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The Role of Public Perception in Shaping Urban Development Policies

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Article Info

Abstract

This qualitative study examines how the salience of public perception has an impact on the establishment of urban development policies. Using semi-structured interviews with local residents and municipal decision-makers, the study explores the way of how change in urban planning projects and activities is based on the changing public opinion. The results are that the two key mechanisms that emanate out of civic engagement are the delivery of feedback and the reinforcement of accountability and responsiveness, both of which are valuable in influencing the outcome of policy. The most prominent factors include socio-economic status, personal interest in the issues of cities, and trust in the leadership. These studies also outline the views of the policymakers in the eyes of the population, and, thus, prove that community involvement can be used to trigger the changes within any urban project. This research, therefore, fills theoretical and methodological gaps identified before by illuminating the intricacies of involvement of people and the resulting effects on policy reform in an urban context. The findings highlight the fact that the promotional culture of collaboration under action plans targeting urban development is more effective and leads to social trust. On this basis, it is suggested that future studies should continue with the investigation of the perception of the population at different stages of development and explore the use of online social media as an enabling tool of increasing civic engagement in the policy making process.

INTRODUCTION

The present patterns of urban-development can be characterized by the interplay between socio-economic, demographic, and environmental factors that, in turn, reflect on the context of the policies and the attitudes of the population (Auwalu et al., 2023). In turn, the inclusion of the role of citizen participation in the initial planning and policy making is becoming a democratic imperative and managerial need (Sharma et al., 2022; Auwalu and Bello, 2023; Das et al., 2024; Syaban and Appiah-Opoku, 2023). The lack of success of some urban policies can be partially explained by the absence of necessary infrastructural and economic factors, as well as an inability to consider the public opinion and make the required adjustments to the functioning and implementation of such policies (Iweh et al., 2021; Sarabdeen, 2024).

The significance of first impressions on policy-making processes in urban settings is immense since the literature shows that the perception of people is crucial in planning processes (Simonofski et al., 2023; Richardsen Moberg, 2024; Dastjerdi and Nasrabadi, 2022). The policy perception concept is the general awareness of the population, confidence in governmental and institutional players, and certain fears about the environmental care, fairness, and welfare (Lazarus et al., 2020; Sarabdeen, 2024; Scantamburlo et al., 2024). Quite often, the opinion of the people is not taken into account, which causes a strong resistance that can trigger the project failure or stalling (Alvarez & Brehm, 2020). Empirical studies show that a more responsive policy environment is created by prior community involvement in policy formulation and this can be optimized by having adequate support.

This has been facilitated by increased application of technology and social media in the policymaking of the urban development policymakers, as this has ensured that people can track policy changes in real-time, as well as provide direct feedback to the decision-makers via the digital platforms (Shao et al., 2021; Schaffer et al., 2022). New technologies create a wider range of perspectives and thus diversify the deliberative process in the urban planning. Cortes et al. (2021) showed that digital participation tools enabled the citizens to affect the governance decision regarding the area of public traffic and green space thus enhancing the transparency and accountability. However, the question that still stays is how well does the urban policy-makers incorporate such form of public input in the process of formulating the policies?

The role of the public opinion has become a critical determinant of the policy development, but the specifics of how certain opinion trends influence the urban development policy are not completely understood (Ausat, 2023; Béland et al., 2022; Sparkman et al., 2022). This means that there is still a paucity of empirical studies that put into question the attitudes of the population in the wider range of urban development policies. Further, city growth is brought about by a complex of social processes and a diverse local, regional, and national environment, which is imbued with a different perception pattern among residents. In this regard, this research will add to the existing body of literature by investigating how public perception contributes to the establishment of the urban development policy in a given urban environment.

One of the issues of special concern of the population is trust and transparency in governance. The level of trust in governmental institutions would have a direct impact on the willingness of citizens to approve of urban policies, especially in cities that have to grapple with major damaging effects of urbanization. The more citizens feel that the policies are developed in a consensual and consultative manner, including the stakeholders, the more likely they will support the municipal initiatives (Nicholson et al., 2020). Lack of transparency, in its turn, is likely to trigger a backlash or questioning of policy decisions, an illustrative case being the Anti-Elites protests in big cities like Hong Kong or Istanbul. Therefore, governments have to ensure that the citizens are not treated as mere consumers of policies but as the ones who contribute to the policy making process.

