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Exploring factors of preparing public engagement for large-scale development projects via a focus group study

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Abstract

Public engagement (PE) is increasingly employed to gauge public opinions and obtain their support on large-scale planning and development projects. Despite its booming development, there is a lack of research on how to prepare PE activities. In order to explore the factors of preparing PE activities in the construction industry, four focus groups were conducted, each including different stakeholders (e.g., PE organizers, construction professionals, interest groups, and local residents). Seven critical factors for preparing PE were identified into 3 main dimensions: (1) social (e.g., governmental support and bottom-up consultation approaches); (2) project (e.g., project characteristics, PE program, and project information and publicity); and (3) stakeholder (e.g., stakeholder identification and representative sampling). Based on the results of focus groups, we propose several practical recommendations to stimulate active engagement and improve performance of PE activities, including developing PE guidelines, preparing project information with appropriate language and formatting, and establishing stakeholder identification methods.

Keywords: Construction projects; Focus group; Preparation; Public engagement

1. Introduction

The government widely supports the use of public engagement (PE) in construction projects (Ogunlana et al., 2001). PE involves actively exchanging information and viewpoints between the government, construction professionals, non-governmental organizations, and the general public (Petts, 2007). Engaging multiple stakeholders is thought to be the most efficacious path to not only more acceptable project products, but also the empowerment of the public through the provision of more authority in the decision-making process (Hajer and Kesselring, 1999). However, it is still challenging to apply PE in large-scale infrastructure projects. In various countries and areas such as Australia, Hong Kong, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States, PE activities have still been perceived as a means of defusing opposition and falsely representing public expectations (Cheung, 2011; Cundy et al., 2013; Walters et al., 2000).

In order to improve performance, PE is required to engage representative stakeholders in early stages of construction projects (Reed, 2008). However, engaging multiple stakeholders is time-consuming and expensive (Brandt and Svendsen, 2013). More efficient planning and preparation of PE activities save additional resources and engage appropriate stakeholders (Roberts, 2004). Although the preparation of PE activities is crucial for specifying project issues, identifying stakeholders, and ensuring projects' success, relevant studies focusing on the preparation of PE in large-scale construction projects are still rare (Elton Consulting, 2003). In order to explore critical factors for the preparation of PE activities, focus groups were recruited, by inviting various kinds of stakeholders who engaged in different PE activities. In the current paper we address the opinions of multiple stakeholders

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and recommend several practical implications for future preparation of PE in construction projects.

2. Public engagement

PE is a team decision-making process that involves representative stakeholders participating in different stages of the project in an effort to solve common issues, fulfill their needs, improve final project outcomes, and promote social cohesion (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; Leung et al., 2012; Williams, 2003). In recent years, the general public has expressed concern with sensitive issues, such as democracy, quality of life, and sustainable development (Chiu, 2005). The requirements of different stakeholders might be contradictory (e.g., economic benefits of development projects versus environmental impact and historical value). To strike a balance between conflicting public views, the government pledged to apply PE in the construction industry, especially in large-scale development projects, such as the major infrastructure projects in Hong Kong (Li et al., 2012), the transportation projects in the United States (Stave, 2002) and the urban planning projects in Switzerland (Joerin et al., 2009).

PE refers to a high level and long period of public involvement in decision making processes in order to achieve greater recognition and legitimacy of project outcomes (Lim et al., 2005; Rowe et al., 2008). In practice, construction projects with PE are normally of high sensitivity and complexity. PE organizers for construction projects, thus, need to divide the whole PE process into several continuous stages (Pomeroy and Douvere, 2008; Stave, 2002). Diverse activities (e.g., exhibitions, online forums, surveys, workshops, focus groups, public forums, and even Facebook) can be applied in different stages (Aaltonen, 2011; Lim et al., 2005). With so many activities involved, it is crucial to develop a PE program for organizing PE activities and encouraging active engagement (Chappel, 2008).

PE assists stakeholders' exchanges of viewpoints and information. Background information for construction projects, including project environment, constraints, and issues, needs to be specific and clear (Elton Consulting, 2003; Picazo-Vela et al., 2012). Information presented in a concise, thoughtful manner is useful, but too much information can be overwhelming and misleading (Renn, 2001). It is critical to decide what information should be published and how it will be distributed (Lee and Kwak, 2012).

In theory, PE provides an opportunity for multiple stakeholders to not only deepen their mutual understanding of project issues, but also to collectively explore and integrate ideas, thereby generating solutions (Leung and Olomolaiye, 2010). Before PE activities, stakeholders should be identified based on several attributes, including statutory requirements, exiting rights, unique knowledge and skills, degree of influence and interests, and potential impact (Olander and Landin, 2005; Pomeroy and Douvere, 2008). PE organizers, through stakeholder identification, determine who to engage in the decision making process, stakeholders' roles, and when and how to effectively engage different stakeholders (Chappel, 2008). Due to the complex characteristics of construction projects, it is extremely challenging to prepare PE activities and identify appropriate stakeholders in the whole project life cycle (Aaltonen and Kujala, 2010). This paper, in an effort to improve the efficacy of PE for large-scale construction projects, uses focus group discussions to explore current practices.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Focus group method

Focus group refers to an exploratory group discussion to obtain perceptions on specific topics in a defined environment (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Originating in sociology, it has been increasingly used as a research tool in the social sciences (Merton and Kendall, 1946). Although we were specifically interested in studying PE, as they relate to construction projects, this topic still involves examining social behaviors of multiple stakeholders. Therefore, in the current study, we opted for focus group consisting of a group of participants. Focus groups may involve two (dyad), three (triad), four to six (mini-group), seven to ten (small), or eleven-twenty (super-group) participants (Cooper and Schindler, 2006). In focus groups, individual participant's perceptions, feelings, and experiences are shared and stimulated, so as to widen the range of opinions on specific topics and avoid the drawbacks of individual bias (Fisher, 2011; Morgen and Krueger, 1998).

When conducting focus groups, procedural problems, such as moderator bias and dominant voices, need to be minimized (Krueger and Casey, 2009; Smithson, 2000). To minimize the moderator bias, the moderator should encourage participants to share opinions and facilitate the discussion in a non-directive manner (Myers, 1998). It is expected that the moderator is familiar with the topics of group discussion, sets the style and tone of the focus group, indicates the scope and topics of the discussion and ensures that the same issues were addressed (Hurd and McIntyre, 1996; Kidd and Parshall, 2000; Sim, 1998). In the study, the four focus groups were relatively homogenous in terms of representative organizations to prevent dominant voices (Smithson, 2000), as participants with relatively homogeneous backgrounds normally have similar perceptions and experiences related to the same topic. Despite its common pitfalls, focus groups provide natural and comfortable atmospheres for participants to discuss specific issues, such as the preparation of PE activities and identification of stakeholders before PE activities (Tracy et al., 2006). Also, focus groups encourage participants to collectively develop ideas and explore specific issues based on their actual experiences related to controlled topics (Du Bois, 1983).

3.2. Samples

To ensure the reliability of data collected, participants were purposively selected if: (1) they had experience engaging in PE activities for construction projects (e.g., focus groups, workshops, and public forums); and (2) they had affected or been