

People and Planning at Fifty (Interface edited y Andy Inch)

What to commemorate? ‘Other’ international milestones of democratising city-making

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A commemoration is an act of remembering: 50 years ago, the Skeffington report was published, and its celebration has been an opportunity to reflect on its implications, legacy, and lessons for participation in planning in the years to come. While a necessary and important exercise in the context of UK planning, we decided to approach this commemoration asking a somewhat different set of questions: What ‘other’ reports, moments, events, policy or concrete achievement around democratising city-making should be celebrated internationally? What ‘other’ milestones should be considered and commemorated, in a context in which participation and planning have diverse forms across the world?

The reasons behind asking these questions go beyond the geographical limitations of this particular document. As we will discuss in this brief text, the ways in which cities are produced go way beyond the formal channels of planning. Restricting the analysis of people and participation to official forms of planning can reinforce blind-spots regarding how cities are produced. In a recent reflection, we have argued for an understanding of participation as planning by looking at collective forms of spatial production emerging from southern contexts, which respond to the inadequacy of formal planning to engage with diverse processes of city-making situated beyond dominant or traditional practices (Frediani & Cociña, 2019). This reflection builds upon at least two traditions that we are trying to bring into conversation with each other. On the one hand, there is the central place that collaborative notions have gained within the planning literature,

following the seminal work of authors such as Patsy Healey (1997) that have generated a rich debate about the places where planning and participation take place, both in and beyond collaborative spaces (see Brownill & Parker, 2010; Cornwall, 2002; Legacy, 2017; Miraftab, 2009; Natarajan, 2017; Thorpe, 2017; Watson, 2014). On the other hand, we refer to the tradition of southern urban critique, that has pushed the urban field not only towards a set of ‘southern’ locations, but more importantly to questions about where and how knowledge is produced and circulated, looking to decentre urban theory and practice (see Bhan, 2019; Harrison, 2006; Lawhon & Truelove, 2019; Robinson, 2006; Robinson & Parnell, 2011; Roy, 2009; Watson, 2002).

With these two traditions in mind, we have approached this ‘interface’ as an excuse to ask colleagues, academics, professionals and activists working in different geographies, the following question: if there was one moment, event, achievement, report, policy or other milestone that we should be celebrating in relation to this topic, what would it be and why? In what follows, we discuss some of the diverse responses we received. The list does not seek to be exhaustive or to capture the hugely diverse set of planning practices taking place globally: the very selection of who we asked has shaped the answers we received. Rather, we present their reactions not only to account for the different trajectories of participation in planning in other regions but, perhaps more importantly, to provide insights into how participation and the course of democratisation of planning take place through instruments and processes

that often occur beyond formal planning systems, reports and regulations.

The first kind of milestone we received as a response refers to the *social mobilisation and articulation of demands* by urban dwellers, as discussed, for example, by the Indian urban practitioner and activist Celine d’Cruz. For her, the most significant transformation processes have started with the construction of alliances within groups of the urban poor. Reflecting on the case of The Alliance between the Mumbai-based NGO ‘Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers’ (SPARC), the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and the creation of a female pavement dwellers organisation, Mahila Milan, d’Cruz suggests that the key strategic choice of the NSDF lay in working together with the pavement dwellers. NSDF was a federation of slum dwellers and their decision to include other categories of the urban poor in their movement was significant: “the emphasis was on bringing the urban poor together no matter what their habitat status was”. She suggests that, on the one hand, the inclusion of the poorest groups within this alliance allowed pavement dwellers to get a voice and political leverage; and on the other, as they had the most urgent need for change, “compared to the slum dwellers they were much more motivated and ready to act. That was the magic, working with the very poor, because working with them strengthened this process with other slum dwellers”. As d’Cruz reflects, the importance of this social organisation for Indian planning relates to the fact that policy alone does not make a difference: “We have no lack of good policy, it is more about how you convert it into a practice: how do you change behaviour, how do you change practice, how do you change the relationship between government and poor people”. The work of SPARC and the Alliance was able to directly influence projects such as the community involvement in the Mumbai Urban Transport Project, creating a precedent for other resettlement projects in the city. The process led by the Alliance was also key for the consolidation of the dwellers’ movement throughout the world, through processes led by people such as Jockin Arputham, president of the NSDF in India, and a wide network of people who took part in the creation of Slum Dwellers International (SDI), which today is a global network of federations of informal settlement in over 30 countries.

