

**SWOT Analysis to Applying Public Participation in Urban  
Development in Developing Countries  
(Case study: Damascus Metro)**

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**Abstract**

"People are not there to be planned for; there are to be worked with ... There must be one golden rule-we all need to be involved together-planning and architecture are much too important to be left to the professionals" (HRH The Prince of Wales, A vision of Britain, 1989).

Syria now receptive to external pressure for community participation, so different international organizations, have involved in community participation in the context of urban planning and development. Outcomes of their involvement have been restricted to the extent to which external agendas fit domestic needs, on the one hand and on the other hand, the social contract between the state and various class interests.

This paper seeks to present an analysis of the public participation process utilized by "Damascus Metro-Green Line" Project. The analysis will conclude with recommendations applicable to future public participation programs in the field of urban planning and development. To achieve that aim, documents analysing and interviews conducting with representatives of the involved experts, public and stakeholders, will be used to define all internal resources, capabilities and obstacles (strengths and weakness), and external factors (opportunities and threats) over which the experience had no control. A powerful tool/ model for doing such analysis is Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) model. This model helps revealing obstacles, capabilities, extracting short comes and lessons; what worked and did not, and why in order to identify ways to minimize affects of weaknesses in our application while maximizing our strengths, and matching our strengths against the external opportunities.

This paper would be a basic reference, as it is the first of its kind in Syria. Further SWOT analysis, regarding other experiences is recommended.

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**Dedication**

To the memory of my father.

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**1.0 Introduction**

Prior to introducing the case study of Damascus Metro public participation (DMPP), proper definitions of concepts and measures against which we assess the case study are needed, reaching to proper contextualizing and common understanding about it.

**1.0.1 Definitions**

The first and fundamental concept we need to clarify is what do we mean by "Public/ citizen Participation"? The used definition comes from Sherry Arnstein, who defines citizen participation as citizen power." "It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future." She makes the point that citizen participation without redistribution of power is a meaningless exercise for the powerless. If the power holders are the only ones who make the decisions, then the status quo is maintained and true citizen participation has not occurred", according to the same reference.

The second concept we need to be clear about is that of stakeholders. They are a subset of the public, who are affected by a plan, program, or project; including those not aware they are affected. Stakeholders are not in an equal distance from the public

participation process; otherwise they are in different “orbits of participation” according to Lorenz Aggens, Founding Member, IAP2:

"Unsurprised apathetic – are given the opportunity to participate, but choose not to in any way

Observers – may not participate, but may inform public opinion

Commenter – will voice their ideas to inform the plan

Technical reviewers – influence the process

Active participants – collaborate to develop the plan

Co-decision makers – approve the plan"

The third concept is ladder or degree of participation; Sherry Arnstein describes various types of public participation and 'non-participation' in terms of a hierarchy based on the degree of participation involved. On the bottom of her ladder are two forms of non participation; manipulation and therapy. **Therapy** pretends to involve people in planning in order to help those people feel better about them selves; **manipulation** is also a facade of participation and is concerned to 'educate' people or get them on side.

The next three levels, Arnstein describes as degrees of tokenism. **Informing** involves the use of the media, pamphlets and posters to provide a one-way flow of information. **Consultation** allows citizens to express their views but there is no guarantee that those views will be considered or taken into account. **Placation** allows some influence to citizens through token membership of committees or boards. The three highest levels which involve real participation involve a redistribution of power.

