Reading between the Lines of Participation:
Exploring the Multiplicity of Perceptions and Assumptions in Creating Participatory Spaces within Toronto Community Housing

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Abstract: This paper aims to critically engage with the strategy and practice of community-based management in the complex context of Toronto's densely populated social housing portfolio where blended populations from around the world reside. A specific challenge is presented as a major barrier to genuine tenant participation. This challenge persists due to the conflicting perceptions and assumptions amongst the stakeholders on what participation is and who should participate.

Introduction

More than ever before, people from both rural and urban areas of the global south are streaming steadily into large Canadian urban centres. The most populated cities of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver while housing a third of Canadians are new home to more than 60% of immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2011). The increase and change in population in the last 20 years in these three cities has been considerable. Toronto, for example, has approximately 5.5 million Canadians in 2011, compared to 3.8 million in 1991. Recent immigrants are streaming steadily to these larger Canadian urban centres despite issues of employment, housing, education, and health concerns. There, as Saunders (2010) argues, they create "arrival cities," clusters of migrants in inner city pockets or on the city outskirts who struggle to build communities, establish a new life and integrate themselves socially and economically, and often to move out to more prosperous areas, creating new room for the next migrating family. I agree with Saunders that these diverse urban locales or "arrival cities" are the places where "the next great economic and cultural boom will be born and can be the launching pads for migrants' upward social mobility or where the next great explosion of violence will occur." The difference, he argues, depends on "our ability to notice and our willingness to engage" (p. 3). This paper is an effort to notice and critically engage with the practice of community engagement in the complex context of Toronto's densely populated social housing portfolio where blended populations from around the world reside. I focus on Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) as a place of immigrants' learning and integration.

In a previous CASAE conference I presented the tenants' informal, yet significant, citizenship learning through the Tenant Participation System (TPS), the community engagement strategy implemented by the TCHC (see Foroughi, 2010). In this paper I will assess individual-level perspectives and effects of participation as experienced by tenants, staff and management and highlight a specific challenge, which I refer to as communicative Problématique, in creating enabling structures to nurture community and learning within such a diverse and complicated setting. This paper is a result of a qualitative case study with over one hundred hours of observation of the work of TPS and in-depth interviews with over thirty five TCHC's tenant representatives, staff and managers.

Tenant Participation

TCHC is the largest publicly owned housing authority in Canada. It houses over 164,000 tenants, six percent of the city's population. In addition to a large number of refugees and new immigrants, there are seniors, persons with special needs and families residing in relatively affordable TCHC apartments and houses. The housing portfolio of TCHC is varied and scattered across the city. The TCHC itself is a relatively new enterprise. It was formed in 2002 as part of the merger of the Metro Toronto Housing Corporation and the Toronto Housing Company.

As part of its mandate TCHC aims to change the face and culture of social housing in Toronto (TCHC, 2006). Since its inception, the TCHC has emphasized its commitment to creating healthy communities in which tenants have a sense of social inclusion. The commitment to quality communities, quality housing and quality services has been highlighted throughout the TCHC's annual Business Plans (TCHC, 2006). To accomplish this, TCHC management has incorporated community-based management plans and tenant participation to be essential parts of the governance structure of the TCHC. This suggests an enormous shift in values, roles and responsibilities of conventional public housing management. Rather than control by bureaucrats and expert elites, this calls for managers and staff to lead facilitative roles in developing partnerships with tenants and other community stakeholders.

The TPS works in the following way: within each Community Housing Unit (CHU), the manager develops local business plans and allocates resources in partnership with the tenant council, also known as the "CHU council". Each CHU council develops an accountability framework so that tenants can keep the TCHC accountable on decisions made and issues that need to be addressed. Within the framework of the TPS, tenant representatives are also involved in a participatory budgeting exercise at both the CHU and city-wide levels. At the CHU level, through their input into the CHU business plans, tenant representatives have the opportunity to influence funding priorities, and through an annual city-wide initiative, tenant representatives allocate scarce capital dollars in areas with the highest impact on tenants' lives (TCHC, 2006). There are multiple opportunities for participation as well as spaces of interaction among tenants, staff and other community stakeholders within TCHC's community engagement initiatives. Some of these include: an election process, community organizing and education, community councils, community planning forums, and city-wide budgeting forums. In short, the TPS has intended to enable a collaborative management structure in which tenants and their representatives work with each other and with management.

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Communicative Problématique

The TPS has been developed to build and maintain a sense of community and to engender a cooperative spirit among tenants, staff and management to co-formulate solutions to local housing problems. Although these goals are reiterated by the TCHC in various ways, it is misleading to assume that a clear consensus exists on what the goals indicate and the means by which they are to be attained. As one of the managers clarified, the TPS was "so undefined; tenants got it and defined it how they wanted to."

