



CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN URBAN GOVERNANCE: FACILITATING FORMS AND STEPS

What is Civic Engagement?

Civic engagement is seen as crucial for strengthening people's empowerment. Currently there is significant focus on the potential of voluntary and collective action of all types by citizens. It is seen as a process that organizes citizens or their entrusted representatives to influence, share and control public affairs. Civic engagement is not an event but a process that closely involves people in the economic, social, cultural and political process that affects their lives (UNDP HDR 1993). Civic engagement is also understood on a continuum spanning from one way flow of information to the public to multi stakeholder consultations in the form of participatory assessment and dialogue, collaboration which includes joint work and shared decision making between facilitator and stakeholders and empowerment where decision making powers and resources are transferred to civic organizations in the form of user groups (Edgerton et al. 2000).

Civic engagement is different from participation per se since it is specifically associated with efforts to create channels of voice, representation and accountability. There is no blueprint for civic engagement because it plays a different role in a different context. Different initiatives are taken up for different purposes. Some of the initiatives for civic engagement at national and international level include civic oversight, inclusive development planning, consultations with citizens, capacity building and creating mechanisms for information sharing.

Why Civic Engagement is critical?

Government refers to a particular kind of public institution (the 'State') vested with formal authority to take decisions on behalf of the entire community. Governance means process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented. Governance encompasses collective decisions made by various actors, of which the government is one. Since governance is a process of decision making, it is important to focus on the actors (formal and informal) involved and the structures that have been set up for collective decisions making and its implementation. The process of governing is most legitimate when it is based on the democratic principles of like pluralism, representation, citizen's involvement in decision-making, transparency and accountability. Good governance is said to be governance that is decentralized, provides for participation of all citizens and is transparent and accountable.

The voices of all citizens groups along with their active participation should be considered in decision-making. People's voices can be considered through representative intermediate institutions of citizens. However, it is important to note that representative democracy does not necessarily mean that the concerns of the most vulnerable in society would be taken into consideration in decision-making. Very often marginalized groups are left out of the development planning process and therefore the needs of the poor do not get

included in the plan formulation and the resource allocation fails to contribute towards the development objectives of the poverty alleviation and socio-economic equality. In this context, it becomes imperative to work towards inclusive planning.

Accountability is a key requirement of good governance. Not only government institutions but also the private sector and civil society organizations should be made accountable to the public and their institutions. How resources at the disposal are used and whether the needs of society particularly of the vulnerable sections are being fulfilled needs to be made available to all citizens. Information is critical for holding any public institution accountable to its mandate. The information should be in a simple form to understand and monitor. However, the experience has been that information is available only to certain groups. This results in distortions, where those with the necessary information stand to benefit from it, with little institutional support available to those without it. Creating space through civic action in planning, implementation and budgeting process can ensure the inclusion of marginalised groups, empowerment of citizens to participate in a meaningful way in the decision making process and in building transparency and accountability in governing process.

Building Civic Engagement

There are various forms of civic engagement which can be selected depending on the objectives and the context.¹ Four such forms, their processes and impact have been discussed here.

(1) Participatory Monitoring of Basic Services (Report Card)

Citizens in towns and cities are dependent on the urban local body (ULB) for basic amenities like water supply, road, sanitation, garbage collection and street lighting. It is the responsibility of the ULB to provide basic services to the citizens. There is a general feeling of dissatisfaction about the services provided by the urban local bodies. Very often the poorer areas and slums are left either without access to basic services or forced to rely on the more expensive private options. As citizen's experiences and views are not recognized in planning and implementation of these basic services, often basic issues from the user's point of view are not addressed. Report cards are being increasingly used for civic engagement to demand better services. It can be used as an instrument to hold the governing institutions accountable.

Report cards are participatory assessments that solicit user feedback on the performance of public services. The report card reflects the actual experiences of people on a range of basic services. It attempts to present a view on the status of public services from a

¹ This section is based on UNNATI's experience of working in the small and medium towns of Gujarat and Rajasthan.

citizen's perspective and captures citizen's feedback in simple terms indicating their level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The users assess the services and tell the provider of the accessibility, adequacy, appropriateness and affordability of the public services and the problems they face in accessing them. This can help design local solution to urban issues. The process also includes initiation of a dialogue with the provider to find local solutions to improve the services. All this can lead to participatory management of services. It can form the base for taking up town level planning exercise.

