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Deliberative Democracy: An Analysis of Citizens’ Perspective in Buyukkonuk – North Cyprus

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Abstract

It is no secret that deliberative democracy has had a positive effect on social sustainability in many regions of the world; this has led to strident calls for it to replace elite democratic practices. This paper is based on research carried out in Buyukkonuk Village, an eco-tourism village and in the Walled City of Famagusta, North Cyprus, investigating people’s views and perceptions concerning community participation in the decision making process. The major aim is to find out the opinion of the local populace on the merits or otherwise of deliberative democracy and its impact on the improvement in their quality of life.

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1. Introduction

The concept of deliberative democracy is not a recent development as purported. Before westernisation and its attendant labels of democracy and legislature, man lived in small communities where decision making and community participation in community projects had been mandatory. Local village chiefs and family heads met on issues ranging from improving farming and fishing methods, to deciding on the ideal

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punishment for a criminal, right down to the community providing financial and physical support to help a new couple put up their first matrimonial home.

With the on-set of westernization and in the case of developing countries, the issue of colonization, western forms of governance were seen as more civilised and traditional forms of governance were discarded.

Deliberative democracy, which can also be referred to as community participation in decision making or, community involvement in decision making, has had a positive effect on social sustainability in many regions in the world. It is a means of bestowing authority on the citizenry; publications by authors such as Dumreicher and Kolb (2008) support this fact. Although there have been strident calls for it to replace elite democratic practises elsewhere, not much literature is available especially with regards to North Cyprus. In this study, research was carried out in Buyukkonuk Village, an eco-village and in the Walled City of Famagusta in North Cyprus, with regards to the views of people concerning the issue of community participation in the decision making process.

The major aim of this research paper is to find out the opinion of the local populace on the merits or otherwise of deliberative democracy and, how this has impacted on the improvement in their quality of life. The primary mode through which the people’s views would be conveyed are through surveys specifically; questionnaires, personal observations, photographs and interviews. The ideology of Cultural Relativity maintains that though one principle may work in one community it is no guarantee that it would work in the next. Academicians such as Hofsted (1984) reiterate this fact. Moreover, there are still people in two extreme ends of the divide who cannot seem to come to an agreement as to whether the local populace should be involved in decision making or, if decision making be left exclusively in the hands of a few experts and the government. There have been no research works that have attempted to find out the benefits of community participation in North Cyprus. This paper attempts via surveys to answer this question and determine empirically if community participation is needful. Thus two towns which have had different experiences with regards to the participation of their citizenry in the decision making process are chosen. While the citizens of Buyukkonuk have been in a number of cases involved in the choice of developmental projects and its execution, residents in Walled City on the other hand, are usually not involved in decision making and all decisions are made by the municipal authority.

1.1. Brief background

The re-introduction of community participation in decision making took the momentum in the early 1960’s and 1970’s. Some countries took the bold initiative to involve their citizenry in decision making at the local or grass-roots level. This contributed in no small way in improving the economies of those particular communities. The active participation of the citizenry in decision making spurs an upsurge of national or civic pride in the citizenry. The thought of taking a project from its birthing stages to maturity, fosters a unique sense of achievement and it has been proven that projects that are community initiated tend to out-live those that are not. This is so because, community initiated projects has as it were, ‘the blood, tears and sweat of the community’, thus, the culture of maintenance is invariably adopted.

On the other hand, in the case where the project’s existence is decided on by a group of experts and the sitting government, it now and then leads to apathy as, the community may not want that particular project at the said time and in some cases, boycott it completely. Several publications such as, Ekblom (2005), Newman (1997), Lawson (2007, 9), exemplify the government initiated project of Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis Missourii, which had to be bombed as a result of under-utilization of the project leading to the area becoming a principal crime area.

Porto Alegre in Brazil in contrast is one of the popular success stories of deliberative democracy. Through the “Participatory Budget” where the population had a say on what projects they wanted
implemented and which they did not, quality of life improved tremendously. In depth analysis of this project is provided by a number of authors such as, Novy (2005), de Sousa Santos (1998), Wright (2003, 45).

