

Adopting participatory planning paradigm in rivers state: a catalyst or an impedance to effective community planning

Abstract

Participatory planning is a holistic paradigm entrenched in most advanced democracies to manage community planning where communities are critical stakeholders, co-owners and net beneficiaries of the planning scheme. However, the narrative is different in Rivers State and, by extension Nigeria due to the existing social disconnect and trust deficit between the proponents and beneficiaries of the planning scheme. Most times, the proponents are the government, MDAs, oil and gas multinationals, private investors, and the beneficiaries (host communities). This paper reviews the extant Urban and Regional Planning Laws-Nigerian Urban and Regional Planning Law NURPL Decree 88 of 1992 now CAP N138 LFN 2004 and the Rivers State Physical Planning and Development Law No. 6 of 2003 are operational in Nigeria and Rivers State. However, findings from the review indicate no section or provision in these planning laws and regulations where participatory planning is considered part of the laws. Thus, making participatory planning very difficult to achieve in Rivers State and Nigeria. Therefore, the review recommends that all extant Planning laws be amended with Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation added as sections of these planning laws. The review further generated a new framework to achieve effective participatory planning such that when included in the extant laws. This framework, if adopted, would enhance holistic, participatory planning in most communities because the community members are co-owners and critical stakeholders in the entire planning project.

Keywords: catalyst, community, impedance, paradigm, participatory planning

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Introduction

The world has experienced catastrophic phenomena revolving around challenges in the physical environment. These changes range from climate change-related disasters to poor urban governance, poverty induced social vices, misplaced, unplanned and unregulated land uses. Other challenges include rapid uncontrolled, urbanisation, poor land management and administration and devastating flooding events. These challenges have become daunting tasks for all professionals in the built environment, especially the town planner saddled with the multitasking responsibility of managing the physical environment for comfort, convenience, beauty, and safety.

As Lewis Keeble had succinctly put, the role of urban and regional planning is building any society.

"Town and country planning might be described as the art and science of ordering the use of land and the character of siting of buildings and communication routes so as to secure the maximum practicable degree of economy, convenience and beauty".¹

For instance, climate change-related disasters are common in our clime, with the most tangible evidence being precipitation leading to unprecedented flooding in urban and rural environments. Flooding as it stands to in the global south has other ripple effects on the environment besides the crippling of commercial activities. In the opinion of Khan² governance has incrementally become a paradigm to measure successful development and growth that has also generated the needed attention by scholars globally.

Engaging the community in the planning process is an essential component of urban and regional planning that engenders community cohesion, known as the participatory planning process. Participatory planning is significant in the entire planning process because there is the need to properly plan the environment since planning is an

essential component of our collective existence. This collective is fast becoming a norm for most emerging and existing societies because of the inherent benefits from such gestures.³ Therefore, adopting a participatory planning approach is necessary to achieve sustainable collective planning in the physical environment.

Participatory planning

Participatory planning is an embedded paradigm that adopts the integrated planning approach to design liveable and active spaces for human habitation that engenders accessibility and plausible community cohesion. It stems from blended knowledge and learning from indigenous and expert knowledge that often result in robust and effective outcomes. It considers the perception and input of residents within the community at the core of any planning decision-making process.⁴ The participatory planning process involves several ways to achieve the same result as it makes the community feel included in the assessment of their challenges and participate in the design of the solutions to their challenges. Generally, participatory planning strengthens the adoption of emerging models, offline and online training and information tools that turn members of the affected community into citizen planners.⁵

Levels of participatory planning

There are several significant pathways and levels to achieve participatory planning in every community since each community has its peculiar prospects and challenges. Each level may be appropriate in different circumstances or with different groups. Although only at "deciding together" and above do they begin to be fully participatory because of the term used in this section.

Information- Telling community members what is being planned. The information would only be appropriate when:

- I. The funder has already decided on that course of action
- II. Reporting on an activity that is already in progress.
- III. It involves keeping people informed so that they will have the information to be part of a participatory effort later.

Consultation- Offer an array of options to the participants and listen to their choices in the feedback. Remember that consultation-only may be appropriate when:

- I. The proponent wants to improve on or evaluate existing services
- II. The options available are limited and are obliged to choose from among them
- III. There are several technical reasons. Sometimes, a funder questions why only certain groups of people are always officially involved in the planning process.