To conduct report card with citizen's involvement the following process can be adopted.

i. Quick assessment of wards

- Walk through the various areas of the town. Meet citizens and discuss informally about the town. Observe the overall condition of services in the town.
- Collect information on population of the city/town, population and number of households in each ward, details of elected representative of each ward, town map showing the wards and details of services provided by the municipality.
- Hold meeting with President, Chief Officer and councilors to state the purpose for conducting a report card. The purpose of the exercise is to seek citizen's feedback to redesign the service delivery among to fulfill the needs of the users and develop participatory management practices.
- Identify the different stakeholders of the town. Effort should be made to identify those that are excluded and invisible.

ii. Orientation of Ward Committees/Citizens

- Mobilise the community at the ward level or at the cluster level. From among the community identify a group of 8-10 citizen leaders who are willing.
- Conduct ward level meeting and orient the citizens on report cards. Special effort may be made to ensure the participation of vulnerable groups particularly the slums residents.
- Invite the elected councilors to these meetings to build trust of the community and the elected members.
- The concept of report card and why it is important to do a report card and how it can be used as tool to build transparency and accountability needs to be explained repeatedly.

iii. Identification of Services

- Identify the services to be assessed and the agencies responsible. Often times, different agencies are responsible for the creation, operation and maintenance of the service. The identification of the service should ideally be based on the priority of the users. PRIA tools can be used to identify either the most stressed or the most critical service.

iv. Develop Indicators/Parameters (with community)

- Once the services are identified (water supply, road, garbage disposal, street lighting and gutter/sewerage network) in consultation with the citizen groups, indicators for evaluating each service needs to be developed. For example, for assessment of water supply the indicators used can be the time at which water is supplied, timeliness of the supply, duration of the supply, quantity/pressure and water quality on observation.
- Citizens can develop a format to collect information on each service based on the indicators.
- Hold informal discussions on issues of accessibility, availability, adequacy and affordability and on any other issues like conflict, equity, women's drudgery, corruption etc.
- Ask the people to rank the reasons for non-satisfaction in terms of their

importance.

v. Conduct the Report Card

- For conducting the report card divide the wards into geographical areas taking into account the existing clusters and slums. A ward map can be helpful aid.
- From each ward at least 10 percent of the household should be covered. For example for a ward with 200 households cover 18-20 respondents with adequate representation of women and vulnerable sections. The respondents must include all the clusters and cover all stakeholders.
- In-depth case study of selected households on their experience with public service providers for accessing public services can provide better insights. These case studies also help in generating suggestions from the citizens for solving some of the problems.
- If PRA is not possible, use survey method. However, along with the filling the forms short meeting with groups at key points in the wards and street corners can help in building an environment for citizen engagement.

vi. Analyzing the Data

- A meeting of the facilitators which conducted the Report Card helps in documenting the qualitative information and case studies.
- The information at ward level needs to be analyzed with the citizen groups.
- Prepare a comprehensive report on the overall status of basic services in the town.
- The information for each ward needs to be put in a format that is simple and easy to read. For example in the map of each ward the level of service available and level of satisfaction for each service can be presented.

vii. Sharing with service providers and community

- Share the report card prepared in the local language at ward level meeting. Any additional suggestions by the community need to be incorporated. Citizens in some cases come up with local solutions which must be documented.
- The report card is then presented to the municipality by the citizen group. It is made available in other public spaces like school, key points in the town, library etc. This helps initiate dialogue between the users and the providers, based on evidence. It also helps to put pressure on the provider to improve its performance.

viii. Action points

Based on the findings efforts are made to develop an action plan. The action plan includes sharing of responsibilities, what the citizen groups will do (including putting pressure on the municipality to improve services) and what the municipality will do and deciding a priority basis for it.

