
Regional governance and the challenge of managing socio-economic change

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1. Introduction

The primary purpose of the chapter is to examine the position of Dublin in a set of widely-shared and influential ideas about the emergence of a new urban era in developed economies, and on the particular governance challenges facing Dublin. The chapter itself is broken into six parts. The first provides a brief introduction to the concept of a ‘New Conventional Wisdom’ (Gordon and Buck 2005: 5) about cities and city regions¹ and the impact of this new paradigm on public policy discourse (section 2).² This is followed by a short review of three key components of the New Conventional Wisdom: competitiveness and competition (section 3), social cohesion (section 4), and urban governance (section 5). Section 6 examines the situation of Dublin within the New Conventional Wisdom paradigm. The final part discusses the potential governance arrangements for Dublin as a consolidating city-region in what is, and is likely to remain, a very open economy (Smith, 2005: 150).

2. Cities and the New Conventional Wisdom

Gordon and Buck (2005) contend that the start of the twenty-first century saw a renewed optimism about cities, in essence, “a shift from seeing them as essentially problematic residues of nineteenth-and early twentieth century ways of organizing industrial economies towards the idea that they could again be exciting and creative places in which to live and work”, (2005: 6). An important element of their contention is that the origins of this shift in thinking lie in social, economic and political changes necessitated by a “qualitatively different economic environment” (*ibid.*) rather than a change in thinking about the benefits of

¹ City-regions have attracted considerable attention in developed economies over the course of the last 20 years. These combinations of an urban core or cores with a semi-urban and rural hinterland linked to the core by functional ties are becoming “increasingly regarded by certain scholars and policy makers as (a) the motors of economic activity in a globalised world, (b) the most adequate geographical units for the experimentation with and implementation of new modes of economic governance, and (c) more fundamentally, the ideal scale for public policy intervention” (Rodriguez-Rose, 2009:50).

² The term is credited to the Canadian economist John Kenneth Galbraith. In *The Affluent Society*, he observes, “It will be convenient to have a name for the ideas which are esteemed at any time for their acceptability, and it should be a term that emphasizes this predictability. I shall refer to these ideas henceforth as the conventional wisdom” (1958: 18). Of particular interest for Galbraith was the limited association between convenience and/or acceptability and some form of objective truth. He notes that difficult and complex economic and social theories are mentally tiring, therefore “we adhere, as though to a raft, to those ideas which represent our understanding” (*ibid.*).

urban living or improvements in the economies of large cities. These changes are flagged by “repeated reference to the imperatives of (economic) competitiveness, (social) cohesion and (responsive) governance” (*ibid.*). It is acknowledged that these changes are not specifically ‘urban’ and they are not necessarily linked to a resurgence of cities. However, it is argued that in this particular context, and taken together as a set, they have been understood as implying a much increased importance for cities in securing “societal success” (*ibid.*). This is the core of the New Conventional Wisdom, a set of widely shared ideas about “the emergence of a new urban era in advanced economies” (Gordon and Buck, 2005: 5), which relates this to a set of pervasive forces in a globalised economy:

- (a) Cities are seen as crucial to the achievement of competitiveness, social cohesion and responsive governance at a societal level;
- (b) Competitiveness, cohesion and effective governance have become vital to the survival of cities, individually and collectively;
- (c) This set of economic, social and political concerns is understood to be interdependent and mutually reinforcing, rather than competing values to be traded off against each other.

It is important to note that the purpose of the chapter is not to interrogate the suppositions underlying the New Conventional Wisdom but rather to examine the impact of the new paradigm on public policy discourse, particularly its employment at transnational level and the effect of this at national and city level.³

It is suggested that the employment of the key components of the New Conventional Wisdom by such organisations as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) has had a significantly larger impact on Irish public policy discourse than other similar states because the Irish state’s institutions are inclined to look to such bodies for policy guidance (O’Hearn, 1998: 55). This reflects an interesting aspect of the Irish public policy formulation process, i.e. the relatively weak structured links between indigenous higher education and research institutes (which could, and occasionally do, play a useful filtering and localisation role) and the state’s policy formulation processes (Garvin, 2004: 179, Kirby, 2008: 4, Munck and Ó Broin, 2009: 154), and the state’s inclination to seek public policy guidance from non-indigenous sources, in particular the OECD (National and Economic and Social Development Office (NESDO), 2009: 19).

