



**Committee of Experts on Public Administration  
Policy Brief No. 1**

**Participatory Governance: Engaging Citizens for Development, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)**

This policy brief is based on the recommendations on *participatory governance* by the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA), during its sixth session in 2007.

The implementation of the internationally agreed development agenda, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), calls for a development framework that must reconcile sustained economic growth and poverty reduction while ensuring equity and environmental sustainability. Such a development framework requires, among other traits, participation, transparency and accountability in decision-making. The challenge for every government, therefore, is to design governance and public administration systems and processes that are inclusive, with the capacity to engage citizens in formulating, implementing and accounting for national development strategies. This challenge is exacerbated by a recent decline in citizen participation in public affairs as well as trust in government in various parts of the world. There may be many reasons for these declines. However, the declines point to the need for a better-shared vision of development and improved accountability in public governance.

Citizen engagement is an important component of public governance and accountable public administration. The Committee defined participatory governance as one of many public institutional strategies that contribute to shared visions in planning, budgeting, monitoring and accountability of development policies and programmes. These institutional strategies should link citizens more directly to decision-making processes, without bypassing representational democracy. Many national and local governments have introduced participatory initiatives that have integrated multi-stakeholder engagement in key areas. They include, among others, the National Economic and Social Councils, participatory poverty analysis through the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), “people budgeting” and service delivery, and “participatory audit”. Successful initiatives offer useful lessons in legal, institutional, methodological and capacity-building interventions that are critical to the sustainability of these practices. The introduction of participatory practices must equally consider associated risks, especially those that relate to capacity deficits.

## I. Participatory Governance and the Internationally Agreed Development Goals

Participatory governance can be defined in various ways, highlighting its normative, descriptive or analytical aspects. For the purposes of its discussion during its sixth session in April 2007, the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA) defined participatory governance as one of many public institutional strategies that contribute to shared visions in planning, budgeting, monitoring and accountability of development policies and programmes.

The Committee noted that participation in public affairs is a right of citizens.<sup>1</sup> It also emphasized that the engagement of citizens in national development strategies contributes directly to achieving the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Participatory governance, therefore, has both an intrinsic and instrumental value.

The implementation of the internationally agreed development agenda, including the (MDGs), calls for a development framework that must reconcile sustained economic growth and poverty reduction while ensuring equity and environmental sustainability. Such a development framework requires participation, transparency and accountability. The challenge for every government, therefore, is to design governance and public administration systems and processes that are inclusive, with the capacity to engage citizens in formulating, implementing and accounting for national development strategies.

This challenge is exacerbated by the recent decline in citizen participation in democratic processes and lowered trust in government in various parts of the world. Absenteeism at the polls was about 35% in low-and-middle-income countries in 2006. Citizens' expressions of dissatisfaction with government was 65% in Western Europe, 73% in Eastern and Central Europe, 60% in North America, 61% in Africa, 65% in Asia Pacific and 69% in Latin America in 2005. There are several reasons for these declines. For instance, globalization and liberalization have marginalizing effects on vulnerable groups. Also, due to concerns about terrorism, there has been a general decline in political and social freedoms and, in many instances, a reduction of democratic spaces for non-governmental organizations, including the media. However, the declines point to the need for a better-shared vision of development and improved accountability in public governance.

Against this backdrop, citizen engagement is regarded as an important component of public governance and accountable public administration. Informing, consulting, involving, collaborating with and empowering citizens in public policy formulation, programme design, budgeting, service delivery, evaluation and audit can link them more directly to decision-making processes and result in more responsive public services. Moreover, participation can serve at least three useful functions: building mutual trust ("integrative"); information exchange ("educative"); and mainstreaming public reasoning and consensus building ("deliberative"). Finally, "civic engagement should not be treated as a substitute for or parallel to established processes of government. It could be a means of revitalizing the formal institutions of democracy. Participatory governance could be regarded as a means to improve the relationship of trust and confidence between citizens and democratic institutions."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Article 21, Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

<sup>2</sup> InterAmerican Development Bank Governance Database. <http://www.iadb.org>

<sup>3</sup> BBC, Gallup International, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Report on 6<sup>th</sup> Session of CEPA (E/2007/44-E/C.16/2007/6), para. 12.

