

Trends in the Public Engagement Projects in Hong Kong: A Focus Group Study



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Summary

Purpose – Public engagement (PE) has been increasingly applied to the mega construction development projects by the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in recent years. There are totally 226 PE projects used in Hong Kong from 1997 to 2009. PE is a team decision-making process which involved multiple stakeholders at different stages of the project. It becomes a popular way of consulting the public, so as to integrate various opinions and gain the final support for the project implementation.

Although the PE projects are blooming, the PE development in Hong Kong is still in its infancy stage (e.g., the Western Kowloon Cultural Development, the Queen's Pier Demolition, and the Cross-Border High-Speed Rail Development). PE has long been queried whether it is a window-dressing or a manipulating tool used by the government. The paper aims to explore the current trends of the PE projects in Hong Kong by adopting a focus group approach. Based on the understanding of the current trends of PE development, some practical recommendations are also addressed in this study.

Design/methodology/approach – To investigate the current PE trends, two focus groups were conducted with different types of stakeholders engaged in each group: construction professionals and non-governmental organizations. To ensure the quality of data collection, purposive sampling was adopted. Participants eligible to join in the focus groups were those who had direct PE experiences (such as workshops, focus groups and public forums) and had been affected or influenced by the projects at the time when they filled in the questionnaire. Seven participants with a good mixture of disciplines, working experiences and PE experiences were invited to each focus group.

Having informed about the ground rules and confidentiality of the discussion, the participants were encouraged to write down their views on the PE projects and express their opinions freely. All of their opinions were collected in the form of audiotapes, worksheets and spontaneous note-taking to ensure the reliability. The qualitative data obtained from in-depth group discussion were analysed by adopting the contextual analysis method in order to identify the motivators and barriers of PE for the construction development projects in Hong Kong.

Findings –The results exposed the current trends in PE projects, including both motivators and barriers. Three motivators consisted of the governmental support for the PE development, multiple PE stages and diverse PE activities involved in the PE projects, whereas barriers were identified and classified into two levels: strategic and operational. Strategic level included three barriers, namely top-down consultation approach, short of PE standards and negative PE impression; while

operational level consisted of both project barriers and stakeholder barriers. The project barriers were caused by insufficient PE experiences, inadequate PE publicity, unclear information, and insufficient time for the PE activities (such as workshops, focus groups and public forums). The two stakeholder barriers referred to unrepresentative stakeholders and inadequate sampling of stakeholders engaging in the PE projects.

Originality/value of paper – The study investigated the PE trends (including motivators and barriers) in the construction industry in Hong Kong by using the focus group study. Based on the findings, several practical recommendations are proposed. The government is suggested to support the PE development and use the bottom-up approach for the future PE projects in order to gauge public opinions widely for the long-term strategy. To standardize the PE application, there is an urgent need to establish PE guidelines indicating: who should be engaged, what the logical PE team decision-making process should be, and what PE activities should be adopted. To ensure that the public can understand the technical issues of PE projects in the discussion, sufficient information is expected to be prepared in simple language for laypeople. We would also recommend the PE organizers to reduce the presentation time in the PE workshop and extend the workshop time so that the public have ample time to exchange their ideas and identify the best solution among the multi-stakeholders in the workshop. In order to enlarge stakeholder sampling and allow more representative stakeholders from different disciplines and backgrounds, PE projects are thus expected to be more inclusive.

The findings of current preliminary study can be used as the initial stages of the comprehensive study on improving PE performance. The current study is expected to become the basis for a large scale quantitative questionnaire survey from which it is expected to investigate the complicated relationships in PE projects. The results are expected to benefit the development of PE in construction projects not only in Hong Kong but also for other countries world-wide.

Keywords: Barriers; Focus group; Hong Kong; Motivators; Public engagement

1. Introduction

As a popular method to gauge public opinions, public engagement (PE) has been increasingly applied in the Nordic countries, such as the impact assessment in Finland (Peltonen and Sairinen 2010), the nuclear waste settlement in Sweden and the GM food project in Netherlands (Hagendijk and Irwin 2006). Since 1997, Hong Kong citizens actively participate into the decision-making and policy-making process in order to ensure their voices are heard by the government and their benefits are maintained (Chen et al. 2007). In recent years, PE has been encouraged by the Hong Kong government, especially in the areas of urban planning, mega-construction projects and policy making (HKSAR Policy Address 2008, 2009). However, it is still blamed for various blunders and inadequate transparency in the decision making of certain mega-construction development (e.g., the Western Kowloon Cultural Development, the Queen's Pier Demolition and the Cross-Border High-Speed Rail Development). This paper aims to explore the motivators and barriers of PE application in the construction industry by using a focus group approach. Based on the understanding of the current trends of PE development, some practical implications are also addressed in this study.

