

Vancouver Centre of Excellence



Research on Immigration and
Integration in the Metropolis

Working Paper Series

No. 04-17

**The Quest to Negotiate Equitable Civic Engagement: Response of
Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamil Community to Social Development Planning in
Canada's Largest Multicultural Metropolis**

Leslie Dickout

August 2004

RIIM

Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis

The Vancouver Centre is funded by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Citizenship & Immigration Canada, Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria. We also wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Metropolis partner agencies:

- Health Canada
- Human Resources Development Canada
- Department of Canadian Heritage
- Department of the Solicitor General of Canada
- Status of Women Canada
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The Quest to Negotiate Equitable Civic Engagement: Response of Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamil Community to Social Development Planning in Canada's Largest Multicultural Metropolis

Leslie Dickout

School of Community & Regional Planning
University of British Columbia
leslied@interchange.ubc.ca

August 2004

Abstract: This paper is the fourth in a series of four, which covers (1) a rethinking of the philosophy of multiculturalism for the 21st century, (2) an exploration of the policy challenges that a multicultural society poses to urban planning and policy, urban governance and citizenship, with examples of successful responses in Frankfurt, Rotterdam, Sydney, Vancouver and Chicago, (3) an analysis of the barriers to integration in Canada, as experienced by one specific group, Sri Lankan Tamils, with specific attention to citizenship, participation, social policy, and uses of space, and (4) an examination of the role of one community-based organization, the Canadian Tamil Congress, in working to overcome barriers to integration and participation in Canadian society.

This paper will examine the connections between urban governance, planning, civic participation and engagement, and the quest for full, active, democratic citizenship by marginalized groups, particularly immigrant communities living in Canada's diverse, multicultural cities. This is explored through a case study of the City of Toronto, its Sri Lankan Tamil community and the newly formed national organization – the Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC).

Key words: citizenship, governance, civic participation, social planning, Sri Lankan Tamils

Introduction¹

Canada is one of a small number of countries in the world that has adopted a multicultural vision of society, yet not all of its citizens have the opportunity to participate equally in the decision-making processes that affect daily life. The process of globalization and associated decades of recent immigration from non-European countries has resulted in a significant transformation not only of the demographics of the population, but of the method of governance required to equitably reflect a highly diverse citizenry within a democratic framework. Within the scaffolding of mainstream Canada, immigrant and other marginalized communities challenge traditional notions of citizenship, identity and what or who makes up the public sphere. This struggle is primarily located in Canada's multicultural cities as the locus of economic, political and administrative power in which marginalized communities struggle against oppression, discrimination, exclusion and inequality (Abu-Laban and Gabriel 2002; Bissoondath 2002; Papillon 2002; Stasiulis 2002; Bannerji 2000; Kymlicka and Norman 2000; Henry *et al.* 1998).

From the perspective of the citizen, the opportunity to shape the social, political and economic fabric of the nation through full participation and engagement in all levels of society and its decision-making represent the underpinnings of democracy. Representation in political institutions, political processes and civic life is a critical indicator of social inclusion (Saloojee and van Heelsum, 2002). According to Chantal Mouffe, a key component necessary for the realization of an inclusive democratic citizenship, which inherently involves a process of dynamic negotiation, is that of civic engagement and participation (2000).

However, even now, attaining such rights associated with full and active citizenship by the individuals and communities that make up Canada's diversity continues to be an ongoing challenge, particularly for those who are not included in society's demographic majority such as immigrant, and ethno-cultural and other visible minority communities. In fact, growing numbers of recent immigrants face barriers to full participation in contemporary Canadian society (Preston and Wong 2002). This impact reflects directly on the health (social, economic and environmental) and potential for future prosperity of the nation as a whole. The broad-based cost of supporting a large portion of a society that is virtually silenced within the politics of the state and unable to "move forward" in the sense of attaining full, active democratic citizenship weighs heavy on Canadian society, most prominently in our cities (Shaw and Martin 2000).

¹ This paper is based on a Master's Thesis by Leslie Dickout (2004). Research was carried out over a period of two years, and included open-ended interviews with 26 members of the Sri Lankan Tamil community, three Planners and one City Councillor.

Within planning discourse, the involvement of citizens in decision-making is discussed as a key element of theories that view planning as a potential instrument for social change within multicultural societies (Friedmann 2002; Ameyaw 2000; Au 2000; Burayidi 2000; Qadeer 2000, 1997; Sandercock 2000, 1998; Holston, 1998). In 1998, Leonie Sandercock offered a critique of “the modernist project of city-building and the planning mentality that supported it, as a state-directed project with emancipatory ideals but less than emancipatory consequences” (1998; 2003a: 2). In a recent paper, she sets out to, “rethink multiculturalism as a form of democratic politics” (Sandercock 2003a: 3). Sandercock² includes the “right to difference” and the “right to the city” as key components in this process which recognize the legitimacy of participation by all members of a diverse society, promoting active citizenship through which to negotiate difference, creating a “shared commitment to a political community” and an empowered citizenry (2003a: 34).