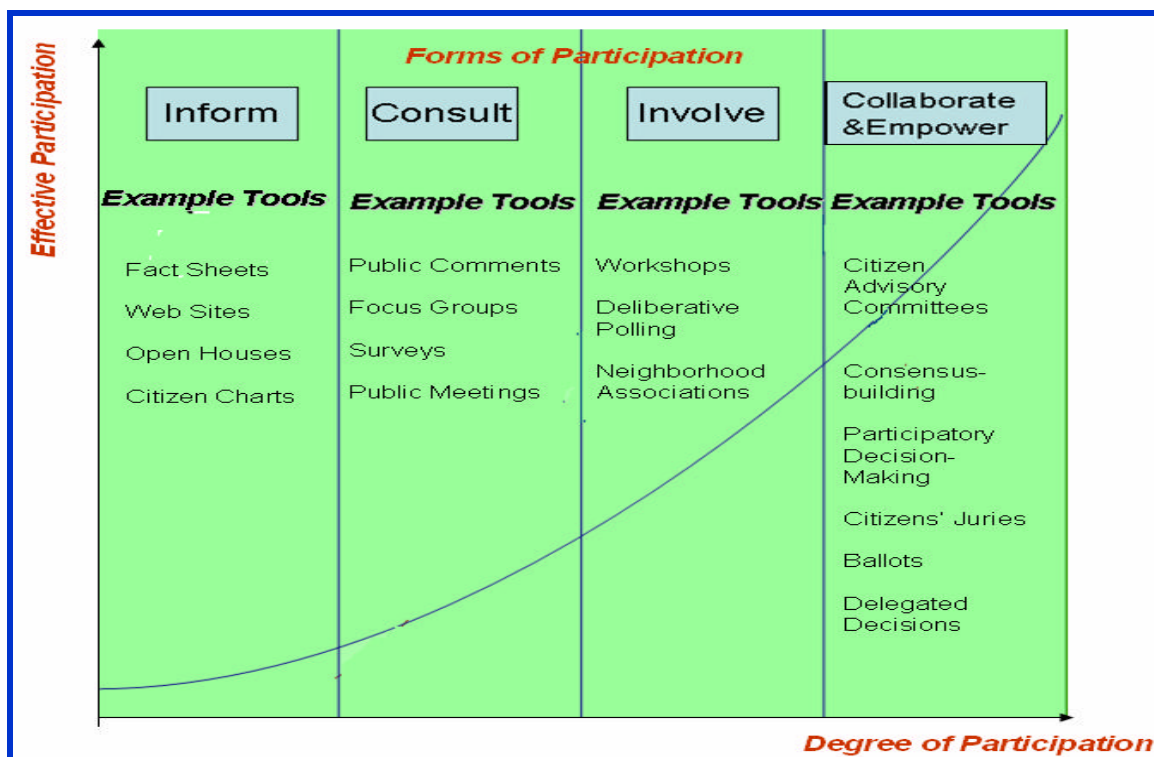
## II. Key Practices and Enabling Conditions

The principle of participation can be employed in key public processes such as policy-making (as in the case of National Economic and Social Councils); resource allocation and oversight (as in the case of ‘people budgeting’); co-production of services and service delivery (as in the case of civil society participation in local government planning and development); monitoring, evaluation and audit (as in the case of “participatory auditing”); among others.<sup>5</sup>

In doing so, participatory governance can be structured in different ways, including:

- government-driven formal deliberative processes (as in National Economic and Social Councils, local government councils);
- devolution of policy management and oversight to committees of local users (as in community-based public programmes);
- partnerships between government and community service organizations (as in participatory budgeting); and
- application of information, communication and technologies (ICTs).

These forms of participatory governance, in turn, involve a large selection of tools for enhancing citizen participation in governance and public administration.



Source: Based on International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) 2000.

Note: This graph is solely for illustrative purposes and is not based on any specific data or regression analysis.

<sup>5</sup> Report on 6<sup>th</sup> Session of CEPA (E/2007/44-E/C.16/2007/6); also see “People Matter: Civic Engagement in Public Governance”, 2008 World Public Sector Report, UNDESA (Forthcoming).

While participatory governance is not a one-size-fits-all process, there are a number of factors that are critical to creating links between the context, mechanisms and outcomes of participation. For example, decentralized local governance structures -- matched with appropriate levels of power and authority, resources and accountabilities -- mediate between a mandate for administrators to provide participatory opportunities and the capacity to realize those opportunities. Other factors mediating between the arrangements for participation and the effectiveness of the process include significant investments by government in providing technical and information support to participants as well as the capacity to harness existing stocks of social capital and empower civil society (e.g. community organizing, individual skills and confidence). Enabling structural conditions such as a democratic environment, regulatory framework, a civil society accreditation policy, well-defined participation principles, among others, are also important variables of participatory governance.