In spite of the wide spread acceptance of the belief that community participation is necessary in decision making, some doubts have been expressed about its desirability and its benefits to society. Some people such as; Kontoleon et.al (2001) Cutler and Johnson (1975) are of the view that decision making should be left to some experts while others like, Fischer (1993) cling to the view that, community participation is necessary. Some of the reasons people give for non-community participation in decision making include;

They believe that governments and their technical experts have better knowledge on a community project implementation. Furthermore, they insist that the government always has its way, regardless of the community’s views. That involving the community would lead to a longer time spent before the realisation of the project is achieved. This paper attempts to provide answers to these questions by carrying out research via survey in Buyukkonuk and Walled City of Famagusta in North Cyprus.

2. Literature Review

In the literature, research abounds in the attempt to determine if community participation, which underpins the concept of social sustainability, is actually suitable for the common good of society. Perhaps understanding social sustainability can help the effort to discuss what community participation means. There are many definitions of social sustainability, but the definition that captures the complexities inherent in social sustainability and provides a holistic assessment of the topic is the definition proffered by McKenzie (2004); he defines it as “a life-enhancing condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition” McKenzie (2004). McKenzie is of the opinion that the said condition includes equal access to key services such as health care, education, and so on. He further posits that social sustainability is a melting point of cultural relations where, the positive aspects of different cultures are promoted and integrated. He goes on to stress the importance of active participation of the local citizenry in all manner of political activities especially at the grassroots level.

However is community participation suitable for the common good of society? In a research analysis of, 444 families in New York O’Hara (1999) sought to engage the local community and, identify their most pressing needs and requirements. The researchers used questions designed by local residents and community organizations in order to identify neighbourhood needs and skills which could aid or increase local development. It was noted that the top needs and requirements of the citizenry were not the priorities of the local government agencies. The survey proves that local government officials should always involve the local citizenry in identifying project needs and not just make assumptions.

In an even earlier work Rossi (1957) analyses research trends or approaches in the decision-making literature with, the aim of determining the most beneficial system of decision-making for the public good. Three decision-making approaches are defined and analysed. The first approach is termed the decision maker approach. In this approach, research is made on the persons and personal characteristics of the decision makers or people in positions of authority. These researches might either be simplistic and can focus on issues such as age, occupation and education or might be advanced or deal with attitudinal issues. The aim of this kind of research is to draw conclusions from the deviation of decision makers from the general populace and how that affects the quality of the decisions they make. The second approach is termed the Partisan approach and studies the social environment of the decision makers. An attempt is made to explore the effect people of power and influence have on, policy decision maker and if at all it
influences their decisions. The third and final approach is termed the Process approach and seeks to study the whole decision making approach from its inception to its conclusion.

In Clark’s (1968) study conducted on 51 different American communities spanning 22 states, questionnaires administered to respondents sought to determine important decision making actors. The results of this study were very instructive and perhaps present the most convincing proof as to the benefits of deliberative democracy as it showed empirically that communities with a decentralized decision making system had a higher number of citizen involvement in decisions which leads to a higher level of the community budget expenditures and urban renewal programs.

Wates (2000) stresses the need for local involvement in decision making at the community level as, this leads to better management and planning of the environment which ultimately leads to a more sustainable community.

Rowe and Frewer, (2000) in their article; “Public Participation and Consultation Methods, a Framework for Evaluation”, are of the view that public involvement in the decision making process leads to less clashes and protests against the government in power by the citizenry. Though in their view, involving a large number of people in the decision making process is likely to take longer time and is not without its share of problems, the advantages are more long-lasting than the few mishaps there off.

In light of the reviewed works in this paper, it is obvious that community involvement in decision making is beneficial to local communities. This prevents local governmental officials from providing what they assume the people need. Instead serves as an avenue for the local citizenry to indicate their needs and how they feel they will be better served. Furthermore, empirical results from a couple of surveys and analysis determine that a decentralized decision making process makes for greater community involvement and better governance for local communities.

2.1. Introduction to Buyukkonuk and the Walled City (Famagusta)

In this work, the towns of Buyukkonuk and Walled City in North Cyprus were chosen as the location for the investigation of the effects of deliberative democracy. Fig.1 (a) shows a map of North Cyprus highlighting the towns of Buyukkonuk and Walled City (Famagusta). The town of Buyukkonuk is bordered by Iskele and Mehmetcik and has a total population of about 1,132 people (TRNC 2006 Population & Dwelling Census). The industrial enterprise of the village is mostly agrarian with a large portion of its produce ranging from grains (barley and wheat) to vegetables, fig trees amongst other cash crops.

