INFORMED COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Stories about the Black Taxi Industry

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This paper argues that for communities to be effectively engaged in participative planning in relation to economic development, they and the planners need to be empowered by being properly informed about the economics of development. As members of these communities are unlikely to have a formal education in economics, the role of stories is examined. A review of news stories in the popular press shows that these stories are much like parables. The extent to which communities are properly informed by these stories is considered, and the question of what stories should be selected is discussed. The black taxi industry, which has featured extensively in the news in recent years and which has also been the subject of a number of academic papers, is used to support the arguments.

THE NEED FOR INFORMED COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Planners need to be well informed about economics. Roweis uses an example related to economics to illustrate his point in arguing that 'the planning theorist cannot begin to describe, interpret, explain or comment upon what planners do procedurally without assuming (rightly or wrongly) that the observed planners are acting on some specific substantive generalisations' (1983:145). The example he uses concerns what is believed will happen to housing if mortgage payments are made tax deductible. Windsor (1986) argues that it is necessary to have a concrete knowledge of micro- and macroeconomics and how it applies to urban markets, regional economics and government finance. Ponte (1986), Feldman (1987), Beauregard (1989), Robinson (1989), Cohen (1990) and Boothroyd and Davis (1993) make the same points in various ways. Fainstein (1990) shows how, since the economic crisis of the mid-1970s, urban planners in the United States and Great Britain have switched their focus from regulating to promoting development. Their methods have moved from needs assessments, master planning and long-term capital budgeting, to market analysis, negotiations and project-specific capital programming. They speak in the same terms as investment
bankers, property brokers and budget analysts. This need for first-hand involvement in promoting economic growth is pertinent to conditions in South Africa.

With the trend to planning with people instead of for them, it is not only planners that need to be able to make such substantive generalisations. Muller says that 'There is no doubt that the capacity of planning to contribute to the institution of an equitable society will be influenced by the desire and ability to communicate with hitherto voiceless citizen groups' (1992:29). This message is echoed frequently in a series of discussion papers by the World Bank in which participation is defined as 'a function of information through which people can come to share a development vision, make choices, and manage activities' (Bhatnagar & Williams 1992:6). This should lead to situations where the bank should 'welcome even instances where communities legitimately reject Bank-financed projects' (Bhatnagar 1992:26). This means that participation, if the community is to be truly empowered, is not just a question of planners listening to the community, or of informing the community of choices and allowing the community to choose options, but of the community having its own independent knowledge so that it brings its own substantive generalisations to bear in decision making. This is a tall order as there is virtually no evidence of efforts by disadvantaged people to pressure institutions such as the World Bank to empower them to make decisions (Bhatnagar 1992:26).

The need for informed participation by the community is particularly pressing in the field of economics. Here the problem is twofold: not only must planners ascertain the views which the community holds with regard to economics, but if the community wishes to be integrated into the national, and eventually, the world economy, it needs to be fully informed as to how those economies work. It is, therefore, not just a question of plans adapting to the wishes of the community, but of the community having to adapt to the realities of the world if they wish to integrate with it. Members of the community need to be able to recognise and exploit opportunities on a global scale, to recognise ways in which it is necessary to compete and in which ways it is necessary to co-operate, to anticipate global reaction, either in support or in competition, and not to be overwhelmed by it. The community needs to understand how to balance individual initiative, enterprise and competitiveness with collective action for the common good. Furthermore, it is the community as a whole that needs to be empowered. If just its appointed and self-appointed representatives are fully informed community members will still be 'planned for' with the representatives joining the professionals in telling them what is good for them.

STORIES AS PART OF THE SOLUTION

Most members of the community are not going to hurry to universities to become qualified economists. Nor are they going to read economic literature widely.