This paper presents how the perception of the populace affects the formation of the urban development policy by focusing on three major aspects, which are concern, trust in policymakers, and sensitivity of policies. The use of a qualitative methodology consistent with these dimensions allows capturing the diverse factors that cause changes in the popular expectations and attitudes. In that way, the study makes a contribution to the academic debate on the importance of the social perception on the creation of efficient and inclusive urban policies. By questioning these dimensions, the research gives recommendations to the policy makers on how to fill

gaps between the expectations of the people and policy interventions to improve the policy legitimacy and effectiveness of urban development projects.

METHODS

Therefore, this paper has used qualitative research design to provide rich and in depth insights on the perceptions of the people on the urban development policies. The choice of the qualitative design was guided by two factors first, it has the ability to go beyond quantitative measures and identify certain attitudes, beliefs, and experiences that might have contributed to the results but are underrepresented in the analytic data; secondly, it is more likely to allow an exploration of subtle factors that may have influenced policy reception. The purposive sampling method was used with the purpose of choosing the participants that had prior understanding of the existing policies in the field of urban development or expressed their interest in this field. The sample that was derived was 25 people who were comprised of residents, community leaders, urban planners, as well as policy makers of the selected urban area. This mixed composition helped both to capture a wide range of perspectives, including those who were directly involved in the processes of urban planning, as well as those who were peripherally interested in them. Data collected by the use of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis were instrumental in answering the primary research questions and, thus, provided detailed and sophisticated information about the perceptions, attitudes, and ideas of participants regarding the urban development policies.

Fifteen face-to-face interviews with residents and policymakers were filled in. Semi-structured interview design provided the flexibility of expanding on issues and at the same time, uniformity of data across cases. The participants were also questioned on their understanding of the current urban policies, their experience on the implementation of policies, and how they felt about the impact of the policies on their respective communities. Interviews were between 45 and 60 minutes and with the informed consent of the participants to be audio taped. Two focus group discussions were organized as well with five participants each; a group of community leaders and a group of community residents. These discussions were fruitful in terms of witnessing the flow of ideas, new trends, and group dynamics, hence contributing to the data on the subject matter with both agreement and disagreements. Each focus group session took around 90 minutes with a moderator guiding the discussion with general questions. All the pertinent documents, such as the policy texts, policy reports, public notices, gazettes, and local government publications were re-reviewed to compare the perceptions of the participants with the official language. This comparison analysis allowed to determine the policy statements, strategic objectives, and the points of engagement with the population and placed these policies in context of how these policies might be appealing or reactive to the public criticism.

The thematic analysis was used to perform data analysis in order to identify patterns and trends in the data collected. The process of analysis included some steps. To begin with, the recordings of all interviews and focus groups sessions were transcribed word-to-word and audio-recorded. The researcher then dipped into the transcripts and read repeatedly till a comprehensive familiarity was achieved with the content, and recurrent impressions and themes were noted. Based on the research questions, major phrases, sentences, and ideas, the systematized coding of them occurred. The codes were inductively derived of the data, as opposed to being determined a priori. A coding process was followed after which a coding was grouped into broad themes that formed areas of societal interest. Themes identified were; knowledge of the urban policies, credibility of the leadership in the urban policies-making and responsiveness of the policies and participation of the people in the policy formulation. The themes were unique aspects of the impact of the role of the masses on the policies of urban development. At the concluding point, themes were

understood with references to the research questions, the available literature, and to the current context of the urban policy. The findings resulting thereof were amalgamated into a consistent story which outlined the nature in which the identified publics supported and hindered the adoption of various policies concerning urban development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The current research adds to a finer understanding of the central problem of social perception and its consequences on the urban development policy, such as understanding that the community and the decision-makers are in a complex relationship. Using such a qualitative interview methodology, the investigation will deal with a wide range of stakeholders, including community members, urban planners, and policy makers, and, as such, the overarching research question will be the following: how do perceptions get formed, expressed, and perceived within the context of urban governance? This question does not only help to name the drivers that create the background of the popular opinion, but also helps to understand that the administrative discourse mirrors the communal sentiment. The results highlight the importance of social engagement in the process of policy-making, as it showed that the active involvement of the community in the planning process has more working policies. As a result, the paper develops a more detailed discussion of the interview results, attempting to place the complex processes in a wider framework, and contributing to a deeper insight into the role of the public perception in shaping a policy-making process in a city.

