Public service Equipment and facilities Urban safety Ecological environment	Living habits Residential zone Employment tendency Architectural types Structure and style	Housing policy Compensation opinion Relocation intention Environment quality	Data of family members Production machinery and consumer goods Loss condition Employment and economic status Residence intention Life difficulty and obstacles Maintenance of social relationships		Community management Cohesiveness Living modes Neighborhood relationship Urban-rural disparity Social Stratification
Technical measures	Literature Site observation Interview Colloquia Resident assembly Questionnaire	Interview Colloquia Questionnaire Brochure Lantern Festival party Video publicity Spot FAQ Opinion solicitation	Site observation Colloquia Questionnaire Video publicity Spot FAQ Opinion solicitation	Interview Questionnaire Depth interview	Site observation Interview Colloquia Depth interview Resident assembly	Literature Site observation Questionnaire Colloquia Interview	Colloquia Resident assembly

Data statistics							
Distribution of questionnaire	150	640	300	1000		500	
Recovered valid questionnaires	146	294	218	729		284	
Interview	193				70	90	
Depth interview					34		
Colloquia	2	2			2	6	2

Table 1: Technical Processes of Public Participation



Figure 2 :Public Participation Outreach of Beichuan

From a technical point of view, public participation in Beichuan is featured by the following characters: sufficient and down-to-earth field investigation in the early stage constitutes as a prerequisite for implementing the public participation; scientific and reasonable choice of the number and scope of sample groups is a guarantee of the work; straightforward planning brochures, questionnaires closely related to actual conditions, in-depth site interview, investigations and communications with the mass through TV programs as well as publicity by means of videos popular with the mass. All these methods helped to promote people's passion to participate and in the diverse ways for them to be involved.

Judging from the participation nature, the reconstruction plan of Beichuan has a strong color of activism, and it is a process of guiding and recognizing the overall process of public participation targeted to obtain means and theories of public participation in accordance with China's unique conditions. And it differs from the public participation in traditional planning procedures in forms, scales and frequency. With sincere attempts to focus on "respecting villager's wishes" with human-oriented approach as well as sufficient consideration and weighing of various elements, the public participation eventually provided a mass-based foundation for the smooth implementation of procedures of the planning as well as decisions to major problems.

In addition, it is important for planners to change their attitude and roles in the planning process. Previous planning work merely focused on the spatial structure and drawings separating from the society. This approach evidently will not give solutions to actual problems or coordinate social contradictions. And now, planners shall walk into the society to understand it, and with the position of maintaining social fairness, planners shall act as a bridge between the public and the government for communication as well as ensuring the fluency and transparency of information, which constitutes as a necessary condition for the implementation of public participation to promote democracy of the planning.

4. Conclusion

Since the site-selection in August 2008, public participation has been enforced throughout the process of master planning, regulatory planning and the implementation of reconstruction of Beichuan New Town that lasted for over 2 years. Though the circumstance was tough after the earthquake, and participating means and methods that can be organized and enforced were very limited, the intervention of administrative resources would influence the participating results to some degree. Yet the special identity of Beichuan Qiang-ethnic Autonomous County makes the reconstruction plan politically-sensitive, and it is the monitoring of various circles of the society that greatly balances the governmental function. With the persistence and careful and coordinated planning of planners, public participation closely correlates the public opinion with long-term goals of the government on the planning platform, which is unexpected at the initial stage of the planning.

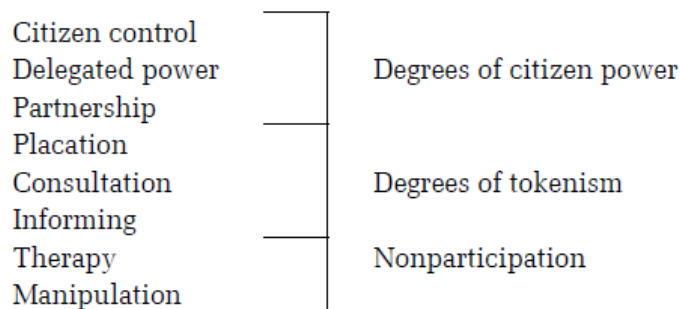


Figure 3: Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation

It is certain that there are theoretical and practical deficiencies in this planning effort. In accordance with the theory of Arnstein (as is shown in the diagram), public participation in Beichuan can only find its place in the primarily level of symbolic participation, incomparable with the depth of that of the western countries. Besides, in terms of the consultation and time order, due to habitual thinking of traditional planning, the main concerns of land-loss peasants has not been thoroughly resolved, leading to certain difficulties in later stages. However, we should clearly realize that participation by ways of citizen's self-governance without accounting for the disciplinary features and quality of participants and specific national political environment is not an optimal approach, however good natured or socially ethical it may be. A "good participation" doesn't seek for stages and forms but the ability to fully understand and take advantage of current environment and technical measures to formulate and realize objectives of the plan and promote democracy process; as for the practical level, public participation in the plan is a meaningful and precious exploration with its special characters, and its guidance and significance to the rapid implementation of plans in response to disasters and emergencies in regions like Yushu, Zhouqu, etc. as well as the promotion of democracy in normal planning.

Public participation in China still confronts lots of difficulties, while it is inapplicable to pursue formalism or be over-enthusiastic about it due to difficulties in creating proper environment for public environment, qualitative leap can not be obtained without mature conditions. Public participation in reconstruction plan of Beichuan New Town proved that during the process of rapid social development, along with stability in the existence of huge changes, and the gradual maturity of political environment, the awareness of the public is now growing. It shows the value of implementing public participation in China and the direction of planning as a profession.

References

1. David Easton, *The Political System- An Inquiry into the State of Political Science* [M], translated by Ma Qinghuai, Commercial Press, 1993, P4-5
2. Sun Shiwen, Yin Yue, *Theoretical Basis and its Development of Public Participation in Western City Planning*, *Overseas City Planning* 2004 Vol .19, No.1
3. Wu Junbin, *On Structural Elements of China Civil Society Configuration*, <http://www.lunwentianxia.com/product.free.10007238.1/>
4. Planning information consists of two aspects: basic level of the planning, as a technical measure of working out the plans and a professional means, is grounded on professional skills of the planner with emphasis on publicity and popularity; social orientation of the plan, means the balance between benefits and relationships of all participants, and it is based on the desires of the participants and embodied by participating means.
- 5 Arnstein, Sherry. 1969. *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*.