Benefits of conducting a Report Card

- The information used as a feedback by the service providers has often led to efforts to improve the quality, availability and access to basic services. In several cases, the poor in slums can access services.
- Institutionalised report card lead to a benchmark of quality of public services
- Through the report card the needs and priorities of the vulnerable groups are articulated and it provides a legitimate forum to demand for quality services.
- Report card is not a one-time action. Efforts made to institutionalize the process help build citizens groups and connect with the local bodies. In the process legitimate space is created for citizen engagement

(2) People Centered Planning

The traditional method of planning is centralised and mostly imposed from the top. It

is considered as a technical exercise conducted by experts. Participatory planning, on the other hand, is decentralized planning from the bottom and agreed upon by various stakeholders. It is based on dialogue and discussion with stakeholders and focused on building a vision for the town/city. It is democratic, inclusive and tries to bring the state and civil society closer (social planning). The state or the local governing body is encouraged to play a facilitator role. Participatory planning takes into account the knowledge and concerns of the local area. It looks at the community as actors who can shape their own development.

Participatory planning in the urban context integrates spatial, economic and social planning. While the town maps and the infrastructure maps help identify the physical availability, or on quantum or on chemical characteristic of water supplied, through the focused group discussion, ward meetings and stakeholder consultations that bring out local issues like poor hygiene standards, repairs taking a long time, or that leakage losses are very high, burst sewers get mixed with the water mains, street light not working etc.

Some of the steps that can be followed are as follows:

- (i) **Information collection and appraisal of the situation:** Collecting the base map and documents and the development plan from the Town Planning and Valuation Department is the starting point. Along with this information on various groups particularly the vulnerable group's needs to be put together. Vulnerability mapping of the town is one such method.
- (ii) **Sharing the information with citizens:** After the data and information is collected a quick round of analyses and interpretation needs to be done. The information needs to be shared with the citizen groups so that they can provide additional information on the city/town.
- (iii) **Participatory assessment of basic services:** Assess the quality of basic services from the point of view of different stakeholders both social and occupational groups. Hold a dialogue with the stakeholders and the concerned agencies on the problems identified by the citizens and the reason thereof. A popular document based on the gaps in service delivery needs to be prepared and circulated widely. The information on the gaps has to be shared through ward level meeting with the citizens.
- (iv) **Survey of physical infrastructure:** If the municipality has detail maps of the coverage of the physical services it may be used to understand the coverage and initiate the planning process. If maps are not available then infrastructure layout maps for all the wards in the town can be prepared. Water supply pipelines, sewerage pipes, street lights, approach roads etc has to be identified and mapped. The senior citizens and the municipal workers and staff can support this process.
- (v) **Stakeholder consultation to prioritise the civic needs:** After collating the information on the basic service and the survey of physical infrastructure, a town level meeting needs to be held to identify common issues facing all the wards. The issues need to be ranked in terms of priority. There could be difference of opinion on which issues can be accorded priority. Subsequently, a priority list can be prepared.
- (vi) **Preparation of a set of draft proposals for the wards:** A set of draft proposals can be prepared for each ward. Support can be taken from the officials of the municipality. The proposals need to contain the current situation, gaps and projections for 20 years hence. This has to be done for both demand and supply side. These set of proposals need to be verified at the ward level through meetings. A brief note in simple language on the proposed plan circulated to all stakeholders can be very useful.

- (vii) **Stakeholder consultation for preparing town plan:** The ward level proposals have to be consolidated to prepare the proposals for the town. A town level consultation of all stakeholders to present the town plan in a simple format needs to be prepared. The participation of the vulnerable groups needs to be ensured. Suggestions and opinions that emerge at the stakeholder consultations must be incorporated into the plan.
- (viii) **Publishing the people oriented development plan:** A final set of proposal is drafted. The proposal includes technical details of the project to be undertaken on a priority basis as well as the estimated cost for each proposal. The final proposal is then documented in a simple format and disseminated among the citizens, local institutions, NGOs, financial institutions and other agency. Information on possible funding for the plan can also be provided.

(3) Citizen Support Cell (Nagarik Sahog Kendra)

On a daily basis there is little linkage between the citizens and the municipal governing system. Both officials and elected representatives do not have mechanisms to share information with citizens. For effective civic engagement, information should flow both ways - from the policy makers to the citizens (policies and programmes) so that they can play a meaningful role in the decision making process and it should flow from the citizens to the policymakers so that it helps the policymakers to understand the local conditions and formulate accordingly.