As noted above, the OECD has been a particularly important source of influence on public policy debate as it pertains to cities, e.g. *Cities for Citizens: The Role of Metropolitan*

³ An interrogation of the key concepts could sensibly start with the formulation of the concepts themselves. It is noted by a number of leading thinkers in the area that they lack precision and don’t provide an adequate basis for either serious public policy initiatives or academic analysis (Turok, 2005, Gordon *et al*, 2004 and Kjaer, 2009). This, to a certain extent, misses the point, it is suggested that it is the very lack of precision that has facilitated their widespread acceptance.

Governance (2001a), *Devolution and Globalisation: Implications for Local Decision-Makers* (2001b), *Competitive Cities in the Global Economy* (2006) and *Competitive Cities: A New Entrepreneurial paradigm in Spatial Development* (2007). The concepts contained in these documents are reflected in much of the Irish public policy discourse over the course of the past decade. For example, variations of “(there) are close links between social and economic development, such that policies to support social cohesion may also increase investment attractiveness and business competitiveness,” (OECD, 2001a: 209) and “(the) governance structure of large cities need to be reformed in order to provide adequate frameworks for meetings the challenges of today such as sustainable urban development, increasing competitiveness in a global economy, strengthening social cohesion and nurturing local democracy,” (OECD, 2001b: ii) can be found in the National Competitiveness Council’s (NCC) *Our Cities: Drivers of National Competitiveness* (2009) and the NESDO’s *Ireland At Another Turning Point: Reviving Development, Reforming institutions and Liberating Capabilities* (2009) and the Dublin Local Authorities’ (DLA) *Economic Development Action Plan for the Dublin City Region* (2009).

3. Cities, Competition and Competitiveness

With regard to the concepts of competition and competitiveness, in this context the economic environment is conceptualised as one in which most kinds of protection from competition have been eroded, through technological change, improvements in communications, and “new instabilities in both tastes and the international economic order” (Gordon and Buck, 2005: 10). Turok notes that competitiveness represents the “fundamental of prosperity in an increasingly market-driven economy” (2005: 25). Unfortunately, as Turok contends, competitiveness is a very difficult concept to define and measure “because it is multifaceted and not directly observable” (*ibid.*). However, despite such difficulties, competitiveness “has become a powerful mantra in economic and spatial policy during the last decade” (Turok *et al.*, 2004: 14). As such, it is used in a variety of ways and contexts and, as Bristow observes, it “retains a seemingly unshakeable hold over policy thinking and practice” (2009: 26). Internationally, it is accepted that certain factors underpin the competitive success or failure of cities, regions and states (Moulaert 2000: 16-17). For example, it is clear that “some cities have consistently prospered, maintaining or increasing their share of national employment and population” (Moore and Begg, 2004: 93). Other cities have struggled to transition successfully to new economic environments and have lost jobs, skills and industries while failing to attract new investment (Savitch and Kantor, 2002: 2-3, Euchner and McGovern, 2003: 93).

The New Conventional Wisdom that has come to dominate so much of the public policy discourse contends that competition is a much more immediate and pervasive fact of life. Not only is it more all-encompassing, it is suggested that it is a qualitatively different process than heretofore. Rather than pursue greater efficiencies in serving existing markets, the central economic imperative is to compete and build competitiveness through a search for new opportunities and distinctive sources of advantage in conjunction with a pervasive “anxiety about competition from other places” (Massey, 2007: 174). Indeed, the New Conventional Wisdom contends that cities and city-regions have to be “more competitive to survive in the new marketplace being forged by globalisation and the rise of the information technologies” (Bristow, 2009: 26). Competitiveness has, in effect, become “a natural law for economic development and policy” (*ibid.*).

In addition, the model predicts a renewal of the importance of place-based external economies and the value of face-to-face relations. As Savitch and Kantor observe, at least for some cities,

the increasingly knowledge-intensive nature of economies has “accelerated face-to-face and informal contact. It has increased an appetite for conferences, seminars, and annual meetings” (2002: 15). Furthermore, businesses are constantly searching for that “extra edge that comes from personal contact” (*ibid.*). As Sassen notes, for a limited number of cities, those integrated into transnational economic networks, urban assets and urban economic performance matter more for national economic outcomes (2006: 76-78).

