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Facilitating generation of local knowledge using a collaborative initiator: A NIMBY case in Guangzhou, China



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ABSTRACT

This study claims that the synergic effects of collaborative governance and effective knowledge integration can solve the wicked policy issues. The function of collaborative initiators (CIs) is studied and defined. The mindset of leaders and entrepreneurs as CIs is generally different from that of public managers. Such mindset helps facilitate collaborative dynamics integrating otherwise distributed capacities and knowledge within policy networks. This study examines a case with reference to the site selection of a waste incineration power plant in Guangzhou, China. A unilateral process emerges among the residents of the district to accumulate the self-qualified knowledge before a general discussion was put forward. “Explicit knowledge” intensifies the hostile situation between the public and officials although such knowledge can be easily accessed through an Internet search. A general discussion reveals the potential for generating local knowledge conducive to abolishing the not-in-my-backyard mentality and prompting collaborative problem solving. District government officials are potential CIs whose roles remain in their infancy. This study finds that a collaborative initiator lacks entrepreneurship when faced with an influx of public opinions. The Chinese CIs vacillate between a rule-dominated manager and a policy entrepreneur with the evolution of China into a more diversified society.

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Introduction

The reform and opening up of China since 1978 has laid a sound foundation for the socialist market economy. This improvement has further resulted in good economic profiles for many Chinese cities. The city-based accumulation regime is gradually entrenched, and a deepening trend of privatization and marketization has been observed. The transformation accelerates the spread of urbanism and significantly changes the socio-spatial city landscape. The urbanization of China in 2002 has exceeded 52%. Accordingly, the cities are predicted to become a home to 1 billion Chinese people by 2030 (The Economist, 2014a). A growing proportion of new middle-class urban dwellers have become financially stable because of the rapid economic development over the past 30 years. More than 50% of the urban households will likely become the “upper middle class” by 2022. This population is predicted to earn an annual household income of 106,000–229,000 Yuan (The Economist, 2014b). The new middle class members are winners of state-

owned enterprise reforms, successful entrepreneurs, and talented workers employed in tertiary sectors. They are uneasy and anxious particularly toward their fortunes and civic rights. Simmel argued the anxiety is a natural reaction of urban dwellers when the city becomes more urbanized and production becomes more specialized. Therefore, attempts have been made to maintain independence and individuality against homogeneity and sovereignty, apart from liberty (Simmel, 2002).

The influence of the new middle class is penetrating Chinese society, which was once under a centralized regime. In recent years, a growing number of urban dwellers have been involved in protests against the government's decision making on unwanted projects. Most conflicts are concentrated on a specific locality and prompted by communities and neighborhoods. This situation reflects the rise of the ‘not-in-my-backyard’ (NIMBY) phenomena in the Chinese society. According to Dear (1992: 288), NIMBY refers to “the protectionist attitudes of and oppositional tactics adopted by community groups facing an unwelcome development in their neighborhood.” The NIMBY syndrome is manifested as a fortress mentality of the affected, which supports a continuous resistance toward unwanted proposals. The NIMBY phenomena do not come from common sense but rather reflect a real social dilemma or

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game situation in local politics and public administration (Wolsink, 2000). The motives for protest are consolidated by adding the physiological, political, geographical, and environmental parameters to the well-being of the neighborhood. The NIMBY phenomena appear in a wide spectrum of scenarios, and are mostly connected with land-use issues. The crux of the NIMBY syndrome is derived from an unbalanced distribution of costs and benefits. Those who participate in NIMBY protests complain that public goods are not properly distributed. Furthermore, they find it unreasonable for a small proportion of people to undertake the noxious effects of facilities or plans.

The new social group in China is the protest protagonist. Their complaints are not as simple as “not far enough”. More fundamentally, these complaints are addressed “not fair enough”. Given the rising fiscal and administrative decentralization in the country, the local government is more responsible of managing economic development and municipal affairs. The pursuit of economic profiles may sometimes hinder the equal attention given to public appeals for a better life and a secured property right. A growing scholarship in China is currently beginning to acknowledge the rising NIMBY phenomenon. Moreover, the transition from incursive decision making to collective participation is strongly advocated (He, 2006, 2009). Existing research agrees with the changing role of a public manager as a facilitator rather than the “boss” of decision making. However, a genuine collaborative process is hard to achieve because of the weak cohesional dynamics among different parties.