Community Knowledge and Publicity of the Urban Development Policies

Urban development policy awareness and understanding by the people are the conditional requirements of the successful implementation and acceptance of the policy initiatives in the communities. When it comes to the urban development context, awareness implies the knowledge of current policies as well as the interpretation of the policy goals, outcomes and effects on the life of the community by the people. The understanding of these factors is important as it enlightens how the citizens make meaning, approach and consequently react to development plans. Regardless of the availability of more information, the findings of the given study suggest that the gaps in the awareness and understanding of the urban policies still exist, thus influencing the way people view and communicate with the policies. The participants tended to have a restricted knowledge of particular policy information, but many of them knew noticeable projects like the appearance of new infrastructure or improvement of the public areas. Some of the respondents were angry about what they felt was the unavailability of information about the broadness of urban policies. One participant, a local resident, remarked,

> *"I see the new roads and buildings going up, but no one explains what's really going on. We are told that it's for progress, but no one asks if we agree with the changes."*

This fact highlights another commonality between interview data, namely, public respondents often recognize the material consequences of policy initiatives, but they lack deeper knowledge of the overall goals or explanatory contexts that guide such policies.

Another interesting result is related to the diversity of the level of awareness within demographic levels. Although some of the participants, especially the community leaders and professionals, demonstrated rather well-informed vision of urban policy, some, especially those belonging to the marginalized backgrounds, demonstrated very little knowledge even of the slightest aspects of the policies, in question. As an

illustration, one of the interviewees who lived in a low-income neighbourhood expressed their worries, as,

> *"We don't get any information until they're already working on the street, and by then, it's too late to give our input. We want to know how it will affect us, but no one seems interested in telling us."*

The lack of participation is also a pertinent obstacle faced by many communities in trying to stay updated and also to play a significant role in discussions surrounding the subject of urban planning.

In addition to that, the respondents noted that, even when information is provided, it is often presented using technical language and bureaucracy, which makes it accessible only to a few people who are part of the general population. Some of the respondents suggested the improvement of the accessibility of information, and suggested the use of plain language and other visual aids as tools of ensuring the ease of understanding by the layman.

This was the need Stated by one of the community leaders,

> *"The government sends notices and announcements, but they're full of technical jargon that's hard for regular people to understand. We need clearer communication so people actually know what's happening."*

This quote highlights the lack of connection between policymakers and people whereby the availability of information dissemination does not necessarily lead to effectiveness due to language barrier or complexity of the idea.

Transparency was also found to be another factor that diluted the understanding of the policies of urban development by the populace. Many of the respondents indicated that they developed suspicion or distrust about policy goals and consequences as a result of opaque communication. Without easily understandable information concerning policy aims and decision -making procedures, the general attitude of the population leans towards mistrust. A participant commented,

> *"When we're not given the whole picture, it feels like they're hiding something from us. We want to know that these changes are really for the community, not just for certain groups."*

The indicated sentiment represents that transparency as an instrument of information dissemination should be seen as a central component of building confidence in the population and engaging in active participation in the community.

Influencing the Social Viewpoint

The urban development policies are shaped by a wide range of intertwined determinants, which affect the way, in which individuals perceive and react to the policy projects. Media representation, personal experiences, socio-economic status, and community engagement were found as some of the key variables that have a significant impact in the present study. All these contribute to the way people evaluate and respond to the implementation of urban development, thus influencing the effectiveness of policies and their popularity among citizens.

Media is a major factor in creating the perception of the people as it frames information about the policies in urban development in certain ways. Reporting on local media, social media or community newsletters is usually the main source of information to the residents. This type of coverage can influence the minds of people, particularly at the time when the media discourse highlights some elements of urban development more than others- economy or possible inconveniences. Some of the participants reported that news articles and posts that they read online had a solid

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influence on their views regarding current projects. For instance, one respondent mentioned,

> *"I read a lot about the new development in the paper, and they make it sound like it's all positive, but when I speak to people in my neighborhood, it seems like there's another side to the story."*

This quote highlights a universal feeling which is that although media may provide information of great value, it sometimes presents a one-sided angle that may not be in consonance with the community experiences or concerns.