4. Cities and Cohesion

Social cohesion, like competitiveness, becomes a key component of the New Conventional Wisdom because the social structures of the previous socio-economic environment, i.e. clear divisions between public/private and economic/social roles, can no longer be counted on to ensure the conditions for competitive success. For example, Parkinson and Boddy observe that the term ‘cohesion’ has “been used in a variety of ways in different contexts” (2004: 4). At one level it is used in an effort to capture the idea of the processes and networks that underpin the activities of successful societies and economies. These include common values, attitudes and social norms. For example, lack of cohesion may be manifest in “a lack of attachment to paid work, restricted social contacts, attitudes to education, substance abuse or a propensity to crime” (Parkinson and Boddy, 2004: 5). Certain forms of social success contribute to economic success, for example, certain social networks, the nature of informal organisational life and the degree of social trust.

In addition, there are questions about how possible it is for old expectations about employment security and some consensus on fairness and legitimacy to continue to be met in the new circumstances of the ‘flexible’ economy and the individualisation of many social relations (Sassen, 2006: 155). This individualisation of such social relations, for example the decline of trade unions’ influence in many developed economies, is often accompanied by what Sassen terms “the informalization of a growing range of economic activities in today’s large cities” (2006: 161). These processes undermine the type of social cohesion envisaged as a foundation for successful cities because they tend to become evident in terms of the breakdown of residential community, family fragmentation and a decline in civic associations (Kirby, 2005). Despite such concerns, social cohesion is perceived to be a key ingredient in the state’s efforts to develop the new ‘smart economy’, i.e. an economy that “combines the successful elements of the enterprise economy and the innovation or ‘ideas’ economy while promoting a high quality environment, improving energy security and promoting social cohesion” (DLA 2009: 6).

5. Cities and Governance

The New Conventional Wisdom suggests that changes in competitiveness, competition and social cohesion have a number of significant implications for “systems of government and economic regulation” (Gordon and Buck 2005: 12). The first relates to the blurring of boundaries between the public and private spheres and the second relates to the scaling of the relevant economic arenas, as these have moved both up and down from the state.

With regard to the former, a very significant development has been the externalisation of many firms’ functions, particularly in the areas of training and continuing professional development. In the Irish case a number of state-funded agencies and quasi-public agencies have become increasingly involved in the provision of bespoke training, e.g. Skillnets, PLATO, Chamber Business School, FÁS. One could arguably include most universities and institutes of technology in this category as well. For example, a significant number of higher education

institutions deliver programmes designed solely to meet external accreditation by private, external organisations, including the Irish Planning Institute, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ireland, the Institute of Bankers in Ireland, and the Society of Chartered Surveyors. This has allowed private organisations to transfer their training costs to the public. In addition, traditional forms of standardised public provision/regulation are perceived to be insufficiently flexible for the new fluid environment. As a result there is a requirement for new forms of public-private and quasi-public partnerships to be established to pursue a more entrepreneurial path (Davies, 2007: 201).⁴

In relation to the scaling of relevant economic arenas, a key contention of the New Conventional Wisdom is that globalisation has led to a blurring of boundaries between supranational, national and local control functions. This has involved both a pressure to allocate decision-making power upwards, for example monetary, trade and environmental regulations (Savitch and Kantor, 2002: 2), and downwards to cities, for example competition for FDI and market shares in internationally traded services (Tsukamoto and Vogel, 2007: 16). Implicit in this perspective is that major factors on the road to the cohesive and competitive city are (a) finding the appropriate administrative scale at which to formulate and implement industrial, social and infrastructural policies, and (b) devising the appropriate partnership mechanism with the relevant private stakeholders. As a consequence, governance is purported to be an answer to how the imperatives of competitiveness and cohesion are to be pursued and balanced, when neither state nor market can assure this (Kjaer 2009:141). Hambleton outlines a model of governance that requires senior managers in local public institutions to “adopt an outward-looking approach, and crucially, to engage with the economic and other interests which influence the current and future wellbeing of the locality” (2003: 151).