How does the Canadian state seek to involve its citizenry? How do governance structures within multicultural cities create space for negotiating with the diversity of voices regarding the needs and desires of their communities? How do citizens, particularly newcomers often unfamiliar with the system of governance, respond to this structure and its functions? What are the responsibilities of planners engaged in the social development of Canadian cities to involve citizens in decision making and what methods do they use? How do these communities overcome existing barriers in order to bring their voices forward and assert their rights to participate in planning for their future? Finally, what can social planners do to support this process and build towards a more inclusive planning practice?

The Quest for Inclusion in the City of Toronto

Toronto is Canada’s largest and most ethno-culturally diverse city. Few urban regions in the world have been more dramatically transformed by recent immigration than Toronto, and few institutions have a more direct impact on the lives of immigrants and newcomers than municipal governments (Siemiatycki and Isin 1997; Siemiatycki *et al.* 2001; Siemiatycki and Saloojee 2003). As recently as 1971, 6 out of 10 Toronto area residents claimed British ethnic origin (Siemiatycki *et al.* 2001; Breton *et al.*, 1990). Today, reflected by its post-amalgamation motto, “Diversity Our Strength,” the city’s demographic reveals that fifty percent of Toronto’s approximately 2.5 million people were born outside of Canada, representing 90 different ethnic groups from over 170 countries (City of Toronto

² See also Sandercock 2003b, 2004a for related theories and context for this study.

2003a). Planning within such a diverse, multicultural, multiethnic society with a wide range of immigrant and diaspora communities is a highly challenging task at best.

In 1997 the Ontario provincial government, in the face of overwhelming civic opposition and accusations of undermining local democracy, ordered the amalgamation of the seven municipalities of Etobikoke, East York, North York, Scarborough, Toronto, York, and the regional government of Metropolitan, or Metro Toronto into a new ‘megacity’ (City of Toronto 2001a). The largest citizens’ movement in Toronto’s history rallied to resist the provincial decision, the majority of which was comprised of white, British-stock Torontonians (Siemiatycki and Isin, 1997). Alarming under-represented within the meetings and rallies of this movement were members of immigrant and ethno-cultural communities within the seven municipalities, who viewed the coalition of opposition as inaccessible, even invisible, and not representative of their own concerns – a similar perception held of City Hall itself. It wasn’t until the process of amalgamation had begun that immigrant and visible minority communities began to organize, calling for the promotion of more engaged and effective forms of urban democratic citizenship, particularly support by the new city for increased participation among traditionally marginalized communities (Siemiatycki and Isin, 1997).

Governance and Social Planning in the Megacity

The new City of Toronto combined two tiers of government, and introduced a complex structure that supported new decision-making requirements but also attempted to maintain, integrate, rationalize and harmonize many of the components of the seven pre-existing municipalities. Before amalgamation, the role of Metropolitan Toronto in social development planning was residual, addressing issues related only to those most in need. The majority of the responsibility for social development planning rested on the voluntary sector to fund and provide community services to the city while local government dealt primarily with issues related to physical infrastructure (CSPC-T 2001). In developing the governance structure and practices of the new City, responsibilities for social development planning have been distributed throughout the political, bureaucratic and not-for-profit realms.

Along with the amalgamation process, the Ontario provincial government transferred the responsibility for a number of social services to the new City of Toronto, including social assistance, social housing, child care and public health, but failed to transfer the corresponding revenue (Papillon

2002). These changes, in addition to other responsibilities, contribute to the many challenges of planning within a large, highly diverse city.³

The governance structure of the new City of Toronto includes various means by which citizens can have their voices heard. These include voting, speaking to the appropriate representative City Councillor, taking part in city-driven community initiatives, consultations, becoming a member of agencies, boards or commissions, or making deputations to Council. Each of these methods are top-down and place the onus on the citizen to bring issues to the attention of the City with the notion that each issue brought forward will be addressed. The options for participation provided also assume that all citizens understand the system, are aware of the options, and have equal ability to choose and commit to follow-up. Barriers to these forms of participation exist for many people, particularly new immigrant and other ethno-racial communities.

Social Development as Community Development

Within the new City of Toronto's bureaucratic structure, 'social planners' do not exist as they do in other Canadian municipalities such as Vancouver. Instead, the responsibilities associated with social development planning are distributed throughout different offices of the City. Community Development Officers (CDOs), Community Health Officers (CHOs), and members of the Parks and School Boards all work with communities in a variety of social planning capacities. According to two CDOs interviewed, communication between offices and bureaucrats that hold social planning-related roles has diminished greatly since amalgamation, now resulting in more "informal connections" than standardized channels of information sharing and exchange (Planner 1, Planner 2).