2. Public engagement in Hong Kong

The number of PE in Hong Kong has increased rapidly, which is 226 in total from 1997 to 2009 (Cheung 2011). PE is a process which involves related stakeholders in the decision making of project investigation, planning, decision making and implementation (Chen et al. 2007). It has been popularly used in the construction projects for gauging public opinions (Rowe et al. 2008).

At present, the government encourages all large-scale public projects with high sensitivity to apply PE (HKSAR Policy Address 2007-2011). In consideration of the complexity of the construction projects, PE is generally divided into three stages: the envisioning stage, the realization stage and the detailed planning stage (CEDD 2009). Several PE activities are often conducted in the series of PE stages including exhibitions, site visits, workshops, focus groups, public forums, hall meetings so on and so forth (Planning Department 2009; Public Policy Research Institute 2010). The outcomes of PE are summarized in the final report and published to the general public for review purposes.

A number of representative stakeholders, who might affect or be affected by the projects, should be included in the PE process. To maintain an open and transparent environment, not only should PE include internal project teams, but also involves the relevant district councils, community groups, green groups and professional institutions (CEDD 2009). This paper thus conducts focus groups with different stakeholders so as to explore the current motivators and barriers of the PE development in the construction industry in detail.

3. Research methodology

Two focus groups were conducted in order to deepen the understanding of current PE trends in Hong Kong. To ensure the quality of data collection, purposive sampling was adopted (Adams and Schvaneveldt 1985). Participants were recruited according to their experiences in engaging in the PE activities (such as focus groups, workshops and public forums) and whether they had affected or been affected by the projects. Professional consultants were invited to the professional group (PG) and non-governmental organizations to the interest group (IG).

In this study, both the PG and IG have seven participants, with a mixture of participants that included directors (14.3%), project managers (7.1%), architects (7.1%), engineers (14.3%), surveyors (14.3%), environmentalist (21.5%), social workers (7.1) and district councilors (14.3%). Of which 14.3%, 28.6%, 35.6%, 21.5% of the participants have been working over 20 years, for 10-20 years, for 5-9 years, for 1-4 years and less than 1 year, respectively. Focus group participants who have engaged in 1 project (7.1%); 1-4 projects (43%); 5-10 projects (35.6%); and over 10 projects (14.3%).

At the beginning, the moderator introduced the purpose of the study and explained the ground rules (such as equality and without hierarchy) and confidentiality of the discussion. The participants were requested to write down their perception of PE projects on the worksheet according to their actual experience. Then the participants were to discuss freely about their opinions. Qualitative data was collected in the form of audiotapes, worksheets and spontaneous note-taking during the discussion to ensure reliability. All data were contextually analysed for the purpose of understanding the trends of PE application in the industry in Hong Kong.

4. Results of contextual analysis

Consistent with the wider literature, PE has increasingly developed in Hong Kong. However, focus groups' participants identified so many barriers in the current PE development have yet to be resolved. The data collected from the two focus groups were summarized according to keywords and phrase identification (see Table 1). Table 1 presents a synthesis of current motivators and barriers in PE for construction development projects in Hong Kong.

Table 1 Summary of PE motivators and barriers identified by the focus group

Perceived motivators	Groups	Examples
Social		
Governmental support	PG:	Nowadays, PE is <u>widely used in large-scale governmental</u> projects.