Deciding together- The proponent inspires other participants to provide different. Opinions and ideas and join others in deciding on the appropriate way forward. Deciding together may be appropriate when:

- I. Significantly, all and sundry perceive ownership of the plan
- II. Fresh ideas are needed from several possible sources
- III. the proponent can co-opt direct beneficiaries of the project.
- IV. There is a commitment to provide support through the process for those who need it
- V. Time is enough to carry on, even though time is often limited in situations like this.

Acting together- Not only do diverse professionals decide together what works best, but they also form a formidable partnership to ensure that it is being carried out. Acting together may be appropriate when:

- I. The planning process will be more effective than when an individual runs it.
- II. Community oversight is part of the funder's requirement to commit funds.
- III. There is a firm commitment to developing a genuine partnership between the participants and funders.
- IV. Acting together benefits all and sundry in the process
- V. One goal of the intervention is the eventual assumption of leadership or the learning of leadership skills by the target population and others in the community.

Supporting independent community initiatives – helping others do what they want within the resource holder's support, advice, and grants. Supporting local initiatives may be appropriate when:

- I. Community empowerment is the primary driver of commitment
- II. The community has the desire and at least some of the tools to start and run a successful intervention
- III. There is a commitment to provide training and support where needed
- IV. The stakeholders can only provide support to the planning process for a short time.

Objectives of participatory planning

As evident in every endeavour, be it communal, business, or academic, there are clear cut objectives driving the process of

participation. As such, some of the objectives of participatory planning include

- I. Engendering productively and positively connecting to community members' entrenched commitment and knowledge in achieving community goals.
- II. Develop a collective sense of ownership of the entire planning process by community members.
- III. To build a sense of investment among community members through participation.

Importance of participatory planning

In rendering the Culture and Social blog post (2012), participatory has indicated the propensity to engender communal cohesion among community members because of the collective decision-making regarding their challenges in the environment. Participatory planning has led to the continuous spread and adoption of the paradigm globally as a panacea for peaceful community building and communal cohesion. Some of the benefits of participatory planning include the following:

The strengthening and subsequent implementation of the concept of togetherness.

This concept of togetherness stands as a superior technique in achieving specific community-based decision-making and planning activities. Harnessing the concept empowers every eligible community member to participate in activities of significant interest to the community. Participatory planning further encourages the active participation of community members in the planning, organisation, application, and implementation of community goals. Being together often reflects a positive power in achieving collaborative planning and decision-making in the community. With the adoption of participatory planning, every community member is involved in the entire process and has the moral obligation to ensure that the programme succeeds since they have been part of the ideation process.

Participatory planning engenders the adoption of the concept of POAC, which indicates:

Planning, Organising, Actuating and Controlling. These components of the concept work as a holistic package in the participatory planning paradigm because if one is missing, there is every tendency that the process would short-circuit. After all, it is systemic by default. It encourages every community member to be proactive in every segment of the process since the POAC comprises actors with specific and multiple skills set at every stage. Thus, fostering community.

Another importance of participatory planning is the recognition of individual and collective competencies.

There are different types of participatory planning, for instance, the decision-making by an elected representative in a democracy. Generally, competence reflects the self-image of every individual in the community. Participatory planning connotes a systemic planning approach that involves every community member participating in the planning and decision-making process. Given this circumstance, competence plays a significant role in achieving the people's collective will, especially in solving their challenges as a community.

Benefits of adopting the participatory planning paradigm

Zimmerman et al.⁶ assert that there are some inherent benefits in adopting participatory planning. These benefits include but not limited to the following:

Participatory Planning usually comes with the feeling of ownership and often tends to build a robust background for community intervention. If community members are integrated into the planning of the community intervention, they would have the perception that they own the planning process. Besides, they become automatic stakeholders and not only as net beneficiaries but also as its designers and implementers. As such, they are likely to do what they can to ensure that their work succeed.

Participatory Planning ensures that the entire process will be credible in all community spheres since it is a community-based plan with representatives cutting across all community sections. If some participants know that others have similar opinions and experiences as theirs, then there would be a collective effort to make the intervention feasible.