Community Development Officers have the broadest mandate to serve "on the ground" in terms of social development planning in the city's bureaucratic structure. CDOs are housed under the Community Resources Unit Community Development Program, which is located in the Social Development and Administration Division of the Community and Neighbourhood Services Department at the City of Toronto (City of Toronto 2001b). One CDO's description of the job is, "to work with communities that are disempowered in some way to find ways to ensure that they could participate in civic processes equitably" (Planner 2). There are presently only five full-time geographically based CDOs and two project-specific CDOs responsible for 2,481,494 people in the City of Toronto (Statistics Canada 2001a). Each is responsible for providing education, training,

³ With amalgamation came the realignment of long-standing provincial-municipal cost sharing arrangements. This included removing part of the cost of education from the property tax base, and funding transportation infrastructure (City of Toronto, 2001a).

networking, partnership building, organization and project consultation, and assistance in attaining community-based grants provided by the City. According to one CDO,

... it's the vulnerable communities we're providing a lot, which the vulnerable communities most often end up to be the ethno-specific communities. We provide looking at coalitions and planning within different areas and some of those include and need to think about including and looking at and involving ethno-specific and ethno-racial communities. (Planner 1)

Social development planning as carried out by the City of Toronto is informed by research and information gathering methods. A key planning body that includes a large research component is the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto (CSPC-T)⁴, a non-profit organization partially funded by the City to carry out independent social planning at the local and city-wide levels. According to a planner from the CSPC-T, "we're kind of the independent planning body that operates along side, but provides a different kind of voice, to the city planners, city community development officers, and other staff" (Planner 3). The organization, "provides support largely to coalitions and committees working on different issues in Toronto rather than to individuals or residents, per se" (Planner 3). The organization works to raise awareness around social planning issues of city-wide importance, such as homelessness, immigrant and refugee, or youth issues. The CPSC-T also builds support for campaigns at the community-level that address concerns of people in that community and are linked to city-wide initiatives.

Since amalgamation of the City, a number of research-based initiatives involving the CSPC-T and other City offices have been carried out to explore how the city could strengthen civil society, increase community involvement and civic participation, and continue to work towards the elimination of the barriers faced by marginalized communities including immigrants and refugees. These have included the establishment of the Toronto Transition Team in 1997, which attempted to involve Torontonians in active discussion on how to create better local government, and the 1998 Council-established Task Force on Community Access and Equity. The Task Force developed Toronto's Action, Equity and Human Rights Action Plan, which identified necessary policies, structural functions, program priorities and an evaluation process by which the city could strengthen civil society, increase community involvement and civic participation, and continue to work towards the elimination of the barriers faced by marginalized communities including immigrants and refugees

⁴ The CSPC-T is committed to diversity, social and economic justice, and active citizen participation in all aspects of community life. Through its research efforts, the Council identifies social trends and advocates for policy solutions to address needs and inequities within Toronto neighbourhoods (Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, 2003).

(CSPC-T 2003; City of Toronto 2001c; City of Toronto 2000). Council approved the Plan in December of 1999. The following year the City of Toronto adopted the Framework for Citizen Participation in the City of Toronto policy, which defined the four key principles of civic engagement and participation to be: collaborative decision-making, accessibility, continuous improvement in citizen participation, and community capacity building. These principles were used as guidelines for a five-part discussion series organized by the City exploring questions such as:

- What is a useful framework for civic participation?
- What are major global trends that influence civic participation?
- What constitutes meaningful civic engagement?
- How does the City of Toronto engage its citizenry?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of its civic engagement practices?
- What role should municipal governments play in community capacity building?

The findings reflected that traditional public consultations were no longer enough, and that new institutions and new methods for engaging citizens needed to be developed.

In 2000, the city authorized the first phase of a Community Consultation on Social Development strategy, to be carried out by the CSPC-T. Input from citizens was gathered through submissions from social support networks, and focus groups with public and community-based sector representatives. These voices reflected a wide range of concerns facing a diverse citizenry, drawing attention to the spread of social vulnerability, especially in ethno-racial communities, and the need to strengthen, support and promote civic engagement in planning for the city.

The CSPC-T produced a report from the consultation process entitled, *Preserving Our Civic Legacy*, which presented a number of emerging themes. These were then utilized in the development of the Draft Social Development Strategy of Toronto. The final document, *A Social Development Strategy for the City of Toronto 2001 (SDS)*, now acts as the social planning component of the city's Strategic Plan, building on identified directions to help define and shape the social aspects of the Official Plan (City of Toronto 2001a).

Toronto's Social Development Strategy establishes three strategic directions for Toronto's approach to planning. These explicitly address firstly the need to "strengthen community" by encouraging and actively fostering participation of all sectors of communities in government decision-making, and secondly, to help shape a "civic consciousness" among residents (City of

Toronto 2001a). Finally, emphasis is placed on the need to fund community-based agencies and planning organizations, “to undertake community planning initiatives and to develop indicators of community capacity and well-being” (City of Toronto 2001a).

The aim of the SDS is to strike a balance between social development and economic growth, to “democratize prosperity and opportunity,” valuing diversity and reaffirming “the goals of achieving access and equality of outcome for all residents as expressed in the city’s access and equity action plan” (City of Toronto 2001a). This is guided by five principles: equity, equality, access, participation, and cohesion. The eleven strategic directions in the document are grouped under three general headings that aim to: Strengthen Communities, Invest in a Comprehensive Social Infrastructure, and Expand Civic Leadership and Partnership.