		The government brought forward the concept of PE for several years.
	IG:	The government helped in <u>conducting more PE activities</u> .
Project		
Multiple PE stages	PG:	The current PE stages (i.e., <u>envision, detail design, consensus building</u>) are feasible. PE can be used in <u>different project stages, e.g. planning, implementation, operation</u> .
	IG:	PE involves in <u>different levels and stages, e.g. Tseung Kwan O to Lam Tin Tunnel</u> .
Diverse PE activities	PG:	Before the construction of the project, we met with DC members to discuss the project issues. The development of PE is required to <u>collect opinions from different channels, including workshop, forums and meetings</u> .
	IG:	I have joined <u>different PE activities (e.g. focus group, forums, meetings, workshops)</u> . We attended the government <u>briefings</u> and joined some <u>forums</u> .
Perceived barriers	Groups	Examples
Strategic		
Top-down consultation approach	PG:	Not all policies could be formed as <u>bottom-up</u> . The government often uses the <u>top-down</u> method.
	IG:	The <u>top-down</u> approach of PE <u>cannot resolve fundamental conflicts among stakeholders with different needs</u> . The <u>bottom-up approach</u> is <u>painful</u> . The government told us the design drawing is confirmed without even listening to our opinions.
Short of PE standards	PG:	The government does <u>not have a standard model</u> . The government procedure/handbook/guideline for the implementation of PE is <u>missing</u> , that is, it lacks a step-by-step PE instruction booklet.
	IG:	Such guidelines are not found in Hong Kong. The PE approach is <u>too simple</u> (i.e., publication → survey → forum). It is not suitable for the complicated PE projects.
Negative impression	PG:	So many activities are <u>politicized</u> . At present, PE is conducted just for <u>face-saving</u> . (protection) The PE has been criticized as <u>fake consultation</u> and <u>window-dressing activities</u> . The current PE is <u>too general and sketchy</u> .
	IG:	The PE is necessary, but the government is <u>criticized for its lack of foresight</u> . The current PE is too <u>superficial</u> and impractical. At present, most of the PE projects are <u>briefings without consultation</u> . The current PE is always using the <u>hard-sell</u> technique.
Operation – project		
Insufficient PE experiences	PG:	At present, the government has yet to realise <u>who should have a role in organizing</u> the PE project. The current contract clause <u>did not clarify PE responsibility</u> . Some consultants <u>are inexperienced in PE</u> .
	IG:	The behavior of the government is very important. It is still <u>in its developing stage</u> . Current PE organizers <u>do not know how to consult residents</u> and to facilitate the whole project.
Unclear information	PG:	The public <u>have no idea about</u> the government policies and PE projects. Due to <u>their limited knowledge</u> , the public were not able to understand the complexity of these technical issues.
	IG:	At the same time, the <u>solutions are always too technical for the public to</u>

		<u>understand</u> . The PE <u>presentation is too complicated</u> , which often confuse the residents. In general, <u>citizens did not understand</u> the technical problems.
Insufficient time of the PE activities (such as workshops, focus groups and public forums)	PG:	Given only two to three hours, the duration for the whole PE process is <u>too short</u> . There is little interaction in such <u>short duration</u> . The time for public discussion is <u>too short</u> . <u>Insufficient time</u> for group discussion. Sometimes the information is voluminous and the <u>presentation time is too long</u> .
	IG:	The PE time-scale is <u>not enough</u> to prepare sufficient information. <u>Most</u> of the public forums are focused on the <u>presentation</u> .
Inadequate PE publicity	PG:	I think the PE projects' <u>marketing is inadequate</u> for the public. The public often <u>does not know the schedule of PE activities</u> . We need to plan well for the PE publicity.
	IG:	The government <u>keeps the PE in low profile</u> , that is, <u>without publicity</u> . The notices of PE projects are always <u>published on the webpage</u> . Unless the public has an interest on the PE, they will not know what the PE projects are.
Operation – stakeholder		
Inadequate sampling	PG:	I hope the government can <u>broaden the scope</u> of selected stakeholders. Stakeholders need to be <u>all-inclusive</u> . The grass roots are expected to be included. Stakeholders need to be <u>randomly selected so as to expand the sample size</u> .
	IG:	The <u>sample size is small</u> . Public opinions are not well represented e.g., the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge. These questions then came around: how many Hong Kong citizens would participate in the PE; and whether the PE is representative for all Hong Kong citizens.
Unrepresentative stakeholders	PG:	It is difficult and tricky to invite the <u>right representatives</u> to attend the workshop.
	IG:	Stakeholders are not <u>representative</u> . The government only invites the non-governmental organizations which has good relationships with them.

Note: PG refers to professional group; IG refers to interest group.

5. Discussion

Participants discussed their opinions and individual experiences freely and suggested several common motivators and barriers as shown in Table 1.

5.1 PE motivators

Participants identified three PE motivators which are governmental support, multiple PE stages and diverse PE activities applied. In recent years, the Hong Kong government encourages the development of PE projects, especially in the large-scale and complex projects (such as the West Kowloon Cultural District, the Wai Chai Development and the Kowloon East Development). Many governmental projects use PE activities to collect end-users' opinions (PG) and to fully support the PE activities (IG).

Due to the complexity of the construction projects, PE needs to be conducted with multiple PE activities in several stages (CEDD 2009). Participants in both PG and IG mentioned that the activities they attended included meetings, briefings, workshops, focus groups, community

meetings and hall meetings. Moreover, the current PE involves three stages – the envisioning, the realization and the detailed design /planning stages which tallies with the previous literatures (Elton Consulting 2003). PE is also applicable in different stages of the project, such as planning, implementation and operation stages (PG).

5.2 PE barriers

Participants identified PE barriers in two levels, namely the strategic level and operational level. In the operational level, project barrier and stakeholder barriers are further categorized.