6. Dublin and the New Conventional Wisdom

As stated above, the primary purpose of the chapter is to examine the position of Dublin in a set of widely shared and influential ideas about the emergence of a new urban era in developed economies. The purpose of the preceding sections is to draw out, as coherently as possible while sidestepping the numerous subtleties and disagreements within the literature, a narrative and its key components. Having done so, it is possible to examine Dublin within the New Conventional Wisdom paradigm and assess its situation.

A number of critical issues arise when examining Dublin as a city-region in comparison with so many of the counterparts offered in the literature. These include:

- (a) Dublin is not only the capital city of a modern EU member state, it is the largest city on the island and possibly the only city of relevant scale for the inclusion into the international network of city nodes discussed in the relevant literature. As the IDA observes, “frequently competition for Foreign Direct Investment comes

⁴ It is important to note that the National Economic and Social Council’s *The Developmental Welfare State* (Report 113) published in May 2005 and the National Economic and Social Development Office’s *Ireland At Another Turning Point: Reviving Development, Reforming Institutions and Liberating Capabilities* both express similar sentiments. The latter contends “new forms of cross-fertilisation between the economy, society and public governance are increasingly evident, enhancing the ability to learn and innovate,” (2009: 7).

not from other countries but from city regions with populations in excess of one million people. Dublin is the only recognised city region in Ireland that meets this criteria,” (2009:8);

- (b) As a consequence to (a) it is not in direct competition with other Irish regions for Foreign Direct Investment as it was in the recent past (O’Hearn 1998: 27);
- (c) It is the engine of the Irish economy and there is some discussion as to whether it is fully embedded into the wider Irish economy or in the process of disembedding from the national economy and taking a place in a different economic environment (Punch *et al.*, 2007: 50). What is Dublin’s place in a “new geography of centres and margins” (Sassen, 2006: 193)?
- (d) It is a city largely governed by national rather than local/regional stakeholders, despite the fact that there are a myriad of local public stakeholders and more proposed. Is it a case of too many local cooks and not much broth to spoil?
- (e) Clarifying the boundaries of the city-region raises a number of interesting political and socio-economic questions. When the City is discussed, is it the boundaries of the City Council, the Dublin Metropolitan Area, the Greater Dublin Area or a Functional Urban Region being discussed (Williams, 2006: 3-4)?
- (f) What coherent evidence underpins the claim that Dublin is a cohesive and competitive city? To develop the argument of Dr. Craig Barrett, former CEO and Chairman of Intel, without low corporation tax and English as our *lingua franca* in what ways is Dublin more competitive than Helsinki, or Barcelona or Copenhagen?⁵

Given these issues, it is suggested that while all cities have unique characteristics, Dublin’s unusual economic position vis-à-vis the rest of the state (Punch et al 2007: 46), the recent and current economic and regulatory regime, its institutional arrangements and track record in creating public institutions, and its political culture, poses challenges that the remedies outlined in the New Conventional Wisdom paradigm may find difficult to surmount.

7. Governance in an evolving city-region

Savitch and Kantor contend that the “combination of economic, demographic, technological, and political change is cumulative, and will continue to impact the social order. No society encapsulates this transformation more than urban society. Cities are the crucibles through which radical experiments become convention,” (2002: 3). In this context, it is argued that for innovative solutions to be formulated and implemented three distinct concerns need to be addressed:

- (a) National-local institutional relationships are more important in Dublin than most cities;
- (b) The relationship between governance (processes) and government (public institutions) is more fluid in Dublin;
- (c) The relative lack of importance of the local/regional public and their elected representatives.

⁵ At the Global Irish Economic Forum in Farmleigh in September 2009, Dr. Barret was reported to have said that there were fourteen reasons why Intel came to Ireland almost 20 years before, but only one remained: the Irish rate of corporation tax.