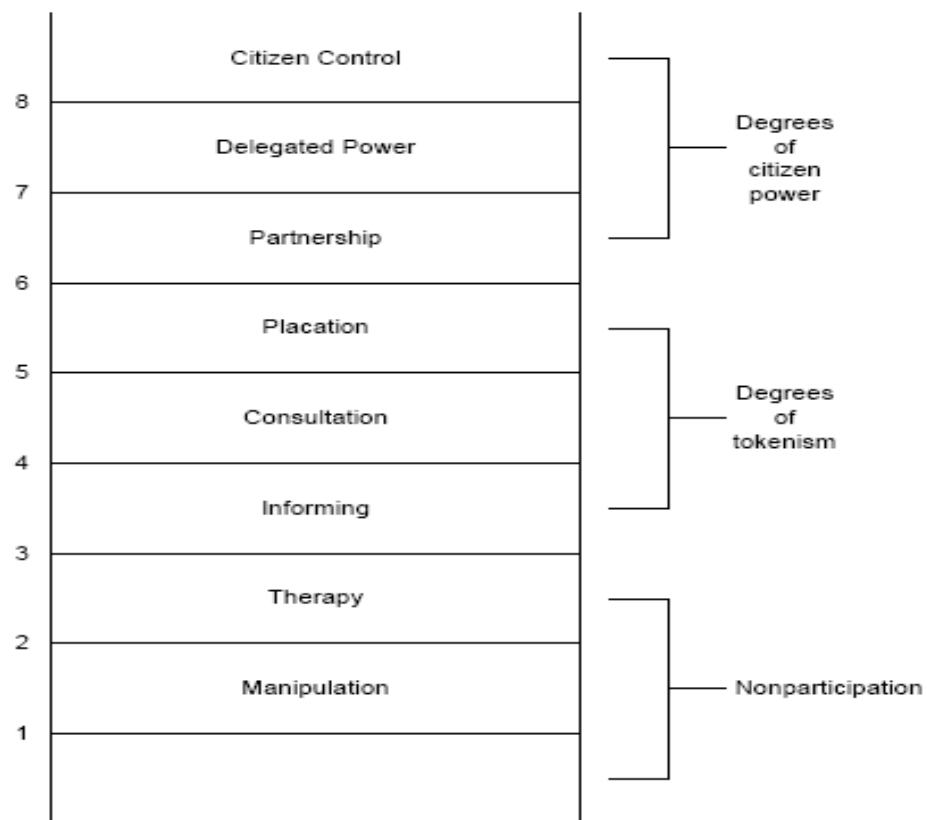


Figure 1: Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation

### **3.0.2 Overview of (DMPP)**

According to the project's documents "The Green Line will be the first step of development of the future public transport network. Feasibility studies carried out by international consultants in 2002 have designed what could be the future Metro network, whose first stage will be the Green Line, between Muadamieh and Qaboun.

Major transport projects, and especially public transport projects, directly concern a lot of people. The population of Damascus living within or close to the Damascus Metro-Green Line corridor will be directly impacted by this new means of transportation. As part of the preliminary studies currently being carried out, Damascus Governorate and the French-Lebanese consultant (SYSTRA / KHATIB & ALAMI) has implemented a consultation process, in order to inform the public and to gather people's comments about the project. One of the main objectives of the study was to define the route of the Damascus Metro-Green Line.

This has been done by analyzing several possibilities and choosing the best one based on several criteria. The acceptance of the population was one of the key criteria to be taken into account. The consultation has collected public points of view and comments, which will be a key element in the decision-making process. "Public consultation is an essential component of a project this size given the impacts it will have," Ms. Haddad from Damascus governorate said. "We want people to be involved and other similar projects have faced legal challenges for not consulting local residents."

Public participation process divided into three stages:

#### ***Stage 1:***

A campaign informing a representative panel of the public about the reasons behind the decision to proceed with a metro system in the Green Line corridor. For Stakeholders, meetings will be organized with different groups to involve them in the project development and implementation.

#### ***Stage 2:***

For the Public, a presentation of alternative Project Options for the Metro in the Green Line corridor and seeking public views will be proposed. For Stakeholders, a methodology to integrate their own inputs in the implementation process is proposed in this report.