### **III. Policy Considerations: Benefits and Risks of Participatory Governance**

Like other governance tools, participatory governance comes with benefits and risks that must be carefully weighed before being applied. The selection and implementation of a participatory governance initiative almost always implies a trade-off between the underlying risks and expected benefits and its operational viability must be considered within the social, political and financial realities of a given locality.

The benefits of participation are sought through encouraging preference expression and needs assessment, by fostering a shared vision and by ensuring greater transparency and accountability in public governance. Through these means, participation can enhance public programme performance, improve service delivery, reduce corruption and build trust in government. In other instances where the push for participation comes from the leadership itself, national or local, the resulting institutional change can reflect “pro-poor leadership” patterns. There have been instances where the leadership has catalyzed processes of altering power relationships and restructuring the decision-making processes that have renewed focus on citizens and favoured the poor.

The risks of participatory governance stem from unintended consequences that can arise in pursuit of common goals such as “free riding” and “elite capture”. In certain circumstances, participation may not be efficient; in others it may not be equitable; and yet in others, it may be neither. Such risks include capture by traditional elites, dominance by vested interest groups, exclusion of socially marginalized groups. In some cases, excessive populism may try to highlight potential benefits more than the risks. Sometimes, overly populist approaches in participatory governance may result in patronage politics and abuse of the system. The question of how best to open more space for meaningful citizen engagement warrants a careful balancing act between what is desirable and what is doable.

By and large, successful cases of participation indicate that countries which practice democracy; significantly devolve political, administrative and financial authorities; and encourage the participation of civil society organizations in public policies, budgeting and accountability experience better pro-poor outcomes than those which do not. In addition, there are several challenges such as the absence of a functioning rule of law; capacity deficits in participation management, low professional capacity or weak commitment of the civil society organizations and low or weak political commitment to the principles of participation that may either stymie or stall progress in participatory governance.

The introduction of participation in public governance involves three inter-connecting levels of policy considerations:

*Normative:* a shared political vision (*direction*); a shared vision of political rights of sectors and actors (*legitimacy and voice*); legitimising conditions such as the enactment of law or constitutional provisions that establish the nature of desirable engagement (*accountability*).

*Regulative:* the organisation of institutional tasks, roles, mechanisms, processes and resources around the normative goals of engagement (*performance and accountability*).

*Regenerative:* capacity development of the governance system through the development of the capabilities (knowledge and skills) of all partners, including the government.

#### IV. Capacity-Development for Participatory Governance

Capacity-development in participatory governance should be based on:

- an understanding of the balance between vertical linkages (between government and citizens) and horizontal linkages (among citizen groups) applied to policy goals, accountabilities, performance standards and management systems;
- clearly-defined roles and responsibilities for government and non-government actors for specific tasks;
- established mechanisms, processes and practices that enable government-civil society engagement; and
- adequate human, financial and information resources that are important to strengthen participation.

For the most part, the introduction and operationalization of participatory governance require:

- A clear expression of political commitment and legal provisions;
- Learning lessons from a community of practice and benchmarking of best practices;
- Advocacy;
- Introduction of appropriate tools/methodologies to link participation at all levels: national, sectoral, sub-national and local;
- Development of indicators to measure the processes of participation and their outcomes;
- Skills in managing participation and transforming participation inputs into coherent policies;
- Behavioral changes in public institutions;
- Active involvement of the universities, research institutes, media etc.; and
- Support of the international community, including the UN, in promoting active citizen demands and capacity-building in participation.

Finally, since most successful participation initiatives are home grown and the leadership has given strong support, there may be some merit in creating a “pro-poor leadership forum” around the world. Such a forum could mentor and advance ideas for participation. The motivations, approaches and steps taken by experienced leaders could facilitate the acceptance of participation and help overcome risks, such as those that they may have encountered themselves. Lessons learnt from such pioneering and practising leaders may help in incorporating the value of encouraging participation in leadership training programmes.

This Policy Brief is intended to present policy considerations for *participatory governance*, based on the proceedings of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA)'s 6th session on that topic. It has also benefited from the preliminary results of the World Public Sector Report 2008, entitled *People Matter: Civic Engagement in Public Governance*, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UN/UNPAN028608.pdf> CEPA was established by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 2001/45. It consists of 24 experts appointed in their personal capacity by the Council upon the nomination of the Secretary-General and is serviced by the Division for Public Administration and Development Management, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. For more on CEPA, please see <http://www.unpan.org/cepa2profile.asp>

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