To facilitate the sharing of information, Citizens Support Cell (CSC) can be set up to facilitate information sharing among the citizens and the municipality. These cells must preferably be located within the premise of the municipal office. The objective of the CSC is to:

(i) **Sharing Information**

In small and medium towns there are no ward committees which can act as a platform to link the citizens with the municipality. The cell acts as a link/window where citizens could seek information on a regular basis. The cell can organize regular meetings at the ward and cluster level particularly in informal settlements where the elected representatives from the ward are present. This provides an opportunity to the vulnerable groups to voice their concerns and problems before the elected representatives who could take up the issues at the municipality level. This effort builds accountability in the development process.

(ii) **Support to Women and Marginalized Groups**

The Citizen Support Cell can pro-actively reach out and provide them necessary support to facilitate their functioning. The women representatives should be oriented about their roles and functions and to various development programmes so that they monitor them. In addition to the monitoring the programmes, it also improves the targeting and outreach. In the municipal elections, the cell provides support to women candidates to file nominations. It can take up voter awareness campaigns to educate the citizens on the electoral process and provide information on the candidates.

(iii) **Orienting Citizens and Elected Representatives**

For effective urban governance, the citizen leaders and elected representatives need to

be oriented on various aspects of governance, particularly on the issues of equity, vulnerability, gender justice in the development process. Town level training programmes can be organized on the themes mentioned below:

- Role and responsibilities of the municipality
- Participatory evaluation of basic services using report card method
- How to develop a participatory development plan
- Building accountability in the municipal system
- Formulation of municipal budget and resource mobilization
- Orientation on public private partnership for the development of basic services
- Besides the training programmes exposure visits can be organized to learn from others experiences.

(iv) Public Education

There is a need for creating informal spaces for citizen interaction. A process of public education and awareness building was initiated through preparation and distribution of pamphlets, popular booklets, painting competition, street play, puppet shows and other educational materials. A monthly newsletter can be published in each town. This can be a town level information bulletin for citizens to know about the government schemes and policies, municipal plans and budget and to raise demands. One section of the newsletter documents what is happening within the town as reported by the citizens and in another section the municipality provides information on the development activities planned for the town. Some of the themes covered can include state /central policies, government resolutions related to urban governance, popular notes on national and international studies on governance issues, case studies of best practices on public private partnerships, citizen initiatives, accountability of municipality, innovations to improve basic services and citizen's views on governance etc.

(4) Capacity Building of Citizen Leaders

It is critical to strengthen the capacity of citizen leaders so that they can play an active role of holding local governance accountable and responsive to the needs of marginalised sections of society. When the citizens are informed, organized and active they can make an impact on the quality of governance. They should know about the rights and responsibilities. It is in this context capacity building of citizen leaders can be taken up through structure training programmes. Citizen leaders are natural leaders and are not elected representative of the wards. They are volunteers of the ward who make an extra effort in helping the vulnerable citizens. They support issues of the disadvantaged groups and put pressure on the municipality. These citizens leaders primarily engage in monitoring of basic services, link up with the elected representatives of the ward to hold them accountable and connect with the citizen support centre for accessing latest information to share at the ward level as well as provide feedback to the municipal authorities.

Conclusion

Civic engagement can help local bodies to find effective, cheap and city specific solutions to urban issues. To address these issues it is important for local governing bodies to engage with the citizens. However at present the appropriate platforms are either absent or are disabling in design and structure. Secondly, civic agency presence in the urban areas remains limited and it is mostly sector specific. For example, while a wide range of agencies are working on health and primary education service delivery; few have engaged themselves with issues relating to urban planning and governance. Thirdly in absence of spaces and measures for direct citizen action, the presence of a civic agency becomes critical. However civic agency involvement has to be sustained to facilitate the institutionalization of citizen action. Such a continuous involvement alone can ensure effective and empowering citizen action. And finally, if the newly created space has basic democratic values, all sections of the people, including women, will feel a sense of involvement and ownership. The participation of the poor is not constrained by their economic hardships but by the power relations that perpetuate exclusion. Any empowering process is therefore, inherently political and must be viewed as such. Civic engagement needs to be viewed as a process of reclaiming space of common citizen to influence and shape inclusive development.

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