According to the SDS, Strengthening Communities involves building the capacity of communities by nurturing the development of neighbourhood associations, issue-oriented groups and grassroots coalitions. This in turn strengthens,

...the capacities and opportunities of all people, especially those who are disadvantaged and vulnerable, to enhance their own economic and social development, to establish and maintain organizations representing their interests and to be involved in the planning and implementation of government policies and programs by which they will be directly affected (City of Toronto 2001a; United Nations, 1995).

In addition, the SDS states that, “social development is underpinned by democratic governance — the institutions, process and traditions that shape how city governments work, how decisions are taken and how residents have their say” (City of Toronto 2001a). Recognizing that civic participation is integral to the city’s governance structure, the SDS provides strategic directions for shaping the civic consciousness of citizens while providing greater support and access to avenues of participation.

Under the heading, ‘Investing in Comprehensive Infrastructure,’ the SDS also includes a call for more holistic social development planning that involves community-based organizations, as well as providing funding to these agencies and planning organizations to undertake community planning initiatives, and to “develop indicators of community capacity and well-being” (City of Toronto, 2001a).

The SDS represents a powerful tool for progressive social planning in Toronto. But does it go far enough to develop the form of inclusive social planning necessary to reflect the diversity of social needs represented in Toronto’s citizenry? How has the document been translated on the ground, and

how has the recent approach taken by the City of Toronto towards civic engagement and participation in social development and planning been received by citizens, *particularly newcomer communities?*

One Community's Response

For Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamils, the work done by the City's Community Development Officers has just started to permeate their process of integration in relation to civic participation and engagement of their community members. According to Statistics Canada, Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamil population falls somewhere between 69,000 and 72,000, although community members quote upwards of 100,000, having established itself largely over the past 20 years (2001b 2001c). It was noted in almost every interview carried out with Sri Lankan Tamil participants in this study that community members have and continue to face a host of challenges to integration and barriers to civic participation and engagement including English language difficulties, family and inter-generational issues resulting from a dramatic shift in living environments, cultural norms, economic and other pressures for women, youth, elders and working parents.

As well, poverty, unemployment, over-representation in low-skill jobs, high percentage of school drop out rates, continue to exist within Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamil community. Michael Ornstein, in his 2000 report, *Ethno-Racial Inequality in the City of Toronto: An Analysis of the 1996 Census*, cites Tamils, as well as Sri Lankans, as two of the five severely disadvantaged groups relative to the larger Toronto community in terms of the level of poverty, unemployment, over-representation in low-skill jobs, low education and high-school drop out rates (ii). For some, there also exists a lack of trust in political and bureaucratic figures and processes in their new homeland,⁵ and a tendency towards internal community reliance to deal with their struggles, as opposed to reaching outwards to build partnerships with other communities or access resources within the 'mainstream.'

In their own attempts to address many of these issues, members of the Sri Lankan Tamil community have engaged in the creation of a number of community-based organizations. The longest standing of the community organizations, the Tamil Eelam Society of Canada, focuses primarily on immigration and settlement issues, providing language and job search services. Another long-standing organization, the Federation of Canadian Tamils, is concerned more with the political situation in Sri Lanka and the implications for Tamils living in Toronto. Another early established, though less active organization, SACEM – Society for the Aid of Ceylon Minorities – focuses again on settlement-related issues and was instrumental in establishing a Tamil Housing Co-op in downtown Toronto.

⁵ For further background, please see Sandercock, with Dickout and Winkler 2004.

More recently, a new organization has emerged that is attempting to approach the challenges to settlement faced by Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto from a different perspective.

In 2000, the Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC) became the newest Tamil community based organization in Toronto, created by a small group of individuals with their own vision for the future of Sri Lankan Tamils in the city and across Canada. The organization was founded primarily by youth who had gained leadership experience through their involvement in Tamil University Student Associations, as well as other Tamil community-based organizations such the Canadian Tamil Youth Development Centre (CanTYD)⁶. The CTC and its founding members represent a notably distinct set of interests within the Tamil community, one that is reflective of a politicized generation of individuals who have chosen to take action beyond what is considered ‘traditional’ to address issues they have identified within their community as key to their growth and advancement in Canadian society.

