



Citizen Engagement: History and Definitions

Week 1: Video transcript

Featuring

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Hi, and welcome to this course. We're thrilled to have you with us over the next four weeks.

Citizen engagement is a concept as old as humanity. Whether formally enshrined in documents such as the Magna Carta and the Code Napoleon, or manifested informally at local levels, the concept of citizen engagement is thoroughly global. Kin-based societies from East Africa to the Amazonian rainforest have traditionally made decisions by consensus and persuasion rather than by top-down diktat.

Some 2,500 years ago the city-state of ancient Athens rose to unprecedented political and economic power by giving its citizens direct voice and an active role in civic governance. The city's uniquely participatory system of democracy helped unleash the creativity of the Athenian people and channel it in ways that produced the greatest good for the society as a whole. Importantly, the system grew organically from Athenians own needs, beliefs and actions—it was as much a spirit of governance as a set of rules or laws.

Countries that are not democracies, such as China, have also sought out forms of citizen engagement. Government officials can be subject to informal rules and norms created by community solidarity groups that have earned high moral standards in the community. These solidarity groups establish and enforce public obligations that everyone in the community—officials as well as citizens—are expected to follow.

Countries in the Middle East and North Africa also have their own forms of citizen engagement, which vary greatly from one society to another. It is well known that the Medina Compact of the first Islamic State was based on a social contract whereby consent and cooperation between citizens and the emerging state was well established. In addition, a common feature of many Muslim -- particularly Arab -- societies throughout history is the 'shura', often translated as "consultative assembly."

These examples show us that there is no one blue print or template for citizen engagement. In democracies, citizen engagement is a basic principle because it is understood that governments, at their essence, derive their authority and power from the people. Governments hence have an obligation—and not just the discretion—to respond to their needs. In a democracy citizens have both the right and the responsibility to demand accountability and to ensure that government acts in the best interests of the people.

In other contexts, citizen engagement is seen as part of the social compact between citizens and their delegated representatives. The social contract, in turn, derives from notions of human and citizen rights. Citizen engagement is understood as the right of people to define the public good, determine policies by which they seek the good, and reform or replace institutions that do not serve that good.

For purposes of this course, however, we will narrow the scope of our definition of citizen engagement, and link it to its impact on improving development outcomes. Drawing on the World Bank and others' recent work, we will define citizen engagement as the "two-way interaction between citizens and governments or the private sector that give citizens a stake in decision-making, with the objective of improving development outcomes."

The spectrum of citizen engagement, as illustrated here, includes government sharing information with citizens, and citizens drawing on this information to take action and communicate, including providing feedback to government, both solicited and unsolicited.

Key to this definition is the responsiveness of government to citizen voice. While the scope of citizen engagement includes consultation, collaboration, participation and empowerment, these typically imply a one-way interaction. As we define it here, citizen engagement requires transparent and effective mechanisms by government for responding to citizen voice. The end game for citizen engagement is to improve the accountability of governments and service providers, thus closing the feedback loop.

Citizen engagement can take place at multiple levels—at the community level, at a local district level, at the sector level or national and internationally (for example, through regional or global social movements). Defining which level depends on the type of processes to be influenced and the objectives of engagement.

Citizen engagement can also occur through "invited spaces that are facilitated by or with decision makers (such as government) and engagement that occurs in "popular" spaces, such as protests and social movements". This aspect will be discussed further in the next presentation.

An essential understanding running across all these definitions and examples, however, is that citizen engagement is highly embedded in the nature of the political and governance context and in existing power relations, or the local context. It needs to be understood as a core component of any governance system. It requires active participation of both citizens and decision makers, and is an integral part of governance processes, above and beyond individual projects or one-off feedback.

Citizen engagement also does not automatically lead to improved accountability or better decision making—it is important to look at the wider context in which it takes place to understand what factors enable citizen engagement and influence its impact. We discuss this in a later presentation.

For this course we also present the following definitions which may prove useful:

Citizens – are understood as the ultimate client of government and/or development institutions' and private sector interventions in a country. In this context, the term citizen is not used in a legal sense but is understood in the broad sense of referring to all people in a society or country in an inclusive and non-discriminatory way. Citizens can act as individuals or organize themselves in associations and groups.

Transparency – any attempt by state or citizens to place information or processes that were previously opaque in the public domain, accessible for use by citizen groups, providers or policy makers.

Accountability – broadly speaking, accountability refers to the process of holding actors responsible for their actions. More specifically, it is the concept that individuals, agencies and organizations (public, private and civil society) are held responsible for executing their powers according to a certain standard (whether set mutually or not).

Responsiveness – the process by which government designs and implements public policy based on received citizen input and preferences. Responsive governance is when citizen input actually leads to changed outcomes, rather than just being heard.

Inclusiveness – a process by which the voices of often-excluded or marginalized groups are included in the governing process.

Arguments have been made that throughout history engaging citizens has led to more sustainable, open and equitable governance, and in the end this works to the benefit of all citizens, including the most marginalized. In many cases, it is these marginalized poor that those of us in the development community are most anxious to reach.

Recent research has shown that citizen engagement initiatives can:

- Increase transparency and citizen trust in government
- Enhance government legitimacy
- Improve outcomes of macro-economic policies, and
- Raise the frequency and quality of government responsiveness

Let me give you some concrete examples. In Brazil, numerous municipalities have been practicing participatory budgeting for extended periods, beginning more than two decades ago. Municipalities with participatory budgeting have allocated a larger share of funding to sanitation and health services, reducing infant mortality rates while holding capital budgets constant. While participatory budgeting processes vary widely in practice, on balance their positive impacts are clear. Studies find that participatory budgeting encourages authorities to provide services that meet needs of otherwise underrepresented citizens, and the deliberative process also creates frequent citizen checks on promised governmental impacts.

In Uganda, local civil society organizations worked with local health workers to promote a local compact between communities and local health workers in dozens of Ugandan villages. After extensive piloting, they tested a community monitoring process designed to encourage voice, to avoid elite capture and to facilitate periodic dialogue with health workers. The impacts were dramatic, including reduction in infant mortality in treatment communities—by 33%—increased use of outpatient services—by 20%—and overall improvement of health treatment practices (immunization rates, waiting time, absenteeism).

In Indonesia, a nation-wide rural community development program, first known as KDP, then PNPM, followed a strategy that created enabling environments for community-level participatory budgeting and oversight, mainly for local public works and later for health and education programs. The program led to increased consumption and access to health care in poor households and reduced poverty in all the sub-districts where it operated, especially in the poorest and most remote communities—though members of marginalized groups did not benefit as much as others.

But despite these examples, many exist in which citizen engagement did not result in improved development outcomes.

Citizen engagement is not a panacea. In this course we look at what has worked and not worked. What conditions need to be in place for citizen engagement to have a development impact, what tools and approaches are available, the crucial role of context, and a wide range of other factors that we look forward to exploring with you.

Specifically, in this week we look at further definitions and impact of citizen engagement on development outcomes, the crucial role of context in bringing about impact, and an approach to measuring its success.