

Citizen Engagement in Public Service Delivery

The Critical Role of Public Officials

Introduction

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

Stakeholders in citizen engagement initiatives

- ▶ **Citizens** provide the political leadership with the authority to govern and expect in return effective governance and public services. In research this is referred to as the “social contract”.
- ▶ **Politicians** (those in positions of leadership) derive their legitimacy from the citizens’ acceptance of their authority. They aggregate preferences of citizens and deploy the state bureaucracy and resources to fulfil citizens’ expectations. For their results, they are largely accountable to citizens. This is called “political accountability”.²
- ▶ **Public officials** implement the strategic direction provided by the political leadership and deliver public services to citizens. They are accountable directly to politicians (“bureaucratic accountability”) and only indirectly to the citizens. When citizens engage with public officials, they may exact accountability directly from them. This is called “social accountability”.³

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 officials⁴. 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 effective 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.

How can public officials benefit from citizen engagement?

1. Improving the effectiveness of service delivery

– Citizen engagement can help public officials deal with the complexity of public service delivery in a number of ways:

- ▶ Citizens have a better idea, than public officials do, about the kinds of services they need. So they can help service providers better understand their requirements and identify solutions. They may become directly involved in the design and delivery of services, a process referred to as problem-solving collaboration.⁵ Furthermore, public officials may capitalise on citizen engagement to elicit specific indigenous knowledge which may help them in tailoring public services to the specific needs of the community.
- ▶ Citizen engagement can also be a powerful source of ideas and inspiration for social innovations and bureaucratic entrepreneurship.
- ▶ Citizens may be better positioned to assess the relevance and effectiveness of services, so they can contribute to the evaluation of programmes and services.
- ▶ In cases of funding constraints, public officials may mobilize additional funds from citizen contributions.

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 This description applies largely to democracies and some authoritarian regimes. Exceptions are the highly repressive totalitarian regimes where the actions of the political leadership are completely disconnected from the preferences of the citizens.

3 World Bank, “*World Development Report: Making Services Work for Poor People*”, 2003.

4 The term “public official” in the paper is used to describe non-elected public sector employees.

5 Archon Fung, “*Recipes for Public Spheres: Eight Institutional Design Choices and Their Consequences*” in *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 11, No. 3. (September 2003): 338-67.



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▶ Citizen engagement may provide a platform for inclusive deliberation, consensus and collective wisdom, which has been found to lead to better decision making.⁶

2. Serving the public interest – When the political leadership favours a group against the interests of the majority, public officials may rely on citizen engagement initiatives to act as bulwarks against special interests and clientelist policies. Participatory budget initiatives, that became popular in Brazil and later gained traction around the world, are a good illustration of this. By participating in the allocation of state resources, citizens can contribute to restraining the politicians’ clientelist policies and advocate programmes which deliver priority services.

3. Enhancing legitimacy – Citizen engagement can strengthen state legitimacy by promoting decision-making that reflects shared values and preferences.⁷ In authoritarian systems where legitimacy is built on performance and the ability of the state to effectively provide security, welfare and justice for its citizens, citizen engagement supplements the democratic deficit by increasing trust between the society and the state through its effects on corruption, state responsiveness and service delivery.

4. Strengthening accountability – Citizen engagement may play a positive role in strengthening accountability in service delivery. For instance, committed public officials may enlist the support of citizen initiatives to defend the culture of meritocracy and effectiveness from political interference.⁸ Also, public officials may rely on citizen monitoring to reduce corruption and strengthen service delivery at the grassroots within their departments.

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. 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.

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.

Although citizen initiatives are highly idiosyncratic, it is possible to design strategies of engagement based on first-order principles that have emerged from research.

6 Helene E. Landemore (2012) “Why the Many Are Smarter than the Few and Why It Matters,” *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 7.
 7 Archon Fung. 2007. *Democratic Theory and Political Science: A Pragmatic Method of Constructive Engagement*. *American Political Science Review* 101(3):443-58.