Constructed explicitly on principles of democracy and inclusion, the Canadian Tamil Congress recognizes the importance of knowledge and experience as they related to the ability of Tamils to effectively engage and participate in the political system in Toronto, and in other cities in Canada. Although the organization’s slogan, ‘The Unified Voice of the Canadian Tamils,’ reflects a contentious and rather impossible reality, the CTC is also recognized by members in the community as forging new ground previously seen as unconventional. According to one spokesperson for the organization,

Advocacy is a new concept for the Tamil community. It has not been something that the community has used back home. So it is very difficult to find people who are actually proficient in advocating at different levels of government, let alone people who know the system here and are able to do that. (Focus Group Participant 1)

Another offered,

Politics is not, I mean I think it is similar to so many other communities, but politics is not something that the Tamil community has ever looked up to as a profession... (Org 1)

With their main office located in Scarborough and regional chapters in Vancouver, Quebec, Montreal and Ottawa, the CTC is 100% volunteer-run and receives no outside funding. The organization is governed by an active Board of Directors and involves approximately 100 volunteers

⁶ The Canadian Tamil Youth Development Centre (CanTYD) was the first advocacy-oriented community based organization in the Toronto’s Sri Lankan Tamil community, created as a result of a community-driven initiative to deal with youth-related issues that have arisen primarily as a result of the cultural adaptation process.

who organize a wide range of committees responsible for various programs, projects and research-based initiatives on topics such as social development, health, media, racism and foreign policy (CTC 2003a).

Although almost four years old, at the time of writing the CTC was not yet eligible for grants available through City of Toronto programs, which provides approximate \$48.045 million per year to various organizations within the City (City of Toronto Staff Report 2001). The largest grant pool available to community groups is through the Community Services Grant Program, which totals approximately \$10,006,000 providing funding to community-based organizations for, “programs that improve social outcomes for vulnerable, marginalized and high-risk communities” (City of Toronto Staff Report 2001). The main ‘Community Services Grant Program’ and ‘Breaking the Cycle of Violence’ grants have a variety of requirements to establish proof of sound financial and organizational management (Planner 1; Planner 2). These grants are awarded primarily to organizations that have formed partnerships with other communities or groups to address common issues. The City no longer provides ‘developmental grants’ to new organizations, as was revealed in interviews done with two Community Development Officers. According to one CDO,

I don’t think there is enough money that, in terms of providing the kinds of services for the, as I call it, ethno-racial, ethno-specific community organizations. There is not enough. I don’t think grants are the only answer. I think grants are part of the answer. The way grants are currently in this city it becomes almost a barrier for some of those communities to access that, so it can’t be an answer. It has become more and more difficult because of the demands from the auditor, because the criteria has become a little bit stiffer, there are not what we call developmental grants so there’s some kind of entry point for some for those organizations – that’s not there, though there has been some thinking about it. There used to be developmental grants. (Planner 1)

According to one CTC member,

I guess this role probably is not recognized as an important role, and it is not just for an organization like us, which basically represents the interests of the community, but other organizations out there, which basically are pushing for issues, or agendas which are basically advocating on issues. I think there is no mechanism to support them, and there is actually a negative incentive I would say. (Focus Group Participant 1)

In order to maintain operations, the CTC’s organizational expenses have been paid for by the founding members and active volunteers. In addition, sponsorship within the Sri Lankan Tamil

community continues to be found through individuals and businesses supporting the growth of the organization and development of its various projects (Org 1).

The campaigns of the Congress begin with a process of seeking a mandate and direction from the greater Sri Lankan Tamil community through forums and focus groups, constructing a bottom-up approach to the organization's efforts. According to one CTC founding member, "we want to encourage community's participation in deciding what the community should be doing" (Org 1). According to another CTC founding member, very few people involved in the original organizing had experience in setting up such a process (Org 4). In its first year, the organization held its first small community forums on the three issues of health, education and the media in the Sri Lankan Tamil community. These experiences allowed the groups to test various organizational and facilitation techniques, learn more about the issues within the community, and gain the knowledge required to hold a large, more broad-based event.

In June 2002, the Canadian Tamil Congress held its first National Convention, inviting over 2500 delegates including Tamil community leaders, non-Tamil political representatives, academics, media personnel, and representatives from various non-governmental agencies. The purpose of the convention was to provide the opportunity for, "individual Tamil Canadians and Tamil organizations of diverse purpose and direction to decide on the policies and efforts that should be undertaken for the betterment of our lives" (CTC 2002). Calling for a democratically established mandate⁷ from the Sri Lankan Tamil community associated with each policy identified, the CTC promoted the values of transparency and active participation with the objective of building a strong Tamil lobby in order to advance their interests within the political framework of Canada, as well as, "pathways for cooperative efforts and coalition building with the greater Toronto and Canadian multicultural society" (CTC 2002).

Describing the need for a strong voice within the Sri Lankan Tamil community, the CTC proposed that,

The services provided by these organizations [those presently serving the Tamil community], particularly governmental organizations, do not always reach the targeted recipients due to reasons such as lack of awareness of recipients, cultural and linguistic barriers between the service providers and recipients etc. A *mechanism* is required to identify solutions and to work with appropriate policy makers to design and change policies as well as creating awareness of existing services among the community.

⁷ The Canadian Tamil Congress National Convention 2002 full list of adopted resolutions are available at http://www.ctconline.ca/nc/ctc_resolutions.pdf

Changes taking place in society create the need for identifying new services, ways of delivering services efficiently and co-ordination of the existing services. A common *platform* should be provided to bring together those involved in the front end of service delivery, experts in the respective fields and enthusiastic community activists to achieve these objectives.