The personal experience of the urban development projects (either positive or negative) has a strong impact on the way people perceive such policies. The participants who gained direct advantages of the development projects like the improvement in the transportation systems or access to the newly built social facilities expressed more positive opinions. On the contrary, those who went against disturbances like noise pollution, displacement or increase in cost of living felt ignored or sidelined in the decision making process. One local resident shared,

> *"My family had to move out of our old apartment because of a new project. It's hard to see this as a good thing when it pushed us out of our home."*

The assertion shows how personal experience with development programs may create a sense of estrangement, particularly when individual requirements are viewed as less important than the policy-wide goals.

Socio-economic status turned out to be another salient determinant with the respondents of differences in socioeconomic status often having different opinions given by their varying access to resources, information and participation in community events. Respondents that belonged to more affluent areas tended to have a higher level of familiarity with urban policy and were more confident about their ability to access information available to the public. On the other hand, those who lived-in low-income localities were likely to report less awareness and reduced effectivity in policy making. One of the interviewees who belong to a low-income neighborhood stated,

> *"We hear about these big plans, but it feels like they're not for us. Richer areas get parks and clean streets, while we're left out of the picture."*

This feeling outlines the perception gap that is created by socio-economic cleavages where the policy projects of the urban areas are sometimes being seen as favorable to the rich constituencies as well as marginalizing the poor people at the same time.

The community and the extent of the population involvement with the decision-making processes were identified as the critical factors influencing the perceptual outcomes. The subjects who viewed themselves as integral in the process of public deliberations or consultations with regard to urban development projects tended to give a better appraisal of the same initiatives. The feeling of valuation and respect was expressed in such individuals as important contributors to the new direction of their community. Conversely, individuals who faced exclusion or lack of information sharing often had negative perceptions which they described urban development as being a top-down mode which ignores community views. A community leader shared,

> *"When we're actually invited to give input, we feel like we matter. But too often, decisions are made without consulting us, and we're left dealing with the consequences."*

The above feedback indicates the paramount role of developing substantive work with the community to ensure that the decisions made by them are grounded in what the community needs and make them feel that they have a stake in the policy.

How the policymakers understand the view of the masses is a critical factor in the formulation and execution of urban policies. More subtle insight into the interpretations of the decision-makers concerning the general mood of the people will not only impact the issues of the policies but the course in which the decision-maker will conduct the talks with communities. The results have shown that policy-makers are often faced with the challenges of interpreting the will of the people that can lead to active participation in certain cases but in other cases lead to a mismatch between the requirements of the community and the policy goals. Different factors including feedback, political pressures, and personal bias were found to affect the perception and reaction to the public opinion by the policymakers.

Feedback systems, such as surveys, community meetings, and public hearings, are one of the major ways policymakers evaluate the opinion of the people. These tools are meant to provide the information on the preferences and concerns of a community, but their effectiveness may be significantly different based on procedural implementation and interpretative models. Most of the policymakers in this research took note of the effectiveness of these feedback channels in addition to realizing the inherent limitations associated with them. An example can be given of a city planner observing,

> *"We do surveys and hold forums, but often the same voices come through those who are vocal tend to dominate, while quieter community members are overlooked."*

The above view brings into focus one of the most common issues, which is that despite the intention of feedback mechanisms to reflect the overall societal opinion, they could unintentionally reflect only the opinions of certain demographic groups, thus biasing the policy-making process and limiting the ability to represent the interests of a larger group of the population.

Political influences also have a major influence in how policymakers perceive the opinion of the population. Elected leaders, especially those in power, might be under pressure to ensure that their policies are aligned with the opinions of their constituencies to either gain their support in an election or to ensure they are supported by the masses. However, this alignment is complicated by the fact that there is a variety of opinions and sometimes contradictory ones in the community. This dynamic was elaborated by one of the participants who was a local elected official,

> *"I often find myself torn between what I know is best for the city and what seems to be popular among certain groups. It's a balancing act that can be quite stressful."*

The discussed sentiment is the summary of the empirical fact that, even though policymakers strive to address the view of the population, the need to balance the conflicting interests frequently results in dilemmas that complicate the decision-making process.