8 James E. Rauch and Peter B. Evans (2000), “Bureaucratic Structure and Bureaucratic Performance in Less Developed Countries,” *Journal of Public Economics* 75: 49-71.



Distinctions between traditional and alternative approaches to citizen engagement.

Traditional approach	Alternative approach
Technical approach vs. power relations⁹	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Citizen engagement is seen as a “technical tool” for stimulating citizen demand for better services (reform). ▶ Focus is on strengthening citizens’ motivations and capacity to engage. Much less attention paid to the willingness and capacity of state actors (especially public officials) for engagement. ▶ Political processes that underpin power relations within and between society and the state are ignored and depoliticised. ▶ Reform conceived as a technical solution to a governance problem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Citizen engagement is seen as a process shaped by power and interests. ▶ Focus is not only on the interests of citizens, but also on the vested interests of public officials and politicians. ▶ Political mobilization and support is considered important for the sustainment of citizen engagement initiatives. ▶ Reform conceived as a corollary of power relations, therefore fundamentally political. ▶ Reform is seen to require not only technical inputs but also political mobilization and support to be sustainable.
“Citizens vs. the state” vs. “pro-reform vs. status-quo coalitions”¹⁰	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Importance of collective action is downplayed. Focus is on the individual citizen. ▶ Capacity needs of individuals (i.e. training on processing and analyzing information, formulating priorities, etc.) take center stage. ▶ State and society are seen as two monolithic structures clearly divided by a boundary, with citizens on one side demanding quality services and state actors on the other, supplying them. ▶ Focus is on the interaction that takes place along the state-society boundary. ▶ Citizens conceived as primary drivers of reform in the public sector. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Collective action assumes greater importance than individual action. Focus is on coalitions and alliances. ▶ Needs of the collective, for organizational and political skills and capacities to forge coalitions and alliances across boundaries, take center stage. ▶ State and society are conceived as heterogeneous networks of power-wielding actors, complete with their internal hierarchies, conflicts and power dynamics and competing with each other on the basis of interests.¹¹ ▶ Recognises that public sector reform may originate and be driven from below (citizens), above (politicians), within (public officials) and outside (international organizations and donors)
“Static & short-term” vs. “dynamic & long-term” engagement¹²	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Citizen engagement initiatives are perceived as having smoothly rising trajectories and producing uniform effects. ▶ Citizen engagement initiatives are conceived as short-term and highly structured. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Citizen engagement initiatives are perceived as dynamic, with ups and downs and changes in the power structure taking place by leaps and bounds after periods of lull. ▶ Engagement process are conceived as gradual, iterative and open to self-experimentation and learning through failure and success.
“Parallel structures” vs. “integration with formal governance processes”¹³	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Citizen engagement initiatives established in parallel or as appendices to state structures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Citizen engagement initiatives highly embedded in the nature of the political and governance contexts and in existing power relations.

9 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.

10 Anuradha Joshi (2008), ‘Producing social accountability? The impact of service delivery reforms’, IDS Bulletin, 38 (6), 10–17.

11 Jonathan Fox, *Accountability Politics: Power and Voice in Rural Mexico*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

12 Michael Woolcock (2009). ‘Toward a plurality of methods in project evaluation: a contextualized approach to understanding impact trajectories and efficacy’. *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 1(1): 1-14.

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

Steps in the design and implementation of citizen engagement initiatives

- Step 1:** What is the problem to be addressed? What are the desired outcomes? What is the context?
- Step 2:** What kind of state action is possible? What role can public officials at different levels of government and elected politicians play? What are their interests and how do they relate to the desired outcome?
- Step 3:** What kind of citizen action can stimulate change and promote the desired outcome? What forms of engagement are possible and which are the most effective?
- Step 4:** How to jumpstart, strengthen and sustain citizen engagement?
- Step 5:** What are the risks and opportunity costs of engagement? Do the benefits exceed the costs of engagement? Are there more efficient alternatives?

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.

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵



CC BY-ND Kecko / Accessible public transport on Rheintalbus through co-design in Switzerland.

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

¹⁴ 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>

¹⁵ 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