Canadian Tamils should discharge their civic responsibility by fully participating in the national and political process. At the same time, they should also assert their rights as Canadian Citizens when addressing their concerns to national and international institutions. A *force* is required to encourage our community to work with political parties whose principles they support to participate in the Canadian national affairs.

Above all, our community should unite to further their economical, social, cultural and political conditions and *voice* their concerns loudly to reach the ears of the elected representatives and government bureaucrats and non-governmental institutions. (CTC 2002; original emphasis)

The Canadian Tamil Congress was the first organization to hold a Convention of this kind within the Sri Lankan Tamil community. The input gathered through forum participants on twelve key issue-areas⁸ helped determine the direction of the work of the Congress over the next three years.

Project Participate

Approximately one year after the National Convention and based on the resolutions proposed, deliberated and adopted by the community, the Canadian Tamil Congress was given the mandate to hold a number of focus groups surrounding the issue of civic participation and the barriers facing the Sri Lankan Tamil community. The Congress, aware of the lack of statistical data or any form of vital information denoting civic participation of the Tamil community, built on the input provided by community members through these small group discussions to formulate their activities and to develop 'Project Participate'.

Initiated in 2003, 'Project Participate' aims to bring together community members, policy makers, researchers and academics to identify barriers to participation faced by the Sri Lankan Tamil community in Toronto, and to educate, develop and provide the means for each member of the community to attain full, active citizenship through civic engagement and participation that would

⁸ In addition to Health, Education and Media, these include Social Development/Capacity Building/Community Services, Business, Women's Issues, Justice, Peace Efforts in Sri Lanka, Language and Culture, Human Rights, Immigration and Refugees, and Labour.

allow them to directly contribute to the shaping of the city and their opportunities to flourish as urban citizens within it (CTC 2003b; Org1). Guided by an Advisory Committee that includes community members, CTC representatives, academics, and a City of Toronto Community Development Officer, Project Participate seeks to engage the Tamil community in the process of identifying its barriers to participation, as a form of empowerment and process of community development. According to the description of the four-stage project found on the CTC's website,

Project Participate is designed to equip our community with the essential knowledge and skill sets required to assert the Tamils' needs, issues, values and aspirations at the various levels of civic decision-making process. Furthermore its intent is to assist the Canadian Tamils to form strategic alliances with other communities, while overcoming various barriers and limitations. Most importantly this project will work towards ensuring accountability, fairness and transparency within all levels of governments, policy makers, and elected representatives (2003b).

Described in an interview with a CTC member,

You know, I think when we went on the air [Tamil TV and radio] about Project Participate just to talk about Project Participate and where we wanted to go, we were surprised. We were surprised about the response. People came out and said, like we need to get there, we need to participate, how come we're not participating?... But when presented like that they take it, like oh, maybe we should be thinking about running for, supporting a candidate in that election or whatever. Or running for School's Council Associate, School Councillor, Teacher's Association...So you know, just giving those ideas to them. Saying this is where you can participate. (Org 1)

Another CTC member offered,

I think we need to mobilize the community to ask for whatever they need. Whether it be space for cricket, or whether it be a study on post-traumatic stress. Whether it be a community center, or businesses or things like that. I think the initial step is what we had got through the establishment of the Canadian Tamil Congress... Because as we get developed and kind of advance our plans, it would be the overall city plans that would be getting advanced. (Org 4)

In its essence, Project Participate seeks to educate all members of the Tamil community about the economic, political and social system in which they live, how it works, and how to participate within it. The project places emphasis on the fact that through contributing their resources, skills, energy and education to participating in the 'mainstream', not only will the Tamil community benefit, but so will the overall city. One interview participant noted that, "In that sense we are doing the work of the municipal government" (Ind 9). Another offered,

It is in the interests of the country to make us a certain part of the political process. It should be seen in that way. Because it is an investment in the people, right? (Focus Group Participant 7)

The theoretical framework of Project Participate was established through a literature review that allowed the project team to understand and provide context to the issues. The following definition of civic participation was adopted to guide the initiative and appears here from the project website:

Civic participation represents the patterning of how we share a common space, common resources, and common opportunities and manage interdependence in that "company of strangers" which constitutes the public (Selman, 1991). More specifically, it is the processes whereby citizens concerns, needs, values, expectations and problems are taken into account in the governmental decision making process.

Through the project's background study, it was also determined that various factors govern the civic participation of recent immigrants, particularly:

- motivation - benefits and costs of motivation
- competencies - knowledge, skills, attitude, behavioral intention, awareness and having concept or opinion, attitudes and behaviours
- systemic structural barriers - discrimination, limited access points to governments and receptiveness of government

Established as a four-phase project, the first phase involves a 'needs assessment' based on these factors within the Sri Lankan Tamil community. According to an interview carried out with an individual working on this project, the approach of this phase will also be to determine why there seem to be a lot of activities and participation within the community, but very little beyond it, in non-Tamil organizations or contexts (Org 1). The second phase will involve a community education campaign to address some of the issues that will be identified through phase one, utilizing all forms of media, community programs and organizational outreach. The third component surrounds the development of a campaign to encourage community members to participate. The final phase emphasizes the accountability of electoral representatives to the Tamil constituents and the issues they raise.

