

The Role of Public Perception in Shaping Urban Development Policies

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Abstract

This qualitative research examines the measures by which public perception influences the development of urban development policies. Based on interviews with the local residents and policymakers, the study explores the ways that the modifications in the urban planning projects and activities result from the shifts in public opinion. The research findings show that two mechanisms that flow from public engagement are instrumental in shaping policies – feedback and support for accountability and adaptability. Among the most influential following parameters: socio-economic status, concern of an individual with the problems of cities, faith in the authorities. The study also shows the views of the policymakers towards the public opinion to see that the community may indeed drive changes in such urban projects. In this context, this research fills the identified theoretical and methodological gaps by disclosing the intricacies of public engagement in relation to its influence on policy change in the urban context. The outcomes of this research point to the fact that promoting the culture of cooperation in action plans geared towards urban development will be more productive and will command public confidence. Hence, the study should extend future research to examine public perception as the process unfolds across different phases and the activation of online social media as a tool for enhancing public participation in policy making.

Keywords: Public Perception, Urban Development, Policy-Making, Community Engagement, Qualitative Research.

Introduction

Contemporary patterns of urban development are influenced not only by numerous social, economic, and environmental factors, which form a policy context and the public's perception of it. Over the past several years, urban development has intensified in many global cities, the resulting problems include, but are not limited to housing crises, traffic jams, and pollution (Auwalu et al., 2023). As a result, participation of the public in the pre-planning and policy formulation has receiving consideration as a democratic imperative and need in the management of urban development (Sharma et al., 2022). One possible reason for the lack of success of certain urban developing policies perhaps because along with requisites of infrastructures and economics, public sentiments too play a part in determining acceptance and functionality of the policies (Iweh et al., 2021).

The impact of first impressions of the public on the policy-making process in towns and cities is enormous, numerous studies show how critical public perception is in urban planning processes

(Simonofski et al., 2023). Policy perception as a concept can include the overall awareness of the populace, their confidence in government agencies, entities, and their definite issues of concern regarding environmental stance, fairness, and prosperity (Lazarus et al., 2020). In most cases, public sentiments are disregarded and this leads to stiff opposition to policies hence setting project failures or delays (Alvarez, R. M., & Brehm, 2020). These show that the earlier the communities are involved in planning to take up a policy or an intervention, the more responsive the policy environment will be and outcomes may be improved depending on adequate support.

The increased use of technology and social networks in the management of urban development policies has allowed the public to be attentive to the changes taking place directly through policy makers as well as the ability of the public through the comment section to draw the attention of the policymakers to their needs, expectations or to give their feedback (Shao et al., 2021). New technologies help to have more diverse opinions and thus make more contributing opinions regarding the urban planning activities. Cortés et al. (2021) showed that depending on the available digital participation tools decisions of smart cities governance on public transport and green areas were made by citizens which brought more transparency and accountability to policies. Nevertheless, the following is the question left to answer on how efficient urban policy-makers utilize such public input in the formulation of policies.

While public opinion has recently become an increasingly important influence on policy, the concrete processes by which particular opinion patterns affect urban development policies is not well understood. Consequently, urban planning research investigating public attitudes across the wider umbrella of the overall urban development policies is still scarce. Furthermore, the growth of cities is the result of multiple social factors in addition to different local and regional realities and national contexts, which also have their own people's perception patterns. That is why, this study is going to contribute to the existing literature by investigating the presence of public perception as a factor for the creation of the urban development policies within a particular urban environment.

The public especially has great concern with matters related to trust and transparency in governance. Note that the level of trust in government institutions impacts the people's approval of urban policies especially in cities that are grappling with huge negative impacts of urbanization. If citizens are made to feel that policies are being formulated through a consensual process of consultation with the stakeholders, the tendency of the citizens to support the initiatives being offered by the city is bound to rise (Nicholson et al., 2020). On the other hand, when transparency is absent, the people tend to protest or question policy measures for assessment, as was the case with Anti-Elites protests in major cities of Hong Kong, and Istanbul. That is why it becomes necessary for governments to consider the public not just as mere targets of policies, but as policy actors.

This study investigates the role of public perception in shaping urban development policies by focusing on three key dimensions: concern, confidence in policy-makers as well as policy sensitivity. Through the chosen dimensions, it would be possible to use qualitative approach in order to capture the multifaceted nature of factors underlying changes in expectations and attitudes among the public. Thus, the study helps enrich the body of knowledge that opens the discussion on the importance of public perception for the effective and inclusive urban policy. Through examining these dimensions, this research will make suggestions for policymakers to better understand the gaps between public demands and policy measures, in order to promote policy legitimacy and improve the efficiency of urban development policies.