Buyukkonuk has however, carved a niche for itself and has overtime become known as a model village and one with an eco tourism drive. Oktay et.al, (2003). There have been a lot of initiatives initiated by the municipality, international donors, and the community, to sustain and promote their unique cultural heritage and do so in an environmentally friendly fashion. The international organization most devoted to this initiative is the United States Agency for International Development, (USAID) ably assisted by the Turkish embassy.

Amongst the many initiatives being embarked on to maintain their cultural heritage in the village, three projects stand out.
The first is the design and building of accommodation facilities (village styled) in order to cater for the increasing number of visitors. The second initiative is the restoration of buildings which will house village arts and crafts finally a welcome plaza which is shown in Fig. 1. (b).

The Walled City on the other hand, with a population of about 2,026 people (TRNC 2006 Population & Dwelling Census) is an integral part of the Famagusta Municipality and town and it would be out of scope of this paper to discuss the city of Famagusta. In the Walled City however, there are a couple of projects that aim to restore the area to its former glory showcasing its cultural heritage. An example is a United Nations Development Programme (U.N.D.P) funded project that renovated the “Bandabuliya” (which means covered market). The “Bandabuliya” however was not resorted to its former usage. It now serves a location for a number of restaurants and a club. The renovation of the “Bandabuliya” nonetheless did not increase patronage for restaurants and shops in the building. On the contrary most times, the building is empty. The people living in the Walled-City do not like its present function and were never consulted when this change was made.

3. Methodology Employed

The survey was conducted by; questionnaires, interviews, personal observations and analysis of photographs. Participants were selected from the two townships of Buyukkonuk and Walled City at random.

Since the areas of the case study have predominantly Turkish speakers, the questionnaires were translated into Turkish whilst, in the case of the interviews where respondents could not understand English, the help of a translator was enlisted.

The methodology employed in this research work consisted of questionnaires distributed to a sample of the population in Buyukkonuk and Walled City. The questionnaire consisted of carefully prepared questions that sought to gauge the opinions of local residents on the issue of deliberative democracy. A total of 80 questionnaires were given out in the case study areas. 40 in Buyukkonuk, and 40 in the Walled City of Famagusta. Out of the eighty questionnaires handed out, 60 were returned. That is 75% of the questionnaires. Out of the questionnaires filled, 21 were by females whilst 39 by males. ‘15’ of the questionnaires were filled by people between the ages of 16 – 24 (25% of the returned questionnaires), ‘17’ by people between the ages of 25 – 34 (28.3% of the returned questionnaires), ‘18’ by people between the ages of 35 – 44 (30% of the returned questionnaires), ‘7’ by people between the ages of 45 – 54 (11.6% of the returned questionnaires), none by people between the ages of 55 – 64, two by people between the ages of 65 – 74 (3.3% of the returned questionnaires) and one was filled by a person between the ages of 75 – 84 (1.6% of the returned questionnaires). Ten interviews were also conducted, five in Buyukkonuk and the remainder in Walled City. The interviews were personal (one-on-one) interviews.
and conducted in English and some cases with the help of a translator. The interviewed respondents confirmed that they were indigene of the respective communities, gave their opinions of the way decision making was handled in the community and proffered solutions on how they thought it could be improved. The general consensus among all the interviewed respondents in both communities was that deliberative democracy was helpful and should be encouraged.

4. Results Obtained

The purpose of this research endeavour is to find out the importance of ‘deliberative democracy’ and its pros and cons. Questionnaires were handed to participants at random in the two locations; there was no discrimination with regards to age or sex, however, in Walled City, participants were not readily forthcoming with information and had to be cajoled in filling the questionnaires.

Forty participants were given questionnaires in Walled City, and out if this number, twenty-three were returned, whilst of the forty given questionnaires in Buyukkonuk, thirty–seven people returned theirs. The questionnaires sought the response of community members on the following issues:

- Relationship between the community and its leaders.
- Percentage of respondents occupying leadership positions.
- Percentage of respondents involved in decision making.
- Opinion of respondents on community participation in decision making.
- Satisfaction with the decision making process.
- Desirous of change in the decision making process.