One interview participant noted that,

There are some politicians that have gone out of their way to listen to the community when it comes to the issues the community has or is

facing. But I would say, the vast majority is not attuned to the needs within the community. That is not definitely always the fault of the politicians, it is also the fault of the community. (Org 1)

The first phase of the project is presently being carried out. So far, focus groups have been conducted in different neighbourhoods throughout Toronto to compile input from community members regarding the barriers they face. In addition, the Congress has launched a new section of their website dedicated to the project, providing background information, project updates, and opportunities to become involved as a volunteer. The Congress hopes to synthesize and conduct an analysis of the information compiled and move into the next phase by the end of 2004.

The Great Divide

Since amalgamation, the City of Toronto has undergone various initiatives related to the exploration of how best to increase involvement and civic participation of its diverse citizenry. The recent formation of the Canadian Tamil Congress, and its development of initiatives such as Project Participate, represents a recognition by members of Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamil community that a gulf continues to exist between the City of Toronto's politicians, social development policies and processes, social planning bodies, and the methods by which citizens, particularly members of new immigrant communities such as the Sri Lankan Tamils are able to contribute, participate and engage in decision-making. Further removed is the ability of such communities to engage in negotiation, and ultimately transformation, of the way in which planning is approached and carried out that would reflect the City's true ethno-cultural diversity through a more inclusive and equitable planning framework.

This case study of the City of Toronto and its Sri Lankan Tamil community, including the mechanisms of governance, social planning, and civic engagement, found barriers to civic engagement and participation that exist for so many of Toronto's ethno-racial and ethno-cultural communities. The handful of Community Development Officers and others with responsibilities for social planning and community development hold a limited mandate and have very few resources to support the development of the large number of community-based organizations in Toronto. In addition, while funding mechanisms currently available particularly to assist coalitions of community organizations can be seen as promoting partnership and collaboration, the approach can also be seen as problematic in terms of assisting new community groups, particularly ethno-cultural and other traditionally marginalized groups, to establish themselves in order to seek out and make connections with other communities and organizations who are dealing with similar issues.

Following from this, planning bodies such as the Community Social Planning Council of Toronto direct the majority of their energy towards supporting coalitions that already exist, carrying out consultations through established networks to determine community needs and guide planning initiatives (Planner 3). New immigrant communities such as the Sri Lankan Tamils have in many cases not yet built the relationships necessary to partner with other communities and organizations in larger coalitions or network settings recognizable by the CSPC-T or the City. Though the work carried out by the CSPC-T may often speak to the needs and issues faced by the Sri Lankan Tamil community, the present stage of development of this community leaves its needs and desires unseen and its voice unheard. As a result, it is largely left up to Toronto's Tamil community to find the means and resources of supporting and educating themselves and their members in order to gain the ability to assert their rights as urban citizens in a democratic society and have their voices heard. This situation can also reinforce isolationist tendencies already present within the community and its organizations, instead of promoting outreach and collaboration with other communities who are attempting to address similar issues.

An Alternative Approach

The planning-based partnership known as the Alternative Planning Group (APG) is keenly aware that situations such as that faced by the Sri Lankan Tamil community are not unique in Toronto's ethno-culturally diverse landscape. The APG, a partnership between the Chinese National Council Toronto Chapter, the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians, the Hispanic Development Council, and the African Canadian Social Development Council, seeks to bring their voices and those of other ethno-racial communities into the planning debate. The network has partnered in projects with the Community and Social Planning Council of Toronto, and has received significant funding from the City in recent years (Planner 1).

The APG has been working together, "for the purpose of creating and implementing collaborative strategies for inter-ethnic community planning and development, conducting integrative research and organizing joint community events" (APG 2003c). The group is propelled by its recognition of key factors common in the experience of each immigrant partner-community, such as the lack of meaningful mechanisms for participating in civic and political society and multiple barriers to gaining access to employment and affordable housing. Central to their concern is that the concept of 'inclusion' held by the City is a linear one starting from a state of exclusion and ending at one of inclusion without considering how social inclusion can be democratically constructed as opposed to a status quo as defined by the majority (APG 2003c). Reflecting on their own planning

experiences in the City, the coalition recognizes opportunities for transformation, but also emphasizes the necessity of exploring issues related to power on which the construction of ‘diversity’ and ‘difference’ are based, before true negotiation of civic engagement process and practice in city governance structures and institutions can take place (APG 2003c).