Individual prejudices also influence the opinion of the policymakers. Such actors introduce their personal experiences, values, and beliefs, which means that they will affect the way they interpret the feedback of people and the way they prioritize the issues. In other cases, the officials might accidentally give preference to the views of other persons or organizations, having similar demographic or socio-economic features and come up with decisions that do not represent the entire spectrum of sentiments of people.

One policymaker to his credit has noted,

> *"I have to admit that sometimes my own background shapes how I see things. I might overlook voices that don't resonate with my experiences."*

This recognition indicates the significance of self consciousness and why policy-makers must strive to acquire varied views so as to curb the prejudice within their understanding of the general mood.

The above difficulties notwithstanding, most policy-makers accepted the need of active consultation with societies to develop a more accurate assessment of the opinion of the population. Relationship with residents does not only help in the acquisition of substantive information, but also helps in creating trust and rapport between policy-makers and the constituencies where they represent.

This statement was emphasized by one of the participants as he said,

> *"When we take the time to listen and really engage with the community, it changes everything. People feel valued, and we can get a clearer picture of what they truly want."*

The above view argues that substantive engagement can be used to reduce the disjuncture that is often evident in the relationship between policymakers and the general citizenry and hence making it easier to come up with effective and responsive policies in urban areas.

Influence of the general opinion on the changes in policy

The influence of public perception on the adjustments in the policy is immense because policymakers always tend to refer to the sentiment of a community when they need to determine how effective and acceptable their actions are. When civil society is dissatisfied or voicing concerns over city development projects, decision-makers are forced to take action thus causing changes in strategy, change in priorities or at times abandonment of the intended projects. This dynamic interplay implies the significance of understanding how the population thinks, which serves as a driver of policy improvement and a tool of responsibility. There are several important dimensions that demonstrate the way the public perception influences policy changes, and they include community feedback, flexibility of policy and accountability mechanisms. Community feedback is one of the most straightforward avenues through which the public is able to adjust the policy using the means of perception. When citizens express their opinions, be it in form of mass gatherings, social networks, or through community surveys, the politicians are often at fault and are often called to rethink their strategies. The analysis found that officials that are proactive in requesting and listening to the feedback of the people are more responsive in their policy-making procedures. As an example, a local government official quoted,

> *"After hearing community concerns about the lack of green spaces in our urban plan, we re-evaluated our priorities and shifted our focus to include more parks and recreational areas."*

This statement demonstrates the influence of public opinion in determining development outcomes by providing an example of how community input can result in noticeable changes in policy direction.

Another important consideration when analyzing the influence of public opinion is the flexibility of policies. Public support is frequently more readily obtained by policymakers who are willing to modify their plans in response to community opinion. Because of this flexibility, different viewpoints and priorities can be incorporated, keeping policies current and functional. One urban planner made the following observation during the interviews,

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> *"We've learned that being flexible and willing to adapt our plans based on community input not only helps in gaining support but also leads to better outcomes."*

This flexibility increases the overall efficacy of urban development projects by demonstrating a responsive governing strategy that puts public opinion first. Accountability is also facilitated by public perception, which forces decision-makers to defend their choices and deeds in front of the public. Policymakers may be prompted to communicate more openly or offer more convincing justifications when citizens voice doubts or discontent with urban policies. Improved public-policymaker trust may result from this greater accountability, creating a cooperative atmosphere for next policy debates. One study participant emphasized this idea by saying,

> *"When we raise our voices about what's not working, it puts pressure on the city to explain their choices and consider our needs."*

This claim emphasizes the mutually reinforcing relationship between accountability and public perception, showing how citizen participation can encourage legislators to act more responsibly.