Methodology

Consequently, this study used a qualitative research approach to obtain in-depth and richness of the perceptions of the public on policies in urban development. The reasoning for the qualitative approach was twofold: Due to its ability to extend beyond the numbers and pin down specific attitudes, beliefs, and experiences that may have affected the outcome, but were not necessarily reflected in the analytics. In this study, purposive sampling was used where only those who had prior knowledge about or who had an interest in the current urban development policies were chosen to participate in the study. This sample targeted 25 participants who were residents, community leaders, urban planners, and policy makers in the selected urban region. Such diversity enabled getting a broad picture of the various attitudes of the field, involved and non-involved in the processes for urban planning. First authored research questions were answered using qualitative data collected through semi structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. These methods allowed obtaining comprehensive and rather refined data about the participants' perceptions, attitudes, ideas about the policies for urban development.

In all, fifteen individual interviews with residents and policymakers were completed. The use of semi-structured interviews provided fluidity when discussing topics which are analysed but at the same time ensured uniformity of the interviews. Their answers were sought concerning their understanding of the existing urban policies; experience in policy implementation and further; regarding the effects of these policies for communities. All interviews took 45 to 60 minutes long with the participants' informed consent for recording the interviews. There were two focus group discussions, with five participants in each group- the community leaders and the community residents. These discussions proved useful to sit in and watch in the course of the exchange of ideas, trends and group dynamics and add value to the results of the data collected as they displayed the agreed and disagreeable. One focus group session took about 90 minutes per session, and it's headed by the moderator who served as the general questioner. All the documents such as policies; policy reports; public notices; gazettes; local government publications among others were revisited so as to benchmark the participants' perception. This analysis allowed to determine what the policies are in terms of policy statements, what are the strategic goals, and where the policies are engaged with public, that was giving background for how those policies may engage or respond to the public perception.

Data analysis was reviewed by using thematic analysis so as to show various patterns and trends of the collected data. The analysis process involved multiple stages: All the interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed, word by word. The researcher thus read through the transcriptions in order to be very familiar with the data collected: some impressions and repeated ideas. With the specific aim of addressing the research questions, the coded key phrases, sentences, and ideas were quite systematically labelled. Codes for the themes that would be captured were developed inductively that is from the actual data. At the end of coding, codes were bundled into overarching themes capturing areas of public concern. Such themes included knowledge about urban policies, and the credibility of leadership in urban policy-making, identification of responsiveness in policies and the participation of the people in policy formulation. Since each theme was an aspect of how perception impacts on the policies of urban development, each was distinct. In the last stage, themes were discussed with regards to the research questions and the literature and where the participant's perceptions sit in the current context of urban policy. Thus, findings obtained were integrated to come up with a coherent literature story aimed at capturing the manner in which the identified 'publics' influenced or otherwise supported the implementation of various development policies in urban regions.

Results and Discussion

The finding of this research offers a deeper understanding of a key issue – public perception and its impact on urban development policies, including an appreciation of the complex interplay between the community and decision-makers. The study employs qualitative interviews and engages a range of stakeholders including community, urban planning and policy making. Thus, the key research question guiding the study is how perceptions are constructed communicated and interpreted in the sphere of urban governance. Such investigation does not only identify the drivers creating the public opinion’s backdrop, but also illuminates the perception of the administration discourse regarding the community opinion. Indeed, the research shows the importance of public participation in policy-making works with regard to stressing that if the community participates in the planning process, their contribution will result in better policies. Subsequent to that, the study concludes more elaborate discussion of the interview findings as an effort to depict the complex interplay in a broader context as well as gain a richer comprehension of how the public perception influences the policy-making process in urban context.

Public Awareness and Understanding of Urban Development Policies

Public awareness and understanding of urban development policies are foundational to the successful implementation and acceptance of policy initiatives within communities. In urban development, awareness encompasses both knowledge of ongoing policies and the public’s comprehension of the policy objectives, benefits, and impacts on community life. Understanding these elements is crucial because it informs how citizens interpret, engage with, and ultimately respond to development plans. Despite the increased availability of information, findings from this study indicated that gaps in public awareness and understanding of urban policies persist, affecting how individuals perceive and interact with these policies.