In the strategic level, three barriers are categorised as the top-down consultation approach, short of PE standards and negative PE impression. Participants agreed that *top-down approach* was often conducted in the PE projects. However, this approach failed to ‘resolve the fundamental conflict among stakeholders with different needs’ (IG). Although the bottom-up approach is painful (IG), it is suggested to be taken into consideration for future PE projects (PG). On the other hand, participants of the two focus groups also suggested that current PE *lacks of a standard guideline* for practical PE procedures. To promote PE development in Hong Kong, PE guidelines need to clearly indicate ‘who should be engaged at which stage and how to carry them out’ (IG). Both PG and IG participants expressed their *negative views on current PE projects*. PE was considered as ‘politicized, sketchy, window-dressing and face-saving acts’ (PG and IG). The government often pretended to integrate public views which often resulted in objections (Petts 2008). Remedial measures for these situations were always criticised for its lack of foresight (IG).

Four PE barriers were categorized into project dimension at the operational level including lack of PE experiences, unclear information, insufficient time for PE activities and inadequate PE publicity. Although PE is commonly used in the governmental projects for several years, focus group participants often thought that PE organizers and consultants were *inexperienced* (PG and IG). PE organizers sometimes did not even know how to conduct effective consultations with local residents and failed to facilitate the whole project (IG).

Participants considered that the *information* provided by the PE organizers is not clear enough to understand the whole project (IG). Moreover, the information given was often too voluminous with many technical terms (Lloyd-Smith 2009). As the public are not knowledgeable about the information, they often fail to understand the technical issues of the PE projects (PG). In terms of the duration of PE activities, participants expressed that the PE activities including workshops, focus groups and public forums would generally take two to three hours. Such *short duration is far from sufficient* for the public to understand the project issues and to express their opinions (PG and IG). Some participants even expressed that they were not given the chance to speak out and discuss with other stakeholders (PG). This resulted in the negative perception of PE. In respect of PE publicity, participants in PG and IG considered that the current PE *publicity was inadequate*. The public often ‘were not aware of PE activities due to the inadequate marketing and publicity of PE’ (PG and IG). If the public have not informed about the PE activities, they would not participate and convey their needs (IG).

Inadequate sampling is one stakeholder-related barrier identified in the focus group study. PG participants expected that the PE organizers should ‘broaden the scope of participants and establish a feasible sampling size’. The grass-roots should be included. Both PG and IG participants agreed that well suited stakeholder representatives were not involved in PE projects. Stakeholders involved in the PE projects should ‘be more inclusive and not be limited to a few interest parties’ (IG).

6. Recommendations

The findings identified a diversity of motivators and barriers for PE development. Several practical recommendations are brought forward in consideration of the current trends of PE development.

Firstly, the government is recommended to enlarge the support on PE development and consider

bottom-up approach for the future PE projects. There is an urgent need for *standardized and detailed PE guidelines* to regulate who should be engaged, how and when PE should be implemented and what forms should be applied. For the complicated construction projects, PE can be divided in to several continuous stages and conducted by multiple activities.

Secondly, from the project aspect, it is expected that clear information could *be prepared in a suitable and layman language*, so that the public could understand the technical terms. In term of the short workshop duration, the PE organizers are suggested to *extend the duration of the whole workshop (e.g., a series of half-day workshops) and decrease the content of the introduction or presentation section*. The PE organizers are also recommended to advertise the PE projects via multiple channels, especially online forum, Facebook and Twitter, which can be used to encourage the youth engagement (Raynes-Goldie and Walker 2008). In consideration of inadequate sampling, it is suggested to enlarge the sampling scope. PE should be *more inclusive to engage representative stakeholders* from different disciplines and backgrounds.

The current focus group study aims to explore the current trends of PE development in construction industry in Hong Kong. This preliminary study describes the current situation (including both motivators and barriers) of the PE projects. The findings can be used in the further large-scale questionnaire survey which is expected to investigate the complicated relationships in the PE projects.

7. Conclusions

PE has increased its popularity in integrating public views for the construction industry in Hong Kong. This paper explores the current trends of PE by introducing focus groups which involve construction professionals and non-governmental organizations. By means of contextual analyses of the qualitative data, three motivators are identified, which are governmental support, multiple PE stages and PE activities. Nine barriers are also identified and classified into strategic level (e.g., top-down consultation approach, short of PE standards and negative PE impression) and operational level which is further categorized as project dimension (e.g., lack of PE experiences, unclear information, insufficient time for PE activities and inadequate PE publicity) and stakeholder dimension (e.g., inadequate sampling and unrepresentative stakeholders).

According to our understanding of current PE trends, several practical recommendations are proposed, such as the adoption of bottom-up approach in future, the establishment of PE standards, the supplying of sufficient and appropriate information, the extension of PE workshop duration and the expansion of stakeholder sampling. Hence, the PE organizers are expected to resolve the current problems, improve PE performance and satisfy representative stakeholders.

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