The adoption of participatory planning brings on board an array of people with various skills set into the planning process, and this provides access to an enlarged range of viewpoints and thoughts about the focus of the community at that time.

Engaging in a participatory planning approach minimises the chances of pitfalls occasioned by limited knowledge of the realities of the community. For instance, if Muslims are part of the planning process for intervention within a community, other team members will know that lunch meetings during Ramadan are not usually suitable for work. Besides, members of the community who have long-time experience in community affairs will know what approach has failed in the past and why it failed to avoid the previous mistakes.

Participatory Planning usually incorporates essential professionals from the start. Should the process need the support of a specific individual, competence, or that of a particular agency or group, since they have been part of the planning from the commencement stage, their cooperation is highly assured.

Participatory Planning often provides an opportunity for the often-marginalised sections of the community to be heard and communicate that they have meaningful things to contribute.

It imparts skills set that usually last way beyond the planning process that helps to improve the community over the long term. Based on the knowledge imparted, participants learn to organise meetings independently, analyse data, and construct strategic plans, and most times, they become community leaders and assets.

It establishes ties and brings together community members who would typically have no contact with each other. Such relationships as those between the low-income class and the burgeoning class, for instance - are not only supportive of the participatory process but may break down barriers in the community and help to create lasting relationships.

The participatory planning process, when properly executed, builds trust, both between the proponents and the host community and among the individuals involved in the process. This trust can be pivotal for future community actions and community development schemes.

The participatory planning process mostly mirrors the goals and mission of community-based organisations (CBOs). Since its groundworks are entrenched in inclusiveness, collaboration, and empowerment, the participatory planning approach symbolises the principles that form the fundamentals of most community-based organisations.

Implicitly, participatory planning respects the opinion of everyone in the community. Thus, it sets a standard for community empowerment

schemes and participation trends that other organisations and the community might adopt.

Logically, a participatory planning approach should be effective. The fact that it includes the views and perspectives of everyone affected by the intervention should ensure that all assets and needs are identified and addressed and that unintended consequences are minimised.

Incorporating participatory Planning ensures that planning activities are done in the way they should be done. Since it respects every participant's intellect, thoughts, and experience, it offers every participant a measure of control by empowering the community, and particularly the target population, rather than just superimposing its ideas on a social structure that already exists. This process often gives value to its standards as some participatory approach is always the most ethical way to plan a community.

Extant planning laws and participatory planning in Nigeria

Nigeria presently has no specific laws set out to encourage participatory planning. Even the extant Nigerian Urban and Regional Planning Law (Decree 88 of 1992) is remarkably silent on the aspect of participatory planning approaches in solving local challenges in communities.

Several countries have included participatory planning paradigms in their statutes to engender collective bargaining power among community members in matters of collective interest. Recently, there have been constitutional amendments in the Republic of South Africa that encouraged participatory planning globally, especially in Tanzania, Colombia, and Portugal. The Constitutional Courts in these countries studied several regional and international human rights instruments, including the Harare Commonwealth Declaration, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights, the declarations of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

Participatory planning as a model provides for proper alignment of the planning process, including a shared understanding of set guidelines and minimum requirements for the involvement of the public throughout the participatory planning process. The participatory planning paradigm attempts to set out meaningful information dissemination apparatus, purposeful participation opportunity and compelling reportage of outcomes of collective participation.

Achieving participatory planning in Nigeria

Entrenching participatory Planning in Nigeria and, by extension, Rivers State is a possibility if the current trend of planning is discouraged. In the history of planning in Nigeria, there has never been any form of participatory planning adopted as most communities prefer to employ the services of land surveyors to parcellate the entire land without consulting capable town planners to design and execute functional layouts that are participatory. Implicitly, every step in the planning process in Nigeria is stale with no element of participatory planning. Even the Nigerian Urban and Regional Planning Law (Decree 88 of 1992) and the Rivers State Physical Planning and Development Law No. 6 of 2003 are all moribund and requires revisiting to accommodate the trend of participatory planning to ensure that most people are not excluded in the planning process.