Since my early days of engagement with this research I found one significant yet unnoticed challenge that soon became apparent; I realized that there exists a multiplicity of perceptions,

assumptions and expectations of TPS amongst tenant representatives, staff and managers. The tenant representatives, staff and management each developed expectations on the roles tenant representatives should play and how the participatory process should be structured. The lack of common understanding over the concept of tenant participation has created varying kinds and degrees of contested and unmanageable expectations, which negatively and severely affect the outcome of the TPS. I refer to this challenge as the *communicative problématique*. For example, the TPS is perceived as a liberating empowerment tool for tenants by some, while for others it is solely perceived as a management strategy to channel, and sometimes abort, the tenants' complaining voice. Due to the fact that these perceptions are ever present, yet rarely interrogated, I argue that it hinders effective processes of collaboration.

Frontline staff. One major challenge I found early on is the attitude of the frontline staff towards the tenant representatives as legitimate partners in decision-making. Rather, they prefer to stay in their formal roles and perform their bureaucratic duties with no or minimum tenant involvement, as it had been the case before. There is a tendency amongst the frontline staff to stay distant from the people and communities they are meant to serve. This is elaborated by the following comments made by three community housing managers in relation to the involvement of frontline staff in tenants-centred initiatives:

> We have this problem here, the un-preparedness of staff to do participation, I do not know how to build the capacity in them to understand and feel that this is a better way. Do not be afraid of the conflicts [with tenants].

> It [the problem of staff] is definitely a huge challenge; it is part of the resistant. They are the front… one of my staff [who was unwilling to accept participation as a principle] is on leave so I am happy now… It is lots of stress, [it is] a huge issue.

> What is common among the staff is that they say "you keep cutting back, cutting back and then giving money to tenants to make decisions for. Or staff have discussed [amongst themselves] that tenants have not been able to manage their life very well; that is why some of them find their lives in the social housing and now they have to manage 9 million dollars!

From this and many similar comments and my own observations, I can argue that there exists notable lack of willingness by some front-line staff to treat tenants as equal partners or even accept their presence in the community decision-making domain. Tenants are perceived as incapable of effective participation and that inviting them to partake in the budgeting process is "a waste of time and money". This attitude clearly impedes the growth of a participatory culture within collaborative initiatives with tenants.

I should note that the TPS is introduced at the time that the staff has witnessed massive budget cuts as the result of amalgamation of social housing in Toronto. In a conversation with one of the TCHC's program managers, she explained that staff has always been instructed on efficient utilization of resources, results-based performance measurement and professional expertise for program planning and budget allocation. Specifically in this era of fiscal imbalances, the application of these indicators seems even more essential. She further added that, in relation to

the participatory budgeting exercise, the staff often feels that the TCHC assigns the presumably incapable and inexperienced tenants to participate in housing expenditure management.

I have also realized that the implementation of the TPS was initially sketched and planned by the TCHC top authorities and tenant activist leaders, without representation of frontline staff. I suspect that this lack of inclusion is also another reason why there is an unenthusiastic attitude towards the TPS among the frontline staff. There are also other issues related to the social welfare environment in which the staff interacts with the tenants on unequal terms. The staff is used to a relationship where they intrude upon tenants' lives to scrutinize their expenses, determine their rents, and demand the arrears. In this zero-sum power relationship, the TPS calls for power sharing between the power-holder (staff) and the powerless (tenants). The tenants are not accustomed to possessing the power to determine their welfare, and neither tenants nor staff is accustomed to working as partners. One of the highly engaged tenant representatives with no hesitation, referred to frontline staff as "wicked." She explained that the only times they spend time in her community are "when they are giving notices to people." As this and the following remarks by community housing managers highlight, this problem clearly creates tension amongst the main two stakeholders, front-line staff and tenants:

> You have to say people whose job is to monitor them [the tenants] to let them have a say; staff would say: 'What! These are the people who I watch every day; now you are telling me that I cannot tell them what to do.' The challenge is huge in the context of society as well as the housing and the social service delivery. This is not just a project; this is a life change… It is like having homeless people have a say in determining what food they want to have or what type of programs they prefer to have, you would have the same problem with the homelessness sector staff.

> The problem [with frontline staff] is attitude and perception. Behind the counter they hold power and there is no power on the other side of the counter. They don't get it, I have discussion about it; they don't get it... they don't care and they're rude, they're racist. Every day I have a complaint. They work hard, but it is their attitude.

The question of staff is indeed an important one. They are in constant contact with the tenant population for the very tangible matters of their lives. Such harsh and seemingly impenetrable perceptions of tenants call for a focused agenda to ameliorate this reality. The importance of this change is paramount, if staff members do not join in promoting and accommodating the participatory process and do not integrate these systemic changes into their practice, the chances that many local initiatives will fail are deemed to be high.

Community Housing Managers. Moving from the frontline staff, here I will discuss how the commitment to participation on behalf of the management takes various shapes and forms. The TPS is generally perceived as a process through which tenants are made aware of the TCHC's programs and are consulted on the TCHC's policies, as well as being permitted to participate in some priority setting exercises at their community. In so doing, the TCHC has set no restrictions on the degree of participation. Therefore, the quality of participation depends on the quality of interaction and collaboration among the tenant representatives, staff and management at any given community. The TCHC developed a participatory space that facilitates

and regulates the presence of tenant representatives in the community councils and the participatory budgeting process. Yet how this participatory process is to be implemented has largely been left to the discretion of the community management.