The second category of response is closely linked to the first one and refers to *precedent setting* led by NGOs and local authorities working in collaboration with local actors, able to develop strategies that become model experiences for planning practices. The idea

of ‘precedent setting’ was identified as a key tool by the Alliance, recognising “that setting a precedent was important to prove that communities had the capacity to actually “do it”. Proof of this capacity was needed to create the legitimacy and trust required to get government support” (D’Cruz & Satterthwaite, 2005, p.48). This second type of landmark is also illustrated by the response we received from the South African Professor Vanessa Watson, based at the School of Architecture, Planning and Geomatics at the University of Cape Town. When asked about her impressions regarding meaningful ‘milestones’ for ‘participation’ in her work, she referred to a series of cases in the city of Durban that have been able to set precedents regarding the participation of people in city-making processes. One of the cases is the Warwick Junction Urban Renewal Project, a project located in a street trading area where a group of street traders worked for more than a decade in coordination with authorities to tackle urban challenges in the area. This experience was extensively documented in the book ‘Working in Warwick’ by Richard Dobson and Caroline Skinner with Jillian Nicholson (2009) and has become an important case to discuss the inclusion of street traders and communities in urban plans. A second case Watson mentioned is the Cato Manor Development Project, also in Durban. This project was led by an NGO called Cato Manor Development Association (CMDA), which emerged as a response to the lack of planning authority in Cato Manor during the 80s and early 90s and focused on urban development in partnership with community-based organisations. The project was recognised as ‘best practice’ by UN Habitat in 2002 and has been documented by various research initiatives (see Beall & Todes, 2004; Odendaal, 2007). Both of these cases, Watson argues, illustrate the ways in which municipal government and NGOs can set precedents through concrete experiences of including communities in development processes. Based on these cases, she also invited us to reflect on why these types of initiatives often struggle to sustain themselves in the face of political shifts and how institutions might give them greater continuity.

Finally, the third category of responses we received identified the setting of *national and international legal and rights-based frameworks* as the main milestones to commemorate. This is the case of the examples provided by Eva Garcia-Chueca from CIDOB, the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, and former executive coordinator of the United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) Committee on Social, Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights. Some of the milestones she identified

include the establishment of the City Statute in Brazil in 2001, which established a legal and policy framework to move forward the ‘right to the city’ through participatory urban policy-making. This is also closely related to the “social mobilisations that have taken place in several Latin American countries since the ‘80s”, in countries such as Brazil, Colombia and Ecuador, “as they pushed the political agenda towards urban reform”. Garcia-Chueca also points to the adoption of several international human rights and ‘right to the city’ charters, which have contributed to advance a bottom-up perspective, in which local governments work closely with citizens and communities in the field of human rights and the right to the city (i.e. European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City, in 2001; World Charter for the Right to the City, in 2005; Global Charter-Agenda for Human Rights in the City, in 2011). Finally, García-Chueca points to milestones such as the creation of the ‘Global Platform for the Right to the City’ in 2014, and its advocacy role in the Habitat Conference in 2016 (see Cociña et al, 2019) and the publication of the 4th UCLG GOLD Report on “Co-creating the Urban Future” in 2017.

The three categories of responses we have shared in this reflection do not pretend to be exhaustive of the different events that should be celebrated globally as achievements in participation and planning. However, they illustrate a variety of milestones and the diverse ways in which cities are made and participation is taking place, inside and outside planning systems. To conclude, we propose that it is pertinent to look back at Skeffington to interrogate it from this international perspective. The experiences and understandings of what ‘planning’ and ‘participation’ mean within the UK have repercussions beyond its territorial boundaries. This is not only because of the importance of a critical review of its colonial history and its impact on urban planning in cities globally. As an extension of this critique, it is also important to recognise the current political economy that shapes the global infrastructure of planning research and practice, as well as patterns of centrality in academia and knowledge production (see Connell, 2014).

Therefore, in this act of commemoration, we think it is important to problematise how by ‘celebrating’ Skeffington we might contribute to the ways planning is understood beyond the UK. There are, on the one hand, global trends that tend to see participation in a limited procedural sense, either contained within technocratic planning systems or appropriated by consultancy firms. This context reproduces a depoliticised and consultative approach to participation

in planning, while overlooking the various mechanisms through which people are engaging in processes of democratising city-making. Considering this trend, there is a threat in looking at Skeffington without exploring what Brownill and Inch (2018) identify as the “areas of tension” in participation, in relation to four fields: the question of power, the clashes between different forms of governance, the role of planners, and “the relationship between citizen action within and outside the formal participation apparatus of the state” (Brownill and Inch, 2019:8). As they reflect, alongside the formal processes on which Skeffington focuses, there “is a more ‘hidden history’ of citizen-led action beyond the state that has often creatively challenged plans and proposals” (Brownill and Inch, 2019, p. 20).

By looking at these alternative or ‘other’ milestones, we hope to problematise and recognise the different trajectories through which participation and planning have encountered each other internationally. We propose that celebrating them can become a mechanism to challenge a limited understanding of the relation between planning and participatory city-making practices.

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