This study asserts that the accumulation of unilateral knowledge is the major impediment in tackling the NIMBY mentality. The latter requires some “cohesional dynamics,” which lead to an effective transfer of knowledge and creation of local knowledge. This study also defines and examines a specific type of public manager who is able to manage knowledge divergence by nurturing collaborative dynamics. The literature on collaborative governance and knowledge management is initially reviewed. Accordingly, a pragmatic approach in dismantling knowledge boundaries relies on the deployment of collaborative governance. The literature review is followed by a discussion on a collaborative initiator (CI) capable of facilitating local knowledge by designing a pragmatic framework of interactions. The third part presents the case study on the site selection of a NIMBY facility in Guangzhou. The NIMBY is a universal phenomenon. Correspondingly, a reference to a Chinese city adds to China’s experiences on international discussions and helps enrich the study of NIMBY and local governance. The discussion examines the knowledge accumulated or contributed by different roles and the potential conflicts implied. The study also investigates and benchmarks district government officials with the characteristics of CIs. A conclusion on Chinese CIs and public administration then follows.

Collaborative governance

The revival of collaborative governance results from the gradual evolution of public administration. Traditional public management believes that the government is an agent for everybody’s good (Bryson, Crosby, & Bloomberg, 2014). A highly centralized public management holds the government responsible for the provision of goods and services. The mode is later challenged because of its inefficiency and abandoned after the recurrent crisis in the late 1970s. The one-size-fits-all public administration had been replaced by the practices of the New Public Management (NPM). The NPM primarily aims to enhance the efficiency of providing public goods and services. A public manager, who might not necessarily be a public servant, is appointed to follow a market-oriented mechanism. In consequence, the slogan of the NPM is to

let the manager manage (Pierre, 1999). The two instruments for achieving politically provided goals are markets and competition. Accordingly, citizens are viewed as customers or clients (Bryson et al., 2014).

The NPM has made some progress in categorizing what to produce and inventing appropriate action bodies for policy delivery. However, the citizens’ role is not properly acknowledged. The NPM is particularly incompetent in tackling the “public domain,” where polity or public agency cannot declare a solo authority. Hence, the NPM is questioned by the up-surgings demands from the grass roots of a society striving for processual justice, equity, and participatory democracy. An alternative approach, though not fully fledged, emerges in public administration along with the changes in the urban society.

The decision-making structure shifts from hierarchy to policy networks. Weber and Khademian (2008: 334) noted that a network is “an alternative to the limitations of hierarchical and fragmented administrative systems ... and as a more democratic means of developing public policy”. The policy network acknowledges the inputs from different stakeholders. Furthermore, this policy network links a number of organizations and actors. This process systematically coordinates efforts to achieve collective deliberations and decision making over common objectives (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Booher, 2004). Meanwhile, the changing public administration emphasizes the role of the citizens or the public. This emphasis is embodied as a transition from managerialism to partnerships. The citizen is no longer a voter, client, constituent, or customer but is essential and integral to the process of problem solving and decision-making (Bryson et al., 2014).

The discussions on policy networks are always linked with the literature of collaborative governance. The latter searches for consensus-oriented decision making from all concerned parties (Ansell & Gash, 2008). The public, public manager, and other stakeholders are positioned under one decision-making table. Hence, some synergic effects are likely to appear through the facilitative mechanism. Collaborative governance is a broad term, which considers nearly all new developments in public administration including forums for public deliberation, community problem solving, and multi-stakeholder dispute resolution (Bingham, 2011). According to Bang (2003: 7), “political power does not always hinder or constrain but can also facilitate or enable.” Hence, different stakeholders work collectively under committed rules and procedures through the crisscross deployment of ruling and dialogs. The process highlights a shifting ownership in decision-making because the problem solving process relies on capacities beyond those of public managers.

The nature of wicked policy issues leaves decision-making and implementation vulnerable to resistance and protest. Hence, collaborative governance is one potential solution to address the NIMBY mentality, where conflicts take place. However, practices of collaborative governance need time. In addition, the process itself is vulnerable to conflicts (Emerson & Gerlak, 2014). Healey (2010) argued that once the contextual conditions become unfavorable (e.g., the government machinery is over addressed or the local actions are constrained), policy network is prone to be invalid. Successful practices rely on collaborative dynamics supporting joint actions or helping prompt decision making in the light of shared objectives. Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh (2011) suggested that collaborative dynamics should include principled engagement, capacity for joint action, and shared motivation. The three cornerstones help synthesize and integrate inputs from different parties. Knowledge, discourses, skills, and other resources in a policy network are distributed but these factors constitute capacities in different aspects of problem solving (Smith & Stirling, 2006). Various resources and expectations need to be converged to

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