Findings of the survey reveal that on the issue of the relationship between the community and its leaders, 30% of Walled City respondents think it is good, 40% consider it to be fair, while 30% consider it to be poor. In Buyukkonuk on the other hand, 30% think the relationship between the community and its leaders is good, 70% consider it to be fair, while 0% consider it to be poor. Fig. 2. (a) Provides a graph of the results from both communities.

Out of the respondents interviewed in Walled City, 20% had leadership roles in the community whilst 60% of the respondents in Buyukkonuk had leadership roles in the community. Fig. 2 (b) provides a graph of the results from both communities. It was discovered that on the issue of actively participating in decision making, none are very actively involved in Walled City, 10 % fairly actively, 30% try to partake, 60 % partake when necessary and 10% do not partake. In Buyukkonuk, none are very active, 10% fairly active, 60% try to take part, 20% take part when necessary and 10% do not take part in the process.
Fig. 3. (a) % Participating in Active Decision Making; (b) Opinion of Respondents on Community Participation in Decision Making.

Fig. 3. (a) provides a graph of the results from both communities. On the opinion of respondents on community participation in decision making in general, in the Walled City 80% think it is a good idea to involve the community in the decision making process, while, 10% consider it to be not a good idea, 10% do not know. In Buyukkonuk, 70% think it is a good idea to involve the community in the decision making process, while none consider it to be not a good idea, 30% do not know. Fig.3. (b) Provides a graph of the results from both communities. On the issue of the satisfaction of the respondents with the decision making process, 10% of the Walled City 60% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 20% fairly dissatisfied, none were very dissatisfied. In Buyukkonuk none were very satisfied with decisions taken in the community so far, 50% were fairly satisfied, 40% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, 10% fairly dissatisfied, none were very dissatisfied. Fig.4. (a) Provides a graph of the results from both communities.
Some of the suggestions Walled City participants made regarding how they would want things to be done differently with regards to decision making included:
- Public education on projects before they are undertaken.
- Local representatives should be given more voice at the municipality level.

100% of the respondents would prefer future surveys to be done by questionnaires and not by email, post or telephone.

In Buyukkonuk, some of the suggestions participants made regarding how they would want things to be done differently with regards to decision making included:
- Community budgetary allocation should be increased.
- Better administration of community involvement in decision making.

100% would prefer future surveys to be done by questionnaire, and not by email, post or telephone.

From the survey, in Fig. 2 (a) it is obvious that, the citizens of Buyukkonuk believe that the relationship between the people and the leaders is good and fair with most of the citizens Fig. 2(b) have leadership responsibility, it can thus be deduced that the people in Buyukkonuk are more involved and therefore, no one thinks the relationship is poor hence, more satisfaction as shown in fig. 2(a). Compared to those of the Walled-City, the citizens of Buyukkonuk are more proactive as there are more people involved in the decision making process Fig. 3 (a) while in the Walled-City, the citizenry take part in deliberations only when necessary. With regards to community involvement in decision making, Fig. 3(b) none of the respondents in Buyukkonuk think it is a bad idea. These deduced trends highlight the participatory nature of the citizens of Buyukkonuk. Consequently participatory nature in Buyukkonuk is not forced or orchestrated but flows naturally perhaps out of the strong bond that exists in a village setting where everyone is his/her brothers’ keeper. In conclusion from Fig.4(b), even though the people in Buyukkonuk are more satisfied in the decision making process, they are still interested in improving the system. This reiterates my position that since Buyukkonuk is a village-like setting where everyone is tied to one another with an economic incentive to keep the environment at its best, so there is more input from all and sundry and consequently a better environment.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The examination of the two communities with regards to deliberative democracy proved that, even though, the time frame for the deliberative process is lengthy, its benefits surpass its disadvantages. Even though one school of thought thinks it is best for the decision making be left solely in the hands of the government and its experts, results obtained from the survey indicate that community participation is indeed crucial. Through the research, it became obvious that the citizenry want to play an active role in the decision making process. This they saw as their democratic and civic right.

