

CS-224

Report from the Practice of Planning with Public Involvement -Pointing to a New System of Project Implementation

CTI Engineering Co., Ltd. Consulting Engineers¹

Kenichi Matsumoto Noriyo Yamada

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a greater call for transparency in the administration of public sector projects. In this context, it is of paramount importance to make public and actively disclose information and take all appropriate measures to foster the formation of a public consensus through public involvement from the initial planning stage. Planning with public consensus for the development of an infrastructure that is closely linked to the community it serves is of vital significance for the future development of a new system of public sector project implementation. Its importance lies in the fact that it promotes a better understanding and appreciation of public sector projects and helps to make more effective use of the infrastructure and ensure its maintenance and upkeep.

To ensure that this practice will find acceptance, various legal provisions are being established that are making procedures to enlist public involvement compulsory, and a large number of precedents have come to light in which the system of public involvement in planning activities has been or is being adopted.

This report tries to indicate how this system might develop as a new approach to public works execution in the future by highlighting the problems and complications that occur in the practice of planning with public involvement.

Manual-Based Planning

For a long time, the hallmark of the Japanese technology approach has been the acceptance and adaptation of technology borrowed from abroad, with Japanese engineers resorting to foreign technology as the source of their creativity at the various stages in the past. The characteristic feature associated with this acceptance of technology from abroad has been that the importation and translation of manuals were given particular importance and priority. Countless projects have taken shape on the basis of such handbooks.

This also applies to the methods of public involvement on which a large number of manuals have been brought in from abroad and translated (Hester 1990). In the civil engineering field alone, the influx of foreign technology has continued uninterruptedly. It began with the planning and design of structures in the past and has continued, in more recent times, with the adoption of technologies in areas such as the protection of the natural environment, the restoration and mitigation of eco-systems and method for public works execution. With regard to the introduction of methods for public involvement, in particular, the issue is of a different nature in its frame of reference involving people and society. This necessitates that the specific characteristics of the people and society concerned be taken into full consideration. In the practice of planning, the problem is that it is often not possible to rely on such manuals.

Government-led Approach and Active Public Involvement

The history of public involvement in Japan shows that public movements came about in the 1970s amidst the protest movements against the pollution problems of that time. This marked the beginning of a new awareness by the residential population of the environment in which they lived, a break from the generally government-led way in which infrastructure development relating to the living environment of the people had been pursued previously (Machi zukuri systemu kenkyukai 1994). The tradition of government-led infrastructure development had created a basis that made it impossible for the local residents to take the initiative. The role of the local public remained passive in merely accepting plans proposed by government. Even in those cases in which ideas were solicited from the public to help shape government planning, it was clear that the public was unaccustomed to taking an active role in proposing ideas. There is no denying the fact that this hampered

¹ Urban & Regional Planning Division, 9th Chuo Bldg., 4-9-11 Nihombashi Honcho, Chuo-ku, Tokyo 103-8430, Japan
Key words: public involvement

progress in the development of techniques of creating procedures for desirable public involvement that would allow government to avail itself of the ideas suggested by the public.

Public Involvement as a Mere Formality and an Empty Gesture

In more recent years, a considerable number of successful examples of planning with public involvement came to be widely presented and the government was therefore compelled to adopt these methods. It must therefore be pointed out in particular that public involvement in Japan has been fostered through the initiative of the government in recent years. Since the procedures for public involvement have been introduced as an extension of government-led planning, however, the procedures themselves became formalities that are necessary for, and have to be adopted in, the development of planning. In this process, public debate became an empty gesture that led only to unfruitful, insubstantial results.

Educational Background and Public Involvement

Hayashi (1996) attributes this essentially vicious circle of public involvement to such facts as “the limitation of public involvement procedures to a mere legal frame of reference” and the “lack of experience and the inadequacy in terms of the development of methods for public involvement.” The author wishes to add to this the particular nature of Japan’s spiritual culture and social structure. The educational background that inculcates harmony and conformity with society as “virtues” from early infancy makes it difficult for the ordinary person to state his or her “own opinion” in public. In the practice of public involvement which lacks thought in the creation of a conducive atmosphere, the evidence that this background is an important factor can be seen in the fact that the members of the general public when asked for an opinion can merely state that they “agree with the opinion voiced by the person to them.”

Traditional Social Structure and Public Involvement

The traditional social structure has remained particularly in the non-urbanized regions. The presence of the traditional leader figure influences the statements and actions of the participants in planning activities and hampers or thwarts the free development and formation of ideas. People feel uneasy about their personal opinions being taken as a representative opinion for the region as a whole and there is concern that unique ideas may not be accepted by the region, and these nagging doubts are incessantly hanging over the participants of workshops like a dark shadow. In reality, the situation is therefore that participants “will always take part in the hope that their personal opinions will concur the opinions held by the majority of their region.”

Towards the Development of a Fruitful Japanese-Style System of Public Participation

The various systems of public involvement taken over from abroad are successful in their own right, and it appears that the methods of presenting ideas with the excitement or fun of a game situation and the techniques of uttering opinions with ease are gradually striking root in the “field,” that is, the practice of planning. There has also been progress in the establishment of manuals and the development of instruction programs to train facilitators capable of summing up the proceedings as a whole.

The important point, however, is to generate interest and commitment among the participants and motivate them by “not letting it end as a game” and “ensuring that the ideas presented take on some palpable shape.” As the active involvement of the participants themselves progresses the government also will change its attitude in the way in which it accepts ideas from the public. This holds promise a change for the better, a transformation of the vicious circle mentioned earlier to a wholly beneficial circle.

References

- Hayashi, Y. (1996). “Machidukuri-wakushoppu no gendaitekiimi”. Chiiki-kaihatsu vol.387 (in Japanese)
- Hester, R T., Jr. (1990). “Community design primer”. The Ridge Times Press. CA, USA
- Partner gata machidukuri system kenkyuuai (1994). “Machiduku-wo tanoshimou”. Mainichi kikaku service (in Japanese)