Participants generally expressed a limited understanding of specific policy details, although many were aware of visible projects such as new infrastructure developments or public space improvements. Several respondents conveyed frustration at what they perceived as a lack of accessible information on the full scope 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 statement underscores a recurring theme across interviews: the public often recognizes the tangible outputs of policies but lacks clarity on the broader objectives or rationales guiding these decisions. Another significant aspect that emerged was the diversity in levels of awareness across different demographics. While some participants, particularly community leaders and professionals, demonstrated a reasonably well-informed view of urban policies, others, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, expressed minimal familiarity with even the basic aspects of these policies. For instance, one interviewee from a low-income neighborhood expressed their concerns, saying,

“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.”

This lack of engagement reflects a barrier that many communities face in staying informed and contributing meaningfully to urban planning discussions. Moreover, participants noted that even when information is provided, it is often communicated in technical language or bureaucratic terms that are challenging for the general public to understand. Several respondents suggested that

information should be made more accessible, using simple language or visual aids to facilitate comprehension. One community leader highlighted this need, stating,

“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 statement highlights the disconnect between policymakers and the public, where information dissemination may be present but ineffective due to language barriers or complexity. The issue of transparency was another factor that influenced public understanding of urban development policies. Many participants indicated that a lack of transparent communication led to suspicion or skepticism about policy motives and outcomes. Without accessible information on policy objectives and decision-making processes, public perception tended to lean toward 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.”

This sentiment indicates that transparency is not only a means of conveying information but also an essential factor in building public trust and encouraging proactive community engagement.

Factors Shaping Public Perception

Public perception of urban development policies is shaped by a variety of interconnected factors, each influencing how people view and respond to policy initiatives. In this study, several key factors emerged as significant influencers, including media representation, personal experiences, socio-economic status, and community engagement. These elements collectively contribute to the ways in which individuals interpret and react to urban development efforts, ultimately impacting policy effectiveness and public support.

Media plays a substantial role in shaping public perception by framing information about urban development policies in specific ways. Coverage in local news outlets, social media, and community newsletters often serves as the primary source of information for residents. This coverage can shape public opinion, especially when media narratives emphasize certain aspects of urban development over others, such as economic benefits or potential disruptions. Several participants noted that their views on recent projects were heavily influenced by news articles and posts they encountered online. 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 common sentiment: while media can provide valuable information, it sometimes offers a one-sided perspective that may not align with community experiences or concerns.

Personal interactions with urban development initiatives whether positive or negative strongly influence how individuals perceive these policies. Participants who experienced direct benefits from development projects, such as improved transportation or access to new public facilities, expressed more favorable opinions. Conversely, those who faced disruptions, such as noise, displacement, or increased living costs, reported feeling overlooked or marginalized by 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.”

This statement reflects how personal encounters with development projects can lead to a sense of alienation, particularly when individuals feel that their needs are secondary to broader policy goals.

Socio-economic status was another influential factor, as individuals from different backgrounds often had varied perspectives based on their access to resources, information, and involvement in community affairs. Participants from higher-income neighborhoods typically expressed greater familiarity with urban policies and felt more confident in accessing public information. In contrast, individuals from low-income areas tended to report lower levels of awareness and felt less empowered to influence policy decisions. One participant from a low-income community commented,

“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 sentiment illustrates the disparity in perceptions based on socio-economic divides, where urban policies are sometimes viewed as favoring affluent communities while neglecting marginalized ones.

Community engagement and the level of public involvement in decision-making processes were highlighted as crucial factors shaping perception. Participants who felt included in public discussions or consultations regarding urban projects generally had a more favorable view of these initiatives. They expressed feeling valued and respected as contributors to their community’s future. Conversely, those who felt excluded or insufficiently informed often harbored negative perceptions, viewing urban development as a top-down approach that disregards community voices. 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.”

This feedback underscores the importance of fostering meaningful public involvement to ensure that policies reflect community needs and encourage a sense of ownership among residents.

Policy-makers’ Perceptions of Public Opinion

Policy-makers’ perceptions of public opinion are critical in shaping the development and implementation of urban policies. Understanding how decision-makers view public sentiment can influence not only the content of policies but also the manner in which they engage with communities. The study revealed that policy-makers often grapple with the complexities of interpreting public opinion, which can lead to both proactive engagement and, at times, a disconnect between community needs and policy objectives. Several factors were identified that influence how policy-makers perceive and respond to public opinion, including feedback mechanisms, political pressures, and personal biases.