There seems to be four prevalent perceptions driving the participatory agenda at the management level. First and foremost, the CHU managers and the head office coordinators emphasized the benefit of the TPS in providing a ground for information sharing between tenants and management. It is believed to be a win-win situation since both parties gain useful information from this process. The tenant representatives inform the management of the existing problems and the management informs them of the policies and programs. In this way the TPS is widely believed to be an information sharing exercise. The second of four perceptions of the TPS is that it provides an opportunity for tenants to take some degree of ownership over their place of residence, which in turn serves three main goals: reducing the housing expenditures, increasing community safety and enhancing policy efficiency. Thirdly, the TPS is perceived as an accountability framework. Here the TCHC is seen to make the CHU management accountable to the needs of the tenants and those of the communities they serve. Part of the perception that the TPS serves as an accountability framework involved how managers and tenants perceive each other. While some managers see tenant representatives as the "loyal opposition to the CHU manager", or "the party in opposition", others see them as part of the CHU management team, thus their role is rather to collaborate with the management and be accountable to the general tenant population. The fourth perception is that the TPS provides a learning opportunity for the tenant representatives to practice formal decision-making and community planning, which otherwise they would not have the opportunity for (see Foroughi, 2010, for an elaborated account on tenants' learning within TPS). Thus, it is believed that the TPS contributes to tenants' education, providing an opportunity for tenant representatives to gain interpersonal and managerial skills: "They get to exercise some decision-making ability around spending money"; "residents get experiences, like [learning] how to sit on the board and how to manage a session", explained a manager.

In sum, it is believed that higher rates of information-sharing develop into more relevant and appropriate housing services being delivered to tenants, which results in more tenant satisfaction (increased accountability to the tenants), and stronger partnerships, with enhanced feeling of ownership by the community; and tenants' learning, through the TPS, enhances the quality of communication and information sharing, thus creating more effective partnerships.

Tenant Representatives. In this section I briefly highlight what a notable number of tenant respondents suggest, that the community housing managers and the staff deliberately or unintentionally, invite the participation of the tenant representatives in only what they consider appropriate. The dominant perception amongst the managers, as discussed above, is that the TPS is an information sharing exercise. As a result, tenant participation is described as a strategy to not only accommodate staff shortage in community offices but also buy-in the general tenant population to whatever policies and procedures that the staff and management have previously planned for:

I think it is downloading of the staff works and responsibilities onto tenants. Because they just went through amalgamation. TCHC tries to use us as tenant liaisons. They call it TPS we call it "can you do something for our work, please?"

You know all these hours we put save them lots of dollars. Bringing info to the management is an unpaid job. We provide lots of good info for the management.

This TPS is good for the TCHC authorities to make out of us a human shield against what they want to fight for. They come up with proposals and we believe we should say yes to those proposals. This is how things are delivered to us.

It is supposed to be tenant driven, but it's not [been] so. At CHU meetings, [there is] very little space, they bring their own agenda which is another thing I don't consider [that] tenant participation because they have their own stuff that they want to deal with first and then there is a little point in the agenda for [all the other] eleven tenant representatives and then if you have something to bring, you bring it there.

Even though some CHU managers promote participation but they support and prefer to get the participation for what they like. How about if a tenant rep disagrees with them, is there support for participation even if they do not agree?

What the above comments suggest are the lack of opportunities for the representatives' input and an overwhelming attention to the policies addressing the interests of the management and the TCHC. The immediate negative consequence of this has been dispiriting activist tenant representatives. As one of the managers indicated, "The best tenants are the ones who leave and we will be left with those who are resistant to change and want to keep their community homogenous".

Conclusion

In this paper, I briefly discussed a specific challenge that I found hindering the sustenance of collaborative partnerships with tenants. I emphasized that although the TPS has been defined by the TCHC, it is wrong to assume that it can be objectively or technically practiced based on the TCHC's blueprint. I demonstrated that the staff and management have diverse perspectives and multiple experiences with regard to the concept of participation, which creates a host of challenges that I referred to as the communicative problématique. To put it rather bluntly, the simple question "*what is it that we want to achieve through the TPS?"* has not been sufficiently discussed by the TCHC management and staff members responsible for tenant participation. Consequently, the TPS was moulded into a rather confusing format for the tenant representatives. This challenge is significant and it does persist for one reason - that tenant representatives are neither perceived as sufficiently capable nor are they perceived as partners in decision-making. The predominant view of the TPS is information sharing in which tenant representatives are perceived as solely the communicative partners of the management, rather than genuine partners in decision-making. Further discussion of the issues that this challenge raises and some consideration of how it can be addressed could help us better understand this phenomenon, and to scale up or replicate such participatory practices in a more genuine way in this or other settings.

Finally, now that participation is finding its way to all layers of community work and local governance. It is imperative to assess the preparedness of public servants for their new roles as communicators and social facilitators rather than blunt bureaucrats. In this case, a lack of understanding of the concept of participatory management amongst the staff was starkly evident. Alongside the implementation of such participatory programs there needs to be strategies for human resource development for such public domains of participatory action.

References

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