The study also identified certain cases where important policy changes were prompted by popular opinion. For example, the city council conducted a number of community workshops to get feedback after receiving a lot of negative feedback about a proposed transportation project that would have forced the relocation of multiple areas. They changed the proposal in the end to reduce displacement and incorporate affordable housing into the redevelopment plans in response to the comments. After considering this procedure, a community advocate said,

> *"It felt like our voices were finally heard. They changed the project to reflect what we wanted, which made a huge difference in how we view local government."*

By emphasizing the potential for collaborative governance when community views are given priority, this example demonstrates the concrete influence of public perception on policy changes. The results of this study demonstrate how important public opinion is in influencing urban development regulations. This study adds to a better understanding of the relationship between community participation and policy-making by looking at the elements that shape public opinion, how policymakers perceive popular sentiment, and the ensuing effects on policy changes. The study identified a number of important findings that fill in significant knowledge gaps regarding the interactions between public perception and urban policy and complement and build upon the body of existing work in these areas.

Prior studies have demonstrated that public perception has a substantial impact on policy results; however, the precise mechanisms underlying this phenomenon have not been well investigated. Cho et al. (2021) highlighted the value of public participation in forming municipal governance, but they skipped over the specifics of how legislators interpret public input. By demonstrating that community input is not only gathered but also actively influences decision-making processes, our study immediately fills this gap. As one urban planner put it, "We often adjust our plans based on community feedback; if we hear strong concerns, we know we need to pivot our approach." One interviewee emphasized this relationship. Compared to earlier discussions in the literature, this highlights a more dynamic interplay.

Additionally, research by Esposito et al. (2021) has shown how socioeconomic position influences how people view urban policies; however, a thorough examination of how policymakers interpret these impressions is lacking. According to our research, politicians have to negotiate a complicated terrain of public opinion influenced by socioeconomic variables, which may distort how they perceive and

react to criticism. "We have to consider that not everyone voices their concerns, and the ones that do may not represent the entire community," said a member of the city council. This realization deepens the current conversation and emphasizes how important it is for decision-makers to take into account the many viewpoints and experiences found in their communities when creating municipal policies.

The literature, especially those who contend that community involvement improves governmental openness, has emphasized the role of public engagement in promoting accountability. In addition to supporting this viewpoint, our research shows that accountability is a two-way street. Participants pointed out that voicing their displeasure forces decision-makers to provide more context and interact with the public more openly. A local leader said, for instance, "When we raise our voices about what's not working, it puts pressure on the city to explain their choices and consider our needs." This mutually beneficial relationship adds another perspective to the discussion of public involvement, implying that a healthy feedback loop can improve cooperation and confidence between the public and local government. This idea is further supported by research by Borup et al. (2020), which shows that communities with active involvement frameworks typically have greater levels of trust in local governance.

Another area in which this study adds to the body of literature is the flexibility of policy in response to public opinion. Although earlier studies have indicated that effective policies are those that address the requirements of the public, this study offers empirical support for the idea that flexibility in policymaking might provide greater results. The study discovered, for example, that when authorities were willing to make changes to urban development plans in response to community input, the projects not only gained support but also became more effective overall. This is consistent with research by Pozoukidou & Chatziyiannaki (2021), who proposed that flexible governance frameworks are critical to contemporary urban administration. "Being adaptable and willing to modify our plans based on community input not only helps in gaining support but also leads to better outcomes," said one urban development officer. Our study, however, broadens this concept by describing particular processes that operationalize adaptability in reaction to public opinion.

The study's conclusions have significant ramifications for further investigations into public participation and municipal policy. First and foremost, longitudinal research is required to monitor shifts in public opinion over time and how they affect changes in policy. Policymakers may find it useful to comprehend how attitudes change in response to particular urban initiatives. Second, given the current era in which social media is increasingly influencing public discourse, more research into the function of digital media as a feedback mechanism is warranted. This topic has been mentioned in the literature (Hügel & Davies, 2020), but there are still few thorough studies examining the subtleties of online public involvement. shows that some voices can be amplified while others are marginalized by digital platforms, which calls for a detailed analysis of how these interactions affect policymaking.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the complex relationships between community involvement and policy-making, underscoring the important impact of public opinion on urban development plans. The study adds to a more sophisticated knowledge of how public mood might influence urban government by examining the elements influencing public opinion, the perspectives of policymakers, and the consequent influence on policy changes. It emphasizes how crucial it is for residents and local government representatives to communicate effectively and hold each other accountable. It also underlines how inclusive and flexible policy frameworks not only build community

trust but also provide better urban planning results. In the end, meeting the many requirements of urban populations and making sure that development projects represent the community's values and goals depend on encouraging a collaborative approach to governance.

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