Challenges militating against participatory planning

Rabinowitz⁷ asserts that it is imperative to anticipate and understand when to deploy participatory planning based on what

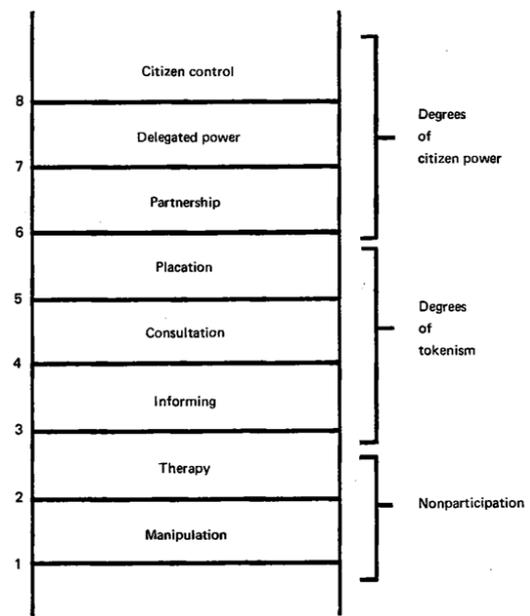
works well and what does not work well in the community. However, some challenges impede participatory planning but are not limited to these alone.

- i. It is a time-consuming process, requiring a longer time to get a conclusive decision on matters since it is a diverse group of participants.
- ii. There are chances of disagreements between the members of the community and 'experts' regarding decisions made during the planning process.
- iii. Education is key to achieving participatory planning, but it takes a long while to be educated. Being a community-based paradigm, it would involve members of the local community to participate actively. Most people in these communities would sometimes apply indigenous knowledge and require some Western education to avoid conflict between scientific knowledge and indigenous knowledge. Some may require new skills to fit into the narrative.
- iv. In most communities, some individuals are sometimes over-determined to participate, and this could ruin the entire process if not handled carefully, as it requires tact and toughness. For instance, if an individual feels convinced that he is the only knowledgeable person in the community, there could be challenges in the participatory planning process.
- v. There is the challenge of getting the right participants to the table. This is because some key stakeholders may not be willing to participate due to factions occasioned by political alignments or chieftaincy tussles in the community. Overcoming this hurdle could be very beneficial to all concerned in the long term.
- vi. Commitment and patience are vital in achieving participatory planning for every participant. Participants need to be encouraged to maintain their commitment over time to avoid misplacement of trust to deter people from compromising or losing interest in the entire process.
- vii. There are no deliberate policies that support participatory Planning in Nigeria. Government and its Agencies do not respect the rule of law and the wishes of most communities in the planning process.
- viii. The Land Use Act of 1978 does not encourage participatory planning because the holding rights defer greatly across the Nigerian geopolitical zones.

While these listed challenges present actual or potential challenges to achieving a successful participatory planning process, overcoming them may increase the possibility of designing and carrying out an effective community intervention.

Making participatory planning work

Arnstein (1969) eight rungs of the Ladder of Citizen Participation gives a clear path on how to achieve participatory planning in every sphere of communal engagement. These eight rungs include manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control. These indicators on the rung when implemented would further engender active participation in communities where participatory planning is introduced to achieve community-oriented goal. This approach would also lead to relative peace and stability as most people in the community would be considered as critical stakeholders and co-partners in communal projects within their domain.



Besides, in the opinion of Forsyth⁸ each community has a unique, citizen-driven Workplan developed in collaboration with various local partners, but the participatory planning approach employs a standard methodology. Communities could learn about this approach by exploring the process to engage a solid and effective representation for all and sundry involved, including targets of change, agents of change, and interested community members, including the funders.

- i. Targets of change are the specific net beneficiaries of the planning process. They could be classed into two broad categories.
- ii. Those from the target communities are the specific beneficiaries and others who share similar socio-cultural, language and age characteristics.
- iii. Actors who are the net beneficiaries of the planning process identity, trust, and rely on as significant contributors to the process, such as people who now move in circles of power, politicians, clergy, advisors, and former community members.
- iv. Agents of change represent individuals who can influence and make policies or public opinions for others. They include real-time policymakers and influential members of the community.
- v. Policymakers in this context connote elected, or appointed officials at every level of governance, university dons, researchers, and opinion leaders in the community who are experts on the issue is planned for.
- vi. Influential people in the community are members of the business community as they are very practical oriented, and it becomes handier when dealing with issues regarding the participatory planning process. These people are often seen as credible partners in progress with easy access to funds. Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs) and the clergy wield phenomenal influence on their followers. Incorporating them into the participatory planning process is very effective because FBOs exhibit a sense of purpose, communal cohesion, moral standing and can influence specific changes in the planning process. The media also has a significant influence on their active listenership.

