

Participatory or manipulative? Civil participation in event-led regeneration and development in the London 2012 and the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games

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In the 1990s, the emergence of network governance denotes the changing role of external actors in policy process. The opinion input from external actors has been regarded as the essentiality to better policy output. In the phase of policy design, civil participation is capable of infusing local wisdom and accessing to local needs. After policy implementation, it can also provide feedback on service delivery (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2004). In short, good governance entails sufficient civil participation.

With strong local-bounded tendency and huge impacts on the neighbourhood, the regeneration of urban space is a policy area demanding great extent of civil participation. However, there is always a discrepancy between the ideal and the reality. The primary reason for the disappointing discrepancy can be pinpointed to the lack of power redistribution. As Arnstein (1969: 216) indicated, the 'redistribution of power' should be the cornerstone of any participation mechanism. Otherwise, it is doomed to be an institutionalised container for the frustration of the powerless and for the consolidation of existing power relations. This deep-rooted problem leads to the asymmetry of resources and exists at both community and the extra-community levels. Within community, the issue stance of those who have more resources than other members tends to be mistaken as a unified community stance. At extra-community level, compared to resourceful levels of government and well-connected developers, community representatives need to pass the high threshold— being both Knowledgeable about community development and skillful in negotiation— if one wants to play a non-tokenistic part in the participation scheme.

When the Olympic Games come into play, the scenario can only be worsened. Games-led regeneration and development projects hardly yield a participatory participation scheme. The 'mega-ness' of a mega-event prefigures an undemocratic delivery pattern. Time pressure is an example. '[The] externally imposed, although internally interpreted, timetable' (Atkinson, 1999: 69) limit the possibility and scope of civil participation. The spirit for meaningful participation— time-consuming opinion exchange and consultations— in nature contradicts with the non-negotiable deadline of staging the Olympic Games. Little room has been left for addressing wider social problems deriving from 'a neo-liberal understanding of globalization' (Bailey, 2010: 325). Hence, the greater scale the regeneration and development project involves, the less participatory the participation scheme would be.

Choosing the London 2012 and the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games as cases for comparison, this project explores the civil participation in Games-led regeneration and development. Through survey, semi-structured interview and archive analysis, I argue that civil participation functions as a manipulative mechanism designed and implemented to enable the delivery of the Games. In London case, the Olympics-framed discourse of East London regeneration has

rendered the imagination, discussion and aspiration of regeneration projects rather limited. And such limitedness is intended. In Beijing case, civil participation Games-led development is nothing but a formality for successful land expropriation. Hence, in both cases, participation is either a way to contain dissents to regeneration projects or a formality for successful land expropriation. Irrespective of their different political regimes, the low extent of genuine civil participation in Game-led regeneration and development is shared. Civil participation is a necessity that enables the Games, not the other way round. The idealistic claim that the hosting of a mega-event is potentially an emancipation for diversity and democracy is not only illusionary but also sugar-coating the manipulative tendency.

Being composed of four parts, this paper will start from a brief review of the paradigm shift from new public management to network governance in the 1990s. The shift announces the recognition of the importance and the legitimacy of including multiple actors into policy process. Civil participation has thus become integral to good policy. The discussion helps to identify how network governance contributes to the prevalence of hosting mega-events. Following that will come a literature and empirical review of event-led regeneration and development. Through the investigation, how hosting a mega-event may accelerate the pace and expand the scale of regeneration and development projects will be revealed. The third part of the paper will be dedicated to the analysis of the two cases— the London 2012 and the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. In spite of their diverse aspirations on Games-led regeneration and development, the two Olympics Games show a similar attribute of lacking genuine and meaningful civil participation.

This paper, as a result, will conclude with an ambitious challenge on the feasibility and possibility of meaningful civil participation in network governance, especially in an era when globalisation penetrates all geographical scales and wipes out the existence of purely local issues, and in a circumstance that the resources possessed by actors involved— international, national and local ones— are apparently asymmetrical.

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Paper presented at the RC21 International Conference on “The transgressive city: Comparative perspectives on governance and the possibilities of everyday life in the emerging global city” Mexico City, 21-23 July 2016. <http://rc21-mexico16.colmex.mx/index.php>

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