

Engaging newcomers in urban planning processes in the Greater Toronto Area

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Abstract

Following decades of immigration-centered growth, Toronto is among the fastest growing cities in North America and lays claim to being the most diverse city in the world. In recent years, municipal planners in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) have endeavoured to refine their approach to engaging local communities—especially its newcomer populations—in public consultations that inform the planning decision-making process. However, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, local governments in the region have had to take greater strides towards infusing their engagement practices with added creativity, particularly in confronting obstacles for the effective inclusion of immigrant communities. Drawing upon interviews eliciting the knowledge and experience of planning practitioners, representatives of locally-based civil society organizations, and migrant community members, this research uses case studies concentrating on land use and planning public participation exercises in selected municipalities in the GTA to determine how municipal decision-making processes are evolving to best accommodate newcomers' strengths and adapt to their particular needs.

As immigrants form an increasingly sizable proportion of the GTA's population, learning how to engage them as co-producers of municipal and community plans not only serves to make the practice of public participation in planning a more inclusive and representative enterprise, but also has broader implications for policies relating to multiculturalism, integration and citizenship. Planning practitioners in the GTA have taken innovative steps to design more accessible methods of engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in terms of taking on more of an 'activist' role to advocate for the needs of newcomer communities and convene them in a variety of settings to better capture the diversity of voices they represent. In particular, there has been a pronounced flourishing of a sense of 'community'—employed as an action to be performed, rather than as a phenomenon to simply be studied—in order to allow for the identification of a common purpose and the emergence of more cooperative forms of interaction.

Nevertheless, as they struggle to navigate the barriers to entry inherent to the top-down planning logic informing most local governments' development practices, planners continue to confront significant barriers to promoting more inclusive engagement activities. It is essential

for local governments to extend additional resources to support planning practitioners as they seek to implement culturally sensitive public participation practices and revitalize their governance structures to more effectively integrate the contributions of, and in turn best serve, their diverse communities.

Biography

Shervin Ghaem-Maghami is a fourth-year doctoral candidate in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto. His research interests centre on migration and integration, urban politics, municipal governance and community-level collective decision-making, with a particular focus on public participation in urban planning practice and newcomer relocation and settlement in the Greater Toronto Area.