- vii. Interested community members include school personnel, parents, and youth who are directly involved in dealing with youth. Most senior citizens have the time, experience, and desire to serve as community volunteers to shape and focus the thoughts of the youth in the participatory planning process.
- viii. Specific provisions to incorporate participatory planning into the planning laws at both state and national levels should be encouraged to engender comprehensive planning in the community.

Achieving a successful participatory planning process involves a holistic paradigm that should be tailored to suit the challenges and demands of the community designed in four phases.

Phase I

- I. It starts with the identification of the challenges of the community as stated by every stakeholder.
- II. Participants should Identify all the available and accessible resources in the form of human and material accessible to the community.

Phase II

- I. Conduct an engaging stakeholder engagement in the community
- II. Establish the aim and objectives for the design.
- III. Establish targets to be met with milestones.
- IV. Establish strategies that would facilitate the achievement of the set targets
- V. Share views and perceptions of suggested strategies.

Phase III

- I. Develop action plans to implement strategies through shared community views.
- II. Evaluation of the costs and benefits of social, economic, and environmental of the action plans.

Phase IV

- I. Monitoring progress of strategy implementation
 - II. Review progress of strategy implement
 - III. Post Impact Assessment
 - IV. Communication of impact and review of set aim & objectives
- Figure 1.⁹⁻¹³

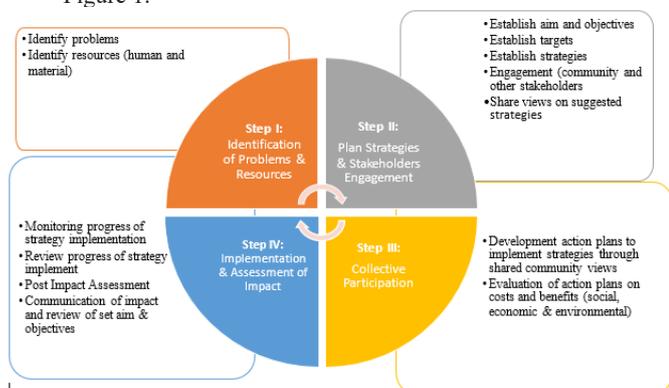


Figure 1 Proposed Framework for Participatory Planning.

Source: Researcher's conceptualisation, 2021.

Conclusion

The participatory planning approach is a planning paradigm that involves every stakeholder in the community. It is one of the most inclusive and effective ways to plan a community because it provides community support and ownership of the planning process because it has information regarding the community, past mistakes, history, and politics. It also provides a voice and respect for everyone as it takes care, time, commitment, and mutual respect. To conduct a successful participatory planning process, it incorporates a carefully considered level of participation as the most appropriate given the circumstances. Participatory planning also ensures that every stakeholder's identity is part of the team by deploying effective communication techniques designed to accommodate everyone. Adequate care must be considered in getting the process started because the persons and methods chosen to be on the committee should have a significant impact on how many participants could be attracted. The process must be maintained over time so that momentum will not be lost. If the planning process meets all these requirements, there is every likelihood that they will be established a thriving community planning that genuinely works and meets the community's needs.

Participatory planning has a place in Nigeria and, by extension Rivers State, given the existing planning scenario. Therefore, it is not out of place to assert that participatory planning is not yet a catalyst towards effective community Planning in Nigeria until the extant Planning Laws NURPL Decree 88 of 1992 now CAP N138 LFN 2004 and Rivers State Physical Planning and Development Law No. 6 of 2003) have been amended to accommodate participatory planning as a statutory paradigm embedded in the Laws. Besides, there has been a social disconnect between the proponents of the planning process and the net beneficiaries of the planning process. If considered and implemented, these amendments would ensure that critical stakeholders and partners are actively engaged throughout the planning process with a sense of ownership that is hinged on mutual trust and further forge a bond of lasting partnership in planning progress.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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