



## **Public participation and urban governance in India**

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### **Abstract**

Asia is urbanizing at a pace faster than ever. The ever increasing population in the Asian cities and the consequent increase in demands for supply of basic services like housing, water, sanitation, health, education etc. pose enormous challenges to the urban local governance institutions. The existing capacities and resources of most urban local governance institutions are over stretched. The situation is exacerbated due to lack of governance reforms leading to enormous deficits in the transparency, accountability and citizen participation- the hallmarks of any democratic governance institutions. The engagement of civil society organizing (CSO) is pivotal in making the urban local governance institutions transparent, accountable, and responsive participatory. However, the capacities of CSOs to engage and hold the urban local governance institutions are also limited.

**Keywords:** public participation and governance, democratic governance

### **Introduction**

#### **Public participation and governance**

Public participation presents a whole new interpretation of notions of citizenship and governance. In the past, the understanding that existed was that citizens had to be governed and in return the citizens were expected to follow rules and fulfil certain obligations to other citizens and to those who governed them. Those who governed, in turn, had the duty to provide citizens with protection and assistance to help them solve problems and make their lives better. The current perspectives of 'citizen participation' however, suggest that citizens can govern themselves by influencing decision-making processes that affect their lives, their livelihoods, their communities, their environment and their societies.

John Gaventa (2006) <sup>[2]</sup> tracing the history of participation in development programmes opines four significant different meanings of participation. First is 'participation from below', which goes back to the end of 1960s and early 1970s, which saw the use of terms like 'popular participation' and 'participatory development' in the development literatures. With Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' the concept of 'people's knowledge' gained widespread popularity, as he articulated the development process not as a 'gift' received from outside, but as a process of transformation gained through critical reflection and action by the people themselves. Second is participation as beneficiaries and users of development projects', which emerged in the early 1980s, with the rapid growth of development actors, who viewed participation as an approach to be used in project delivery. This could be seen in sectorial programmes such as waters, health, irrigation, forestry etc. where participation took the form of user's committees, thus providing space for participation in the project cycle. The third perspective towards participation developed during the 1990s, when terms like beneficiaries and excluded gave way to more neutral

terms like stakeholders in the development discourses, as a result of the mainstreaming of participation in large scale development programs. Participation as exercising the rights of citizenship emerged as a dominant trend towards the end of 1990s, where it began to be viewed as a 'right of citizens' rather than as an opportunities given to beneficiaries. This idea of participation as a right invoked a move to a more political idea of participation of citizens, who themselves bear both rights and responsibilities. It is here that the participation discourses began to enter the governance arena and started getting linked with participatory development, participatory democracy and participatory governance agendas.

One of the strongest arguments for the need of citizen participation in governance is that it contributes to good governance and deepening democracy. When citizens participate and engage with governance institutions, it creates an enabling environment for the benefits of the larger population/community. This kind of civic engagement then works towards promoting a healthy democracy with citizenship that is active and a government that is responsive in ways far more effective than the traditional forms of representative democracy.

#### **Public participation and engagement in urban governance a case of India**

As the world is becoming increasingly urbanized and cities are fast becoming the centres of economic, social and political activities, effective management and governance of these cities has become the guiding agendas for many governments, including those of the developing nations. The region has accounted for about 65 per cent of the demographic expansion of all urban areas across the world since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Large population concentrations in mega-cities are to remain a prominent feature in urban Asia. In the recent past, Delhi and Shanghai have joined the league of 'mega cities', those massive conurbations of more than 20 million

people. It is expected that by 2020, another three Asian cities- Beijing, Dhaka and Mumbai- will have reached the 20 million mark (UN HABITAT, 2012) [4]. With growing urbanization of this nature and dimension, also increase the need for creating counter-balancing mechanism/systems in order to ensure that cities grow in an inclusive manner, wherein the limited resources and essential basic services are accessed by and made available to all the sections of the society in an equitable way. In light of the above, effective urban governance, particularly the participation of citizens in the designing and implementation of development plans and processes, becomes crucial and also challenging.

As compared to rural areas, citizen participation and their engagement in the governance procedures in cities and towns has its own set of challenges. In most cases, the ground realities reflect that citizens are rarely included in decision making, especially the marginalized and vulnerable ones, who are the most effected by the emerging crises of urbanization. This near absence of citizen participation in urban governance can be attributed to numerous factors that bring to light the weak interplay between policies and the way they are practiced on one hand, and the resultant cynicism among citizens towards the entire governance can be attributed to numerous factors that bring to light the weak interplay between policies and the way they are practiced on one hand, and the resultant cynicism among citizens towards the entire governance system on the other hand. As the focus of this paper is on India, it has been observed that though spaces and opportunities for public participation in urban areas have been created through rules, policies and constitutional provisions, they are not implemented in letter and spirit. The urban local bodies in themselves, which have been entrusted with the task of managing towns and cities, are not adequately equipped to ensure citizen participation, as decentralization and devolution reforms have not been rendered fruitful. In addition to this, the growing thrust on economic growth and income generation activities particularly for the poor and marginalized communities in order to earn a living and surviving in cities has further kept them away from engaging with governance institutions, with regard to poor provisioning of basic services, as they have not been able to see any quick tangible results. Thus it can be seen that the citizen-state relationships in the cities are highly contested and there is a need to work towards strengthening the same.

In spite of the current challenges associated with participated, there has been a remarkable shift in the way the perception of communities and governments towards civic participation and engagement has transformed over the past couple of decades. There are numerous instances where joint initiatives by citizens and concerned government institutions have been successful in bringing about anticipated changes and strengthen the grounds for democratic governance. However, the degree to which citizens have been able to participate and authorities been able to encourage and appreciate this participation has been quite varied across countries and through time. There are variations on account of the different socio-economic and political realities as well as the legal and structural norms/systems that a particular country adheres to. In addition to this, trends in civic participation also reflect towards a history or culture in which the nature of state-citizen

relationship comes to light, which many a times overrides the established structural and legal mechanisms for participation.

### **Institutional frameworks for local governance and citizen participation in India**

This paragraph give a glimpse of how government in India has devised mechanism to promote and strengthen people's participation.

In India, the 73<sup>rd</sup> and the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts passed in 1993 were breakthrough reforms that bestowed constitutional powers to institutions of local self-governance like panchayats and municipalities respectively and provided space for people's participation. Along with the other provisions, by providing one-third reservation for women and proportionate reservation for Schedule Castes and Scheduled Tribes, these amendments paved the way for the historically marginalized citizens to participate in the governance and development planning and take decisions about budgetary allocations for village development.

In the case of urban areas the 74<sup>th</sup> CAA provided for setting up of ward committees having a population of more than 300,000 or more, consisting of one or more wards, through which citizens could participate and put forward their concerns. To further the institutionalization of citizen participation urban governance at ward and neighborhood or area level, the Government in 2006 issued a model law, the Nagara Raj Bill (NRB) or Community Participation Law, which explicitly envisaged the constitution of ward committees for each ward of each municipality. It also comprised provisions with regard to the composition of ward committees for each ward committees, the representation of areas in Ward Committees, and some arrangements regarding its functioning. In addition, the NRB proposed to constitute Area Sabhas in each ward, areas consisting of one or more polling booths, not exceeding five. It also included some provisions regarding the constitutions