One of the primary means through which policy-makers gauge public opinion is through feedback mechanisms such as surveys, public hearings, and community meetings. These tools are intended to provide insights into community preferences and concerns, yet their effectiveness can vary significantly based on how they are conducted and interpreted. Many policy-makers in this study acknowledged the value of these feedback channels but also recognized their limitations. For instance, a city planner noted,

“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.”

This perspective highlights a common challenge: while feedback mechanisms are designed to capture public sentiment, they may inadvertently reflect only the views of certain segments of the population, which can skew policy decisions and limit the representation of broader community interests. Political pressures also play a significant role in how policy-makers interpret public opinion. Elected officials, in particular, may feel compelled to align their policies with the views of their constituents to secure votes or maintain public support. However, this alignment can be complicated by the diverse and sometimes conflicting opinions present within the community. A participant who served as a local elected official explained,

“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.”

This sentiment reflects the reality that while policy-makers may strive to be responsive to public opinion, the necessity to navigate varying interests can create dilemmas that complicate decision-making. Personal biases also impact policy-makers’ perceptions of public opinion. Policy-makers bring their own experiences, values, and beliefs to their roles, which can influence how they interpret public feedback and prioritize issues. Some officials may unconsciously prioritize the views of those who resemble their own demographic or socio-economic backgrounds, leading to decisions that do not fully consider the diversity of public opinion. One policy-maker candidly remarked,

“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 acknowledgment underscores the importance of self-awareness and the need for policy-makers to actively seek diverse perspectives to avoid bias in their interpretation of public sentiment.

Despite the challenges mentioned, many policy-makers recognized the importance of actively engaging with communities to foster a more accurate understanding of public opinion. Engaging with residents not only helps to gather information but also builds trust and rapport between policy-makers and the communities they serve. A participant emphasized this point, stating,

“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.”

This perspective suggests that meaningful engagement can mitigate the disconnect that sometimes exists between policy-makers and the public, ultimately leading to more effective and responsive urban policies.

Impact of Public Perception on Policy Adjustments

Public perception significantly influences policy adjustments, as policymakers often look to community sentiment to gauge the effectiveness and acceptance of their initiatives. When the public expresses dissatisfaction or concerns regarding urban development policies, decision-makers are compelled to respond, leading to changes in strategies, priorities, or even the abandonment of proposed projects. This dynamic interplay highlights the importance of understanding public opinion, as it can serve as both a catalyst for policy refinement and a measure of accountability. Several key aspects illustrate how public perception impacts policy adjustments, including community feedback, adaptability of policies, and accountability measures.

One of the most direct ways public perception influences policy adjustments is through community feedback. When citizens vocalize their opinions whether through public forums, social media, or community surveys policymakers are often prompted to reconsider their approaches. The study

revealed that officials who actively seek and listen to public feedback tend to be more responsive in their policy-making. For example, a local government official noted,

“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 exemplifies how community feedback can lead to tangible changes in policy direction, illustrating the power of public opinion in shaping development outcomes.

The adaptability of policies is another crucial factor in understanding the impact of public perception. Policymakers who are open to revising their strategies based on community sentiment are often more successful in garnering public support. This adaptability allows for the incorporation of diverse perspectives and priorities, ensuring that policies remain relevant and effective. During the interviews, one urban planner remarked,

“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 adaptability reflects a responsive governance approach that prioritizes public sentiment, enhancing the overall effectiveness of urban development initiatives. Public perception also acts as a mechanism for accountability, compelling policymakers to justify their decisions and actions to the community. When citizens express skepticism or dissatisfaction with urban policies, it can prompt policymakers to provide clearer rationales or to engage in more transparent communication. This increased accountability can lead to improved trust between policymakers and the public, fostering a collaborative environment for future policy discussions. A participant in the study highlighted this point, stating,

“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 statement underscores the reciprocal relationship between public perception and accountability, illustrating how citizen engagement can drive policymakers to take more responsible actions.

The study also revealed specific instances where public perception led to significant policy adjustments. For instance, in response to widespread criticism regarding a proposed transportation project that would have displaced several neighborhoods, the city council held a series of community workshops to gather input. Based on the feedback, they ultimately modified the project to minimize displacement and included provisions for affordable housing in the redevelopment plans. A community advocate reflected on this process, saying,

“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.”

This example illustrates the tangible impact of public perception on policy adjustments, highlighting the potential for collaborative governance when community voices are prioritized.