The APG seeks to create a new paradigm of planning that reflects diversity, while also building the social capital⁹ of ethno-racialized communities such as the Tamils so they can indeed emerge on the policy platform as legitimate players. The coalition proposes “Engagement through Negotiation,” as an alternative planning framework that will replace what the APG sees as the fragmented approach of civic engagement traditionally taken by the City of Toronto, and will instead enable the construction of a more equitable city. In their most recent paper entitled “Re-defining the Urban Planning Agenda: A joint alternative community perspective,” members of the coalition summarize:

To be truly democratic in a pluralistic setting requires holistic but diverse, decentralized but equitable social planning based on principles of equity and shared vision through negotiation (APG 2003b: 1).

The APG also calls for the City of Toronto to respond to shifting demographics and growing needs of “racialized communities” by recognizing that the public is no longer homogenous. The group states that, “alternative planning offers a unique and necessary perspective on engaging and negotiating diversity through equity” (APG 2003b: 2).

Through these actions, the Alternative Planning Group has proposed a new paradigm that requires planners to carry with them new ideas, perspectives, methods of communication and engagement that are reflective and inclusive of the communities they work with and for, while applying these in their endeavors to shift the politics of planning within. Such tools are vital in the process of moving planning towards a process of ongoing, equitable, inclusive negotiation within and between the state and its communities.

Conclusion

Although advancements have been made, the existing gulf between the City of Toronto’s politicians, social planning bodies, social development policies and processes, and the methods by which

⁹ The term “social capital” was made common by Robert Putnam in his 1993 work, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* and refers to the norms, networks and trust formed between individuals and groups within a community.

newcomer groups such as the Sri Lankan Tamils are able to contribute, participate and engage in decision-making continues to feed planning's great divide.

The new City of Toronto has taken important steps to recognize its diverse citizenry and to examine and propose ways of approaching and supporting civic participation in the city. Their processes, with the assistance and input of many organizations and community representatives, produced the Social Development Strategy – the current social planning component of the City's Official Plan. The SDS includes many positive and hopeful guidelines for civic engagement in social development and planning in Toronto. However, many challenges and concerns arise when examining how it has (and hasn't) been translated on the ground. There are a number of issues that prevent both communities and planners from fulfilling the possibilities laid out in the SDS. One is that planners have been mandated to only recognize and assist those community groups who have partnered with others. This supports the theory and practice behind collaboration and intercultural partnership building between communities, but can result in a lack of outreach and support to communities who are new to the city as well as those not represented in already recognized coalitions. This conflict is further reflected in issues related to the funding available for new organizations. Another issue relates to communication between planning departments and policy makers. Although increased fiscal and management responsibilities as a result of provincial downloading and other economic forces have created great challenges for the municipality, it is councilors, planners and citizens who must continue to pursue the objectives expressed in the SDS in creative and meaningful ways, to “strengthen communities,” “invest in comprehensive social infrastructure,” and “expand civic leadership and partnership.” (City of Toronto 2001a).

Elected officials in a democratic urban society such as the City of Toronto's must come together with citizens in joint responsibility to do more to further the development of a healthy, inclusive, interconnected social planning infrastructure. Such planning cannot be conducted or implemented without the opportunity for direct participation of all citizens as key stakeholders. Toronto, the most ethno-culturally diverse city in Canada, can no longer disregard the absence of the voices of the more than 90 different ethnic groups, many of which represent newcomer communities and face similar challenges to those experienced by Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamils. These are the communities that live on the borderlands,¹⁰ who express “the voices of the multicultural city, of those who have been marginalized, displaced, oppressed or dominated” (Sandercock 1998: 110).

¹⁰ Leonie Sandercock, in her 1998 book *Towards Cosmopolis* refers to her concept of “voices from the borderlands” as the voices of groups who are not often heard by planners.

For newcomer communities such as Toronto's Sri Lankan Tamils, it has been largely left up to their members to decipher the new governance system in which they live, and to locate the means and methods through which they are able to make their voices heard in planning-related decision-making that may directly affect them. They forge ahead to negotiate their culture, customs, language and past governance-related experiences daily as they make a place for themselves as citizens and community members within Toronto. Recently, through the establishment of new organizations such as the Canadian Tamil Congress, a process of recognition and growth takes place. Initiatives such as Project Participate aim to identify, address, and work beyond barriers to participation, while at the same time inform and transform greater planning processes. Although this project does include a CDO as a member of the Advisory Board, this presence alone is not enough to provide a strong, open and inclusive means of participating in overall social planning for the Tamil community. Project Participate reflects clearly what communities will do to educate themselves and assert their democratic and human rights as urban citizens in a multicultural society.

Coalitions such as the Alternative Planning Group push those voices forward, reflecting many newcomer, immigrant and ethno-cultural communities in the city by calling for reform of how citizens are engaged in social planning as it is carried out in the City of Toronto, and demonstrating the need for a coalition or group such as the APG to exist as part of the permanent structure and process of planning in the city. The Alternative Planning Group creates the space and the opportunities to address the barriers to participation, while also bringing voices of ethno-cultural communities to the planning table. It is only through such coalitions that organizations like the Canadian Tamil Congress and planning guidelines such as the City of Toronto's Social Development Strategy can be brought together, expanded, and advanced in a creative way to support and truly build the means for more inclusive planning in the City of Toronto.

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