#### ***Stage 3:***

For the Public, a presentation of the preferred project option with elements and comparisons with the other alternatives will be realized. For the Stakeholders, various meetings to participate in the evaluation process of alternatives and in the choice of proposed solutions. During the second and the third stage of consultation process, the use of virtual reality representation will be proposed as a graphic tool via our partner PIXXIM. To complete this strategy, a web site will be proposed".

## **2.0 Methodology**

In order to analyze the Syrian experience in public participation, I have intended to investigate multiple case studies. Due to time and resources limitations, I decided to focus on one case study; that is DMPP, using SWOT analysis that based on:

1. Literature review
2. DMPP documents' analysis
3. One-on-one interviews.

SWOT analysis has reflected the multi-dimensional phenomenon of public participation, as different paradigms: psychological, sociological, economic, political and legal have shaped the four components of SWOT model.

Interviews have been conducted with individual participant either he was stakeholder, one of the public, a representative panel or from the project side. Posed questions have contributed to formalizing the four components of SWOT model.

When sorting and analyzing interview data, ideas were considered to be significant if they were:

- Identified or discussed by multiple interviewees
- Mentioned multiple times by a single participant,
- Unique in perspective or insight.

It was not possible to interview every stakeholder. SWOT would be more precise if I would be able to conduct more interviews.

### **3.0 SWOT Analysis**

SWOT analysis is an analytical method used to identify and categorize significant internal (Strengths and Weaknesses) and external (Opportunities and Threats) factors. It provides information that matches a project's resources and capabilities to the physical, social, economic and political environment in which it had no control. It should not be viewed as a static method with emphasis solely on its output, but rather as a dynamic part of the management, planning and development process of the project, as this model helps revealing obstacles, capabilities, extracting short comes and lessons; what worked and did not, and why. It is worth mentioned that one item could be an opportunity and threats at the same time.

#### **3.0.1 Strengths**

- The political support represented by Damascus governorate that supervised the project, the financial support represented by European Investment Bank and the technical support represented by Systra and Khatib & Alami.
- Eventhough, internet has the potential to link all citizens - rich and poor, young and old, in addition to the fact that population can participate without rank and without being invited overcoming different physical and social barriers from disability to poverty, but it is not exactly the situation in developing countries due to their economic situation. In our case study, internet has been used for the first time in public participation in Syria. 10.000 persons have visited the web site; most of them were university's students, as large segments of the population are "Internet Illiterate". In addition, Syrian citizen, living abroad, have participated also via the internet. Using the internet may consider a strength since it is one of various other participation tools used in the public participation process. In addition to the fact that the website is user-friendly; information is easy to find, and not buried on the website.
- Different public participation tools have been used in public participation process like questionnaires, brochures, internet, exhibition, media and public meetings.
- Informing the public; it is nice to not only be given a choice to participate in decision making, but to be given information to help make a reasoned decision. Informing helps the public build the capacity needed to formulate alternatives. Damascus Metro has informed the public early and continuously,

through user-friendly website, brochures, public meetings, exhibition and media.

- Transparency of the process shown through publishing the feedback of the two consultation phases on the project's web site. So, the public can see exactly the result of their participation, what has been included or not included and how their input has been used regarding the route of the Green Line. Citizen comments and questioned have been replied personally as well.
- Citizen surveys are a relatively inexpensive and quick technique for measuring public opinion. Unlike public hearings and more deliberative techniques, surveys also capture opinions not heard in more involved processes requiring greater motivation, time, and resource commitments. Also, properly designed and administered surveys allow researchers to draw inferences about a broader citizen population. Citizen surveys have been used in the project. Questionnaires disseminated in different parts of the city at three stages. Questionnaires played a positive role in informing the citizen about the new project, in building an idea about the citizen's preferences and in creating a sense of community among the citizens.
- Public involvement can create opportunities for building trust in institutions. The long years of public opinion's neglecting in Syria generated many mistakes lead to losing public's money and consequences losing trust in institutions. The public reaction towards the initiative of DMPP was very positive, regardless of their participation and outcomes of the process as a whole.

