

Citizen Engagement in Public Service Delivery

The Critical Role of Public Officials

The growth in popularity of citizen engagement initiatives, such as community development committees, citizen satisfaction surveys, public consultations, participatory planning, budget consultations, social audits, and so on, is a reflection of the important contributions that citizens in developing countries may bring to the solution of specific problems in the delivery of public services by engaging constructively with state actors.¹

All stakeholders play important roles in the delivery of public services. However in development research and practice, citizens and politicians often receive disproportionate attention compared to public officials². The latter play a primary role in the process and it is inconceivable that significant improvements in the delivery process can be achieved without their full participation. Therefore, suggesting that citizen engagement can be a transformational instrument in service delivery is only partially true. Citizen engagement, as an instrument of reform is only as good as the use that public officials make of it.

Reform-minded public officials may take advantage of citizen engagement in a variety of ways: to elicit information, ideas

and other contributions directly from the citizens, support public sector innovations and entrepreneurship, defend the public interest from political clientelism, strengthen the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of citizens and bolster public sector accountability and governance.

Citizen engagement is not a magic wand that can automatically solve any delivery issue, but if deployed effectively, it has the potential to help pro-reform public officials improve the quality and accessibility of services. Some questions that arise are: What forms and strategies of engagement deliver the best results? Which stakeholders are most likely to participate and for what reasons? When do they choose to engage?

Traditional ways of conceptualizing citizen engagement initiatives do not always provide good answers to these questions and neither do they produce effective strategies of implementation.³ The paper summarised here, advocates for a more dynamic and disaggregated understanding of engagement which is more cognizant of power relations, collective action and strategic interaction in society.⁴

¹ For a definition of success and failure and many examples of citizen engagement initiatives see "John Gaventa and Gregory Barrett. (2010) *So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement*, IDS Working Paper 348, Brighton: IDS."

² The term "public official" in the paper is used to describe non-elected public sector employees.

³ Shantayanan Devarajan, Stuti Khemani, and Michael Walton. 2011. *Civil Society, Public Action and Accountability in Africa*. HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP11-036, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

⁴ John Gaventa and G. Barrett (2010) *So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement*, IDS Working Paper 348, Brighton: IDS.



From this perspective it is important to recognize that for public officials interested in promoting citizen engagement initiatives as instruments of reform, there is no blueprint for the design and implementation of participatory initiatives, nor are there any standardized or easily replicable tools for citizen engagement. Successful citizen engagement takes place through long-term sustained processes of confrontation, accommodation, trial and error in which participants discover what works, find self-confidence and gain a sense of empowerment. Those interested in promoting citizen engagement should identify pro-reform public officials, elected representatives and citizens, understand their motivations and incentives and consider forming broad, pro-reform coalitions.

It is also important to place citizen engagement in the context of the broader evolution of the public sector, the citizen and the relationship between state and society. With poverty reduction gaining ground and information and communications technologies spreading rapidly in developing countries, citizens are becoming more educated and aiming for higher values and aspirations. Rising expectations of empowered citizens will stretch governments' capacities to deliver services their constituents need, forcing governments to change the way they deliver services, often doing more with less. At the same time, empowered citizens will demand more and meaningful participation in governance.

For the state-society relationship this implies that policy making will need to be brought closer to the citizen, allowing more direct engagement in policy development, implementation, evaluation and service delivery. Governments in high-income countries are currently exploring *co-design* and *co-creation* of public services to better meet citizen's needs and preferences and leverage non-governmental resources. For middle-and low-income countries, such approaches represent a change from models where the government owns inputs and processes, towards a model where the government and citizens jointly own the outcomes. In other words, the government moves from governing for citizens to governing with citizens.

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This also implies a shift in terms of the citizen moving closer to the center of governance and an evolving public sector where citizens, politicians, bureaucrats and service providers become co-creators of public goods.⁵ This shift begins to challenge established notions of public sector values, practices, accountability, knowledge and skills. But more importantly, it also highlights the need for a professional, agile, open, ethical and passionate public service and rebuilding the morale and motivation of public officials where they have been damaged by politicisation or lack of resources.⁶



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For a more detailed coverage of Citizen Engagement, please refer to the full paper at: <http://bit.ly/GCPSEvidence>

⁵ See also: Collaborative Capacity in Public Service Delivery: Towards a Framework for Practice. UNDP 2015. Available at: <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/global-policy-centres/publicservice/collaborate.html>

⁶ See also: From New Public Management to New Public Passion - Restoring the intrinsic motivation of public officials. UNDP 2015. http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/capacity-development/English/Singapore%20Centre/NotesPSE1_PublicPassion.pdf