

# Analysis of the Perception of Professionals in Municipalities of Dammam Metropolitan Area Towards Introducing E-Participation in Saudi Urban Planning

Adel Saleh Bouregh, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Saudi Arabia\*

## ABSTRACT

The aim of the study is to investigate the e-participation in urban planning in Saudi Arabia (KSA). It further investigates the perception of the employed professionals in the municipalities of Dammam Metropolitan Area (DMA) towards introducing e-participation. The study adopts a quantitative research method. The data is collected through a structured self-administrated survey. The sample for survey is drawn from the municipalities in DMA, KSA. The target population of the study is defined as professionals working in municipalities in DMA. The findings of the study indicate that the professionals in municipalities have optimistic attitudes toward e-participation in urban planning. They believe that e-participation in urban planning will contribute in having high representation of public, positive contribution, and speeding up the decision making. The findings also show that there is almost complete agreement in the views regarding the e-participation feasibility in planning process during crises (such as COVID-19).

## KEYWORDS

E-Participation, E-Planning, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Metropolitan Area, Municipalities of Dammam, Population, Public Participation, Urban Planning

## INTRODUCTION

Public engagement can improve policy-making, bring diversified views and voices to policy decisions made. It can lead to better-informed programs and policies which are in accordance with the needs of the citizens. The public engagement process also strengthens the transparency and accountability to establish civic capacity (Katsonis, 2019). Planners have traditionally worked for the public interest (Sager, 2012). That is why most of a planner's time is spent on talking and interacting with people. This means that dialogue has the potential to change situations. It also means that communication between planners and the public can lead to shared information that, in turn, can be embedded in the planning process (Innes, 1998). As modern society is undergoing a participatory revolution, there is a need to identify new public participation methods, which means that there should be new ways of collaboration and interaction for joint learning (Bobbio, 2019). Local knowledge is critical in not only deciding plans but also implementing them fairly on ground. Public interaction is a dialogue between the government and the public as well as a dialogue between the various members of the public. The idea of participation should be understood as an act of thriving creativity rather than

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\*Corresponding Author

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just one-way communication. This also promotes society as a living organism rather than a machine (Booher & Innes, 2005).

Given the above, evolution in ways public is engaged important. The information society in which we live today has information-based objects that are convenient and do more than what they are supposed to do (Innes, 1998). However, planners should focus on the assumptions behind these new ways before they are implemented, as these assumptions can hinder or facilitate public participation.

There is a potential to engage the public and develop lasting relationships through informal public engagement processes; people who fear speaking out or reservations about attending formal events can express their opinions more freely about the issues (Leong, Forester, & Decker, 2009). The planning authorities in municipalities pay attention to how to plan, develop and then provide services that meet the need of the communities. Planners engage themselves in all areas of city development and come with solutions for many problems like the rapid growth of urbanization and population (Krog, 2019). Planning authorities play an essential role in providing meaningful public engagement. Therefore, various approaches of participation were introduced for urban planning to enhance meaningful public engagement.

Public participation research in the community planning process mainly focuses on the design of participation activities and tensions there (Clark, 2020). The process inherent in accommodating such rapid urbanization raises the importance of employing sophisticated tools to engage the public in the decision-making on a variety of issues in urban planning.

Instead of telling the citizens what to do, citizens should be allowed to plan the future of the places they choose to inhabit (DCLG, 2011). In previous years, the world witnessed the emergence of SARS, Zika, and Ebola (Gadhi, 2020). In 2020, another unwelcome guest hit nations, known globally as the novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19. It caused a severe disruption worldwide (Allain-Dupré, Chatry, Michalun, & Moisis, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has a vast impact on municipal governments, and it caused great harm to the inhabitants, services, employment, economics, and governmental institutions.

This matter paralyzed the world and the system (Allain-Dupré et al., 2020). The COVID-19 crisis introduced digital government as a need to manage government institutions' activities and services (Mishra, 2020). Therefore, a municipality with the capability and expertise in ICT should affect the management of the planning process. This allows the governmental institutions to conduct and manage the work without stopping/freezing the activities during the crises. This raises the importance of employing ICT in the planning process to manage urban planning issues during emergencies. Intelligent technologies help increase civic engagement and trust in municipal officials (Campisi, Akgün, Ticali & Tesoriere, 2020). This tool can foster more people (Koekoek & van Lammeren, 2008), manage populated urban areas, and lessen vast distances or even large amounts of time that people face. In fact, ICT has no fixed place or time (Gajendra, Xi, & Wang, 2012). In general, ICT is a necessary tool in all aspects of city development. In Saudi Arabia, cities are rapidly developing and being transformed in response to the continuous economic reform that moves the cities towards change and progress, showing a strong need now for effective urban planning processes across the country. With high urban population growth (Abou-Korin & Al-Shihri, 2015; Abubakar & Aina, 2018) and for citizens who are not living in urban areas, municipalities must make efforts to engage communities and stakeholders in the urban planning process through e-participation in the local level planning process at municipalities. Based on the importance of public participation and creating new ways, this paper studies e-participation in urban planning in Saudi Arabia. It engages the professionals in the municipalities in Dammam Metropolitan Area (DMA), Saudi Arabia, as stakeholders in facilitating the planning process and aims to investigate their opinions towards e-participation and employ it as an additional administrative tool. Therefore, the study aims to examine the e-participation in urban planning in Saudi Arabia (KSA). It further investigates the perception of the employed professionals in the Dammam Metropolitan Area (DMA) municipalities towards introducing e-participation.

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