

Rethinking “Participatory Planning” as an immersive learning process

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This paper considers the intellectual challenge in determining how planners can take part in the people's process. In regular participatory planning the planners get the people participate in their planning process, with the belief that they know what the people need. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to examine whether planners can participate in people's process. The question may be ‘how could we know their process?’ For that, we develop an **intellectual framework** to understand people and their environment; this will lead to a deeper understanding of how the society works.

There is a major discourse that the contemporary planning strategies do not empower the local people very much. Because, the planners failed to connect planning with place, people, culture, past and future. In this case, priority should be given to build **Communities** instead of **Physical Environment**. Empowering communities is the most certain way to empower planning. **Planners should work ‘with people’ not ‘for people’**. Therefore, the focus is on “learning from” rather than “learning about”.

The study area of this research is the “Disaster Recovery Process of People in the Tsunami Affected Areas – Hambantota.”

We studied how people responded to the programme. The government and the NGOs stepped into rebuild. The question is what did they build? More importantly, what do the communities want both in regard to life and the environment? Were their aspirations fulfilled by those agencies? If not, how do people continue to achieve their own aspirations? **They try in their own ways**. How do they rebuild their own lives using or not using what the agencies give them? How planners can help them achieving their dreams? ‘Isn't it the “Participatory Planning”?’

Thus, this paper launches a new thinking for Participatory Planning as an Immersive Learning Process.

Key words: Community, Contemporary planning strategies, Participatory planning, Disaster recovery process, Immersive learning

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