### **3.0.2 Weaknesses**

- Lack of public education is shown when the public lacks adequate information to provide informed opinions on technical urban issues. The second consultation phase has posed a number of questions that need a prior education or assistance from expertise, as an example, "Do you prefer the metro line to run along Qunietera road, or to enter Muadamieh and arrive in the railway station?" the issue is not how many participants we have, but how many meaningful ideas and views we have.
- Lack of public engagement has been seen in different proposed stations, like Al Tahrear Sq. and Muadamieh, this situation may be the fault of the project itself or the city councils or both of them.
- Surveys lack dialogue and not allow for detailed responses. The most notable weakness in the public participation process of Damascus Metro is the weakness of two way information flow, as it relay upon surveys to a large extent. The process should rather have facilitated more opportunities for public participants to present information rather than just receive it. Another point is that some of the survey's questions were very naive that frustrate the participants, as an example, "....Do you think that Damascus city suffers from air pollution?" This question is followed by not least than nine similar questions. In contrast we face at the same questionnaire a very critical and important issue that introduced simply, equal to the nine above mentioned questions; "The implementation of the project will change the nature in some locations which may affect the land use or some properties. Do you think that these changes are: Acceptable, Not acceptable, Not important". Even it is not the case here, but it is worth mentioned that the project neglect completely the importance of the integration between land use and transportation studies.

- 'One size doesn't fit all"; the Public Participation Plan should include a toolbox of methods that is tailored for different groups. The methods used for different groups should depend on their needs and wants, as well as on how they typically receive information and engage in public discussions. For example, e-mail doesn't work for groups without computers, while questionnaires are not effective where they don't use a lot of written materials. Radio and personal contacts may work better for these groups. So, people of Muadamieh should be addressed in a way different to Somarieh or Mazza, or Al Abasean.
- Incorporating public values into the decisions or the extent to which public values influence decisions. A goal that is fundamental to democracy; although members of the public may or may not agree among themselves, they often approach issues from the perspective of different and sometimes more complex views of risks and values than experts. The public often knows more - for example, about local circumstances and policy effects - than do officials, and may suggest alternative solutions. Damascus Metro lack the qualitative information flow from the public to officials which was expected to lead to better decisions, this is due to the limited scope of discussing issues that may lead to better incorporating of public values.
- Increasing of the substantive quality of decisions; the public recognizes as a legitimate source of knowledge and ideas for making decisions. The public may improve the substantive quality of decisions by improving technical quality--by, for example, identifying relevant factual information or discovering mistakes--or by generating alternative solutions that satisfy a wider range of interests. The one-way communication and flow of information that has dominated the public participation process of Metro-Damascus can not cope with the idea of increasing of the substantive quality of decisions. Hence no improving of decision quality has expected to occur.
- Eventhough transparency of the process shown through publishing the feedback of the two consultation phases on the project's web site, but it has ignored publishing the resulted reports of the environmental and social impact assessment which in my opinion may be the most controversial part of the whole study.

### **3.0.3 Threats**

- Contextual attributes are those that were largely outside of the control of agencies and stakeholders when undertaking a participatory process. Some of them describe the "orientation" of the public--such as the relationships among stakeholder groups and attitudes toward the lead agency. Others describe the particulars of the decision-making setting--such as the complexity of the problem under question. The contextual attributes examined here were:
  - Potential for conflict. Eventhough the degree of tension between environmental and economic goals in the area of Muadamieh should be high, but the law enthusiasm, awareness and participation of the public has declined the effect of this attribute. So the lack of conflict in this case to a higher-than-average doesn't related to understanding the environmental consequences on the part of "the average citizen", as well as a willingness to protect environmental quality on the part of the project, but it relates to the law awareness and interest from the public side. Metro station in Muadamieh will increase its population rapidly, that lead to serious environmental challenges. Smart growth studies would be of great help in such point.