With regard to the relationships between Dublin's public institutions and national public institutions, the majority of the issues arise from the historic weaknesses of local government in Ireland and their lack of autonomy (Callanan and Ó Broin, 2007: 497), the "cultural domination of national politics and government in Irish society" (Keogan and Callanan 2003: 503), and the fact that local governments are largely excluded from the planning and delivery of public services such as health, education and policing. In addition, the Irish state has engaged in a process of "agencification" (McGauran *et al*, 2005: 8), particularly at local level (Ó Broin and Waters, 2007), but there is "no overall government or public sector position on agency formation" (Quinn, 2008: 14). As a result, the institutional landscape is littered with a plethora of recently established, very weak and poorly aligned quasi-public agencies.⁶ Furthermore, the focus of national agencies on Dublin is likely to remain, if only because they tend to be based in Dublin. In conjunction with the fact that Dublin remains the seat of the national government, it is likely that national agencies will retain more than a passing interest in the affairs of the city and its governance. Whether these take the form of a national Minister of Transport criticising the City Council's choice of road signage or involvement in the city-region's waste management policies, national stakeholders will be involved in the governance of the city-region in a way that won't happen in either Cork or Waterford.

In terms of the fluidity of governance relationships in Dublin, it is suggested that this arises due to an interesting congruence of events. First, the lack of clarity over what constitutes Dublin has meant that a large number of stakeholders have had to be involved in certain consultative exercises. Taken in conjunction with the corporatist-oriented political culture in the state, this has led to a form of dialogue between stakeholders in different parts of the city-region and at different levels. From Traders Associations in small suburban towns to the Dublin Chamber of Commerce, national business representative associations, trade union organisations, community groups, voluntary organisations and education institutions, public institutions have engaged with a variety of civil society actors and publics in a relatively significant manner. A particularly interesting aspect of this process is that it lacks a specific institutional framework, in particular one provided for by statute. As a result, components of Dublin's public institutions are engaged in a continuous conversation with multiple stakeholders at multiple levels without any obvious democratic or legitimacy dividend (McGuirk 2000).

In addition to the ongoing inter-sector dialogue it is important to note the very significant overlap of views and personal interaction between public servants in key positions. Smith notes the openly avowed declaration that public servants tend to share "a set of implicit values" (2005: 181) and a "high level of consensus in the overall policy approach" (*ibid.*). As such, while Irish efforts to develop linkages between institutions may lack momentum, networked individuals are prominent.

⁶ The Report of Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes (McCarthy/An Bord Snip Nua) recommended the abolition of a number of agencies and the abolition of a tier of local government and the merger of local authorities. In addition, the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs has engaged on a "Cohesion Process", which has seen a number of local development agencies merge and seen the merger to two separate funding programmes: the local Development Social Inclusion Programme and the Community Development Programme. However, it is contended that these efforts don't constitute a rational and coherent programme of public agency management..

In relation to the role of democratically elected public representatives, it is important to acknowledge the relative lack of importance of local/regional public and their representatives. This is a particular problem for Dublin, in comparison to other cities and city-regions. The Irish system of local or sub-national government, in addition to lacking any coherent and effective regional tier, ensures that locally-elected public representatives in Ireland play a much reduced role in the policy formulation and decision-making processes than their European counterparts, and the ability of citizens to influence both the policy formulation and decision-making processes beyond casting their ballot is very narrow (Ó Broin and Waters, 2007). This lack of status and power for citizens and their elected representatives arises from a combination of factors, the most prominent being the highly centralised nature of the Irish state. As Adshead and Tonge observe, that centralisation is equated with efficiency and the “preference for functional efficiency, even at the expense of democratic accountability, is a trait that has characterised local government in Ireland since its foundation” (2009: 160). This trait is perhaps best exemplified by the ‘managerial’ system of local administration. This system constitutes a major difference between Ireland and other EU member states and has been the subject of substantial debate since its introduction in 1929. Despite recent proposals, including a Green Paper, to introduce directly elected mayors, the system remains largely unchanged. Yet the managerial system has had substantial impact on the ability of local citizens, through their elected councillors, to drive a particular policy agenda. In essence, it has resulted in a democratic deficit where many decisions and policies are initiated and implemented by a non-elected manager. Decision-making in Irish local governments can be broadly divided into two categories:

- (a) Reserved functions refer to those made by the elected representatives of the council;
- (b) Executive functions refer to those carried out by the county/city manager.