Though deliberative democracy is being practiced on a small scale through the local village co-operative in Buyukkonuk, its positive effects are already bearing fruits. According to a USAID report of 2009, as a result of the co-operative initiated eco-days in Buyukkonuk, a combination of local and foreign tourism has increased from approximately, 240 in 2005 to 8000 in 2009. This has led to an increase in household income as a result of the patronization of local handicrafts, goods and services in the village.

In order for the success of deliberative democracy process:
- Communities should work in close collaboration with the universities on the island with regards to specific projects. For example, if there is to be an architectural project to be undertaken, the communities should fraternise with the architectural faculties in the universities on the island, to work collectively with the municipality and the funding organisations.
- The administrative process of deliberative democracy should be simple and graphic so, everyone can easily understand.
A model of the decision making process should be designed so, it can be reciprocated in other communities on the island.

Since there are lots of historic old buildings in the two communities especially and in North Cyprus in general, with the involvement of the community, a scheme to restore them should be undertaken so it can benefit the citizens economically.

References


Appendix A.

A.1. Questionnaire Survey - Buyukkonuk

This questionnaire is to find out your views concerning community participation in decision making process and whether you think this is the best approach to be used for developmental projects in this area. This is strictly confidential and your answers will be used only for research purposes. Thanks for your time.
(i) Name of community ____________________
(ii) How long have you lived in this community ___________________
(iii) Do you know your local leaders in this community?  
      (a) yes  (b) no
(iv) How is the relationship between the community and its leaders?  
      (a) good  (b) fair  (c) poor
(v) Do you have any leadership role in the community?  
      (a) yes  (b) no
a) If yes, please specify __________________________
(vi) How involved are you as a person in the decision making process here in this community?  
      (a) very active  
      (b) fairly active  
      (c) try to partake  
      (d) partake when necessary  
      (e) don’t partake
(iv) Do you think it is a good idea to involve the community in decision making?  
      (a) yes  (b) no  (c) I do not know
(v) Were you satisfied with the results of the decision(s) taken?  
      (a) very satisfied  
      (b) fairly satisfied  
      (c) neither satisfied nor dissatisfied  
      (d) fairly dissatisfied  
      (e) very dissatisfied
(vi) Would you prefer things to be done differently?  
      (a) yes  (b) no
(vii) If you answered yes to no. (vi), how? ________________________________
(viii) Any further suggestions? ________________________________
(ix) How would you have preferred this survey to be conducted?  
      (a) questionnaire  
      (b) email  
      (c) post  
      (d) telephone
(x) Title ________  Name:
(xi) Age: 16 – 24  25 – 34  35 – 44  45 – 54  55 – 64  65 – 74  75 – 84
A.2. Questionnaire Survey – Walled-City, Famagusta

This questionnaire is to find out your views concerning community participation in decision making process and whether you think this is the best approach to be used for developmental projects in this area. This is strictly confidential and your answers will be used only for research purposes. Thanks for your time.

(i) Name of community____________________

(ii) How long have you lived in this community _____________________

(iii) Do you know your local leaders in this community?
    (a) yes (b) no

(iv) How is the relationship between the community and its leaders?
    (a) good (b) fair (c) poor

(v) Do you have any leadership role in the community?
    (b) yes (b) no

a) If yes, please specify ___________________________

(vi) How involved are you as a person in the decision making process here in this community? (a) very active
    (b) fairly active
    (c) try to take part
    (d) take part when necessary
    (e) don’t take part

(vi) Do you think it is a good idea to involve the community in decision making?
    (b) yes (b) no (c) I do not know

(vii) Were you satisfied with the results of the decision(s) taken?
    (f) very satisfied
    (g) fairly satisfied
    (h) neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
    (i) fairly dissatisfied
    (j) very dissatisfied

(viii) What are your views on the change in function of the bandabuliya?

(ix) Would you prefer things to be done differently?
    (b) yes (b) no

(x) If you answered yes to no. (vi), how? ___________________________

(xi) Any further suggestions? _____________________________
(xii) How would you have preferred this survey to be conducted?
   (e) questionnaire
   (f) email
   (g) post
   (h) telephone

(xiii) Title ________     Name:

(xiv) Age: 16 – 24  25 – 34  35 – 44  45 – 54  55 – 64  65 – 74  75 - 84