- Confidence in Process; Damascus Governorate has up-down system, so there is a partial participants' pre-existing un confidence in the participatory process supervised by the Governorate. Governorate mistrust for the belief that all critical decisions have already been made and that interpretation of scientific evidence does not occur in a vacuum -- that it cannot be isolated from the personal, social, and political context of the individual providing the interpretation.
- Geographic complexity; Damascus city is more than 3 million inhabitants. The geographical complexity of the city plays a negative role in the success of the process.
- Procedural Attributes are those that fall under the control of agencies or stakeholders themselves in designing and executing participatory efforts. The individual and aggregated procedural attributes that have been examined were:
  - The quality of the deliberative process among stakeholders, including the quality of their communication, the extent to which consensus was sought and the fairness of the stakeholder discussions. These are regarded as important for identifying shared values and resolving disputes. Deliberative processes could only be considered good if the "playing field" was level between all stakeholders. The participation tools that has used in our case does not allow to effective deliberative process to occur.
  - The quality of two-way communication between the stakeholder group and other actors in the decision-making process, such as agency personnel and technical experts. Good communication, often through face-to-face interaction, breaks down the barriers between the two sides.
  - Top Down is how the participatory process was initiated and organized by Systra and Khatib & Alami; the studying side rather than stakeholders (Bottom Up). The bottom up approach is preferable to one that is top down.
- Syria's political environment is colored by a number of elements, including the legal framework guiding the political work, the weakness of political parties and novelty of civil society, education, and the media:
  - Centralization; Syrian culture reflects a clear tendency toward centralized decision-making, that make it difficult to implement effective public participation.
  - The state controls both the audio and visual media sectors. Eventhough that Syria has made a lap regarding the political rights, but there is still inequality between the governmental and the other parties' newspapers. The views published in the governmental newspapers is ought to be taken into consideration from the project's side and to have a formal clarification, while the others published in non governmental one will be probably neglected. Such a thing will lead to loosing a valuable source of qualified participation.
  - Education is considered one of the most complicated and is among the most influential factors on participation, as the relation between education and participation is two-dimensional. The first dimension is the correlation between awareness in general and educational standard. The second dimension is the instruction an individual gains from the

- educational process, which both transfers values directly and provides students with the tools to think critically and/or scientifically.
- Civil society is novel not only in the sense of the newness of its institutions, but also in their limited reach both thematically and in terms of their activity. In addition, civil society groups are centralized in the large cities and only rarely appear in outlying areas, except for activities related to religious institutions. This is the case in Muadamieh suburb, which predicted to have dramatic uncontrolled changes if the project implemented without serious land use studies.
  - The weakness of the political parties and consequently its ability to raising awareness, building capacity to enhance the public participation process.
  - Many of the rules related to political work need to be reviewed, as many of these rules were issued under different political circumstances. The current legislation related to practicing political work hinders political participation, which in turn hinders a transition to a system that allows greater participation generally.
- It is obvious from the historical experiences of several countries that the most economically depressed categories of society are the least willing to participate in the public participation process and tend towards apathy. In Syria, a number of economic factors influence participation, including unemployment and the low living standard:
    - Unemployment: The process of searching for a job and the efforts following it to improve one's income is considered one of the main hindrances to public participation in general.
    - The economic circumstances of the country and the limited capabilities of the governmental sector results in reducing the participation process's expenses to the minimum, transferring part of the financial burden of participation work to the citizen himself. The economic cost of participation is therefore a deciding factor in whether the government will apply public participation process and to what extent, and if the citizen will participate or not.
  - The Geert Hofstede analysis for the **Arab World**, that includes the countries of Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, would be applied to Syria. National cultural characteristics that may consider as a cultural threats are:
    - High Uncertainty Avoidance indicates the Syrian society's low level of tolerance for uncertainty. Strict rules, laws, polices and regulations are adopted and implemented to minimize or reduce this level of uncertainty; controlling everything in order to eliminate or avoid the unexpected. As a result of this high Uncertainty Avoidance characteristic, the rule-oriented society does not readily accept change and is very risk adverse.
    - High power distance is a measure of the degree of equality or inequality in a society. High power distance and high uncertainty avoidance inhibit public participation because they support centralized and control-oriented systems.