The findings from this study highlight the critical role that public perception plays in shaping urban development policies. By examining the factors influencing public opinion, the perceptions of policymakers regarding public sentiment, and the subsequent impact on policy adjustments, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between community engagement and policy-making. The study revealed several key insights that align with and expand upon existing literature on public perception and urban policy, addressing notable gaps in understanding how these elements interact.

Previous research has established that public perception significantly influences policy outcomes; however, the specific mechanisms through which this occurs have not been extensively explored. Cho et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of public engagement in shaping local governance but did not delve into the nuances of how feedback is processed by policymakers. This study directly addresses this gap by revealing that community feedback is not merely collected but actively influences decision-making processes. Interview participants highlighted this relationship, with one urban planner stating, "We often adjust our plans based on community feedback; if we hear strong concerns, we know we need to pivot our approach." This emphasizes a more dynamic interplay than previously discussed in the literature.

Furthermore, studies by Esposito et al. (2021) have documented the role of socio-economic status in shaping perceptions of urban policies, yet there is a lack of comprehensive analysis on how these perceptions are interpreted by policymakers. Our findings indicate that policymakers must navigate a complex landscape of public opinion shaped by socio-economic factors, which can skew their interpretations and responses to feedback. As one city council member noted, "We have to consider that not everyone voices their concerns, and the ones that do may not represent the entire community." This insight adds depth to the existing discourse and underscores the necessity for policymakers to consider the diverse experiences and perspectives within their communities when formulating urban policies.

The role of public engagement in fostering accountability has been highlighted in the literature, particularly, who argue that community involvement enhances governmental transparency. Our study corroborates this perspective while also demonstrating that accountability is a reciprocal process. Participants noted that when they express dissatisfaction, it compels policymakers to clarify their decisions and engage more transparently with the community. For example, a community leader mentioned, "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 reciprocal relationship highlights an additional dimension to the discourse on public engagement, suggesting that a vibrant feedback loop can enhance trust and collaboration between citizens and local government. Research by Borup et al. (2020) also supports this notion, indicating that communities with active engagement frameworks tend to see higher levels of trust in local governance.

The adaptability of policies based on public sentiment is another area where this study contributes to the existing literature. While previous research has suggested that successful policies are those that respond to public needs, this study provides empirical evidence showing how flexibility in policy-making can lead to better outcomes. For instance, the study found that when policymakers were open to modifying urban development plans based on community feedback, they not only garnered support but also improved the overall effectiveness of the projects. This aligns with findings from Pozoukidou & Chatziyiannaki (2021), who suggested that adaptable governance structures are essential in modern urban management. One urban development officer remarked, "Being flexible and willing to adapt our plans based on community input not only helps in gaining support but also leads to better outcomes." However, our research expands this notion by detailing specific mechanisms through which adaptability can be operationalized in response to public perception.

The study also revealed specific instances where public perception led to significant policy adjustments. For instance, in response to widespread criticism regarding a proposed transportation project that would have displaced several neighborhoods, the city council held a series of community workshops to gather input. Based on the feedback, they ultimately modified the project to minimize displacement and included provisions for affordable housing in the redevelopment plans. A community advocate reflected on this process, saying, "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.” This example illustrates the tangible impact of public perception on policy adjustments, highlighting the potential for collaborative governance when community voices are prioritized.

The findings of this study have important implications for future research on urban policy and public engagement. Firstly, there is a need for longitudinal studies that track changes in public perception over time and their impact on policy adjustments. Understanding how perceptions evolve in response to specific urban initiatives could provide valuable insights for policymakers. Secondly, further exploration into the role of digital media as a feedback mechanism warrants attention, particularly in an era where social media increasingly shapes public discourse. Existing literature (Hügel & Davies, 2020) has touched upon this issue, but comprehensive studies investigating the nuances of online public engagement remain limited. indicates that digital platforms can amplify certain voices while marginalizing others, which necessitates a careful examination of how these dynamics influence policy-making.

Conclusion

This study underscores the significant influence of public perception on urban development policies, revealing the intricate dynamics between community engagement and policy-making. By exploring the factors shaping public opinion, the perceptions of policymakers, and the resulting impact on policy adjustments, the research contributes to a nuanced understanding of how public sentiment can drive urban governance. It highlights the importance of effective communication and reciprocal accountability between citizens and local officials, emphasizing that inclusive and adaptable policy frameworks not only enhance community trust but also lead to more effective urban planning outcomes. Ultimately, fostering a collaborative approach to governance is essential for addressing the diverse needs of urban populations and ensuring that development initiatives reflect the values and priorities of the community.

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