For many citizens, the main conclusion from an analysis of the workings of local government is that the power of initiative lies with the manager and the majority of decisions made by the local government tend to lie in his/her domain (Adshead and Tonge, 2009: 174). This is not to demean or underestimate the work carried out by managers, but it remains problematic that managers are, to a significant extent, insulated from the democratic deliberations of elected councillors.⁷ This has added to the public perception that local governments are an “invisible layer of government” (Keogan and Callanan, 2003: 503) with little relevance to people’s daily lives, rather than a flexible and “adaptive tier” of government (Quirk, 2003). Linked to this perceived lack of a robust democratic counterweight to managerial power is a question of the relevance of local government. For example, the various local governments in the Dublin city-region are only tangentially involved in such vital services as health, welfare, enterprise, education, training and policing. In addition to the lack of a robust democratic counterweight

⁷ There is also the added complication of an increasing knowledge gap between professional staff and elected representatives. Nalbandian notes that while there are several ways for professional staff to accumulate competence at a faster rate than elected representatives and to systematically convey learning from one generation to the next, there is no comparable systematic way for one generation of elected representatives to learn from another (2009: 192-193).

in the city-region's local governments, the public agencies operating in the area also lack political counterweights in all public agencies.⁸

In this context, the question remains: is it possible for a Dublin, as an evolving city-region in an open economy, to meet the challenges that are likely to arise in the coming years? The contention of this paper is that it has the potential to, though not through the solutions promulgated by the New Conventional Wisdom. As Healy notes, "each place is different, and has its own trajectory and potentials. There is no predetermined pathway to building effective institutional capacity," (1999: 192). In relation to developing the Dublin's institutional capacity, it is important to acknowledge that it is highly unlikely that:

- (a) The "cultural domination of national politics and government in Irish society" (Keogan and Callanan, 2003: 503) is going to change. National public agencies, government departments, TDs, Ministers and the Taoiseach are probably going to make contributions to the city-region's public policy formulation and implementation processes;
- (b) Local/regional institutional structures will improve in the short to medium term, including the proposal for a directly elected mayor. This is not to suggest that reforms are not worthwhile but rather recognition that the Irish record of significant and radical reform of public institutions, particularly local public institutions, is poor.

It is suggested that the more likely avenues for success are to develop a shared strategy between the four local governments, other relevant public agencies, including higher education institutions, and private organisations that builds on the existing strengths of interpersonal and inter-institutional relationships and shared knowledge. This may involve a systematic process to facilitate greater interaction between staff in public, private and other institutions and agencies for varying periods of time. The recent establishment of the Creative Dublin Alliance is a very positive development and, along with other such initiatives, it is providing the parameters for substantive collaboration between a number of diverse stakeholders.

In this context, it is suggested that the most fundamental challenge facing the formulation and implementation of public policies is to build public support, recognition and legitimacy for these processes. What is required is an approach that embraces democratic renewal and embeds public policy in some form of citizen-involved public deliberation. The region is littered with consultation efforts that embitter and further marginalise citizens from their local public institutions.

A fundamental rethink is necessary. Without a public policy process that has the support and involvement of the city-region's citizens and communities, the policies formulated to address challenges such as climate change, the shift to the low carbon economy, reorganisation of the global financial system, the restructuring of the city-region's economy and demographic

⁸ In terms of democratic accountability, one of the more interesting consequences of the establishment of the Health Service Executive was the removal of much maligned elected representatives from its deliberations. As a result, many citizens who heretofore relied on elected representatives to advocate on their behalf have lost a voice in their health service..

changes are unlikely to be effective.⁹ There has to be a recognition that stimulating active citizen participation in local government, complex and uncomfortable as it can be, is crucial and will have “profound implications” for public servants and elected representatives (Hambleton, 2007: 167).

However, if the city region’s stakeholders, citizens and communities can keep the social relations between key institutions fluid and focused on the success of the city-region while trying to improve region’s institutional architecture and build citizen support and legitimacy, Dublin could develop the social, civic and institutional capacity to thrive.

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¹ Understanding what drives participation among its citizens will enable the city-region to develop more appropriate mixes of intervention and the right range of opportunities and encouragements. Social science research identifies a number of factors as to why people participate in local civic life. For example, citizens participate when they can, when they have the resources necessary to organise, mobilize and make their argument and when they think they are part of something. They like to participate because the arena of participation is central to their sense of identity and their lifestyle. They participate when they are enabled and encouraged by an infrastructure of good civic organisations that provides different pathways to participation. People participate when they are directly mobilised or asked for their opinion. Finally, people participate when they experience the system they are seeking to influence as responsive (Stoker 2005, 15-18).

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