### 3.0.4 Opportunities

- Syria has adopted economic and political reforms since 2000, different international organization like JICA, GTZ, and European Union support Syria in its attempts, through administrative, economic, financial and urban planning and development programs.
- The globalization phenomenon has been connected closely with the fast transfer and exchange of information and ideas. This has resulted in a positive effect on the issue of participation, as it raising the awareness about the citizen right to participate in decision making.
- Attitude toward Lead Agency; there may be a positive pre-existing attitude toward the lead agency (European Investment Bank) that may play a positive role toward the project in general and the process of public participation in particular.
- Cultural Environment
  - Collectivism, which indicates whether individual or collective rights are prominent. Syria like the other Arabic countries has a collective society facilitates a high degree of public participation, but this, may be left to informal public participation if the power distance is high.

#### **4.0 Analysis**

Upon comparing Damascus Metro's case with Sherry's ladder we reach to a conclusion that the case seems to fall in the degree of tokenism, between two rungs; informing and consultation. Public informing and education are generally a one-way process to present information and to increase understanding of certain issues, and are about getting information out to audiences. In contrast, consultation is a mutual process, where information is provided to participants and new information and views are fed back in. It is aimed at involving the community in a process of decision making. It is premised on the right of the public to know what decision-makers are doing on their behalf, and to be involved.

Arnstein (1969) argues that "the effectiveness of public involvement should be measured by the degree of citizen control over outcomes". In addition, Hartig et al. (1998) states that "successful participatory processes have been those that treat the public as "an equal partner" rather than an advisor in decision-making". According to Sherry and Hartig's criteria DMPP may consider not successful.

Eventhough DMPP has shown an interest in involving public in the participation process through informing and consulting, but it did not express a commitment to dialogue and power sharing.

#### **5.0 Further Actions**

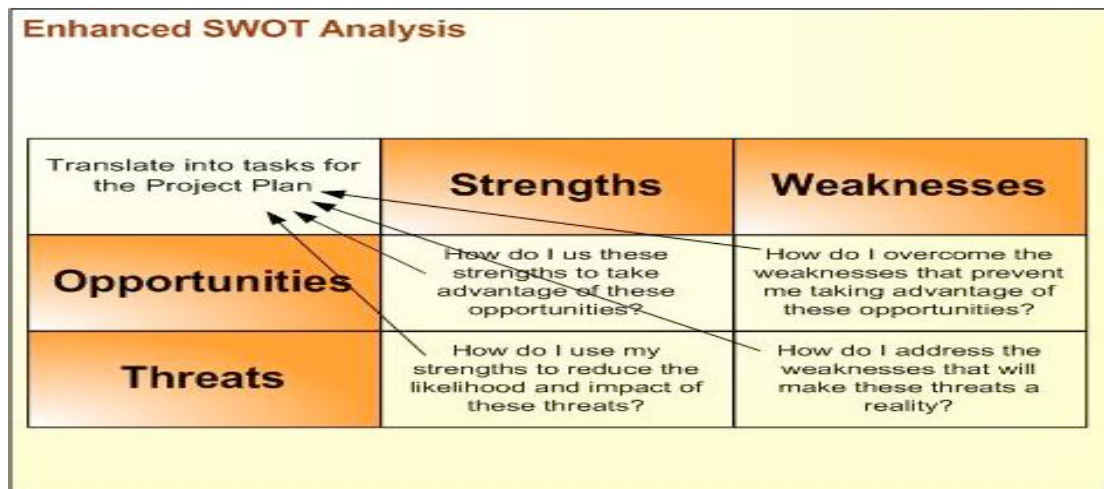


Figure 3

Based on enhanced SWOT analysis, further actions mentioned down would support the shift from technocrat and managerial decision-making to effective public participation decision making. Some of these actions are long term processes, while the others are short term. Some of them may consider as a basic ones, while the others are consequences.

- Two way communication; is essential in the effective public participation. The most valuable form of public engagement is to discuss issues with others in some type of public meeting, where there is the opportunity to listen to others, express one's own opinion, and see where the consensus lies.
- The most important thing in dealing with the International agencies for technical cooperation is to be aware that the success of such agencies depends on setting a suitable internal atmosphere politically, economically, and culturally on the one hand and on the other hand, their programs should be framed with relation to a society's values and circumstances.
- Enhancing transparency and accountability as a way to increase trust in national institutions and lead to more public involvement in public participation process. Truly deliberative and interactive citizen participation is only possible within a real democratic environment, protected by transparency and accountability.
- Decentralization as a process involves the transfer of authority and power to plan, make decisions and manage resources, from higher to lower levels of the organizational hierarchy, in order to facilitate efficient and effective service delivery.
- Updating the legislative framework to provide the public as individuals or their representatives (parties and NGOs) with better opportunities and wider horizons for participation.
- Developing the educational process by speeding up efforts to eliminate illiteracy and by developing school curricula that strengthen students' critical thinking skills as well as set the basis for group work, equality, and respect for differences of opinion among them.
- Developing the media as the role of the media in supporting participatory culture is major. It educates the public, introduce and spread the values that support participatory culture.
- Improving economic performance by improving national economic conditions and citizens' standard of living, considers a major encouragement to get

citizens interested in strengthening their role in decision-making and in public participation generally.

- Facilitating Internet using through providing widespread access to computers that are linked to the Internet in public libraries and cultural centers.
- Develop Bottom-Up public Participation Plan, in consultation with all interested parties.
- If the right of public participation really exists, there will have to be guarantees that this right can be exercised effectively. General statutory rules are required for this purpose, which mainly originate from the three basic principles of public participation:
  - access to relevant information;
  - the right to participate, and;
  - The right to complain, appeals, and sue. These rights are critical in that they give citizens the power to check whether the policy-makers take public participation seriously, or only consider it a kind of democratic gimmick to keep the citizens happy. The rights of objection appeal and complaint to legal authorities is, therefore, not only a necessary tailpiece in the process of public participation, it also advances the quality of the decision making process.

## **6.0 Recommendations**

Due to the limitation of time and other resources I have limited my study to DMPP, but it would be of a great help to expand the scope of study to a larger number and wider variety of cases, as an expanded study would compare how participation varies for different types of problems and different phases of decision making. A future study for DMPP would be of a great importance also to examine the relationship between participation, implementation and operation. A study of implementation would focus on whether and how public involvement generates support and capacity (or did not) for implementation activities and successful operation of the project. Not to mention that some of the conclusions and further actions can be thought of as hypotheses to be tested through further analysis.

## **7.0 Conclusions**

One primary reason Damascus Metro project have public participation is that it is required to do so; public participation is a fundamental principle in the Tenth National Five Year Plan, and one of the two preconditions- the second is the environmental impact assessment- to have the financial support from the European Investment Bank.

What we had in DMPP is a passive kind of consultative process that lead to "Participation in participation process" for the public and evidence for Damascus Metro project that it has gone through the required public participation process.

Eventhough the participation process didn't reach to its optimal results from the theoretical perspective, but it is still useful in itself. It is an important experience for the governmental staff that organized it, for its interested observers, and for the involved public. Public participation increases the public awareness either of the subject under study or about the public participation issue in general; how it should be applied and developed.

More collaborative and deliberative process that shifts the community's involvement closer to the centre of the decision-making process is of vital need to not maintain the status quo.

This paper is a simple contribution in studying the Syrian experience in public participation through analyzing DMPP experience to improve the process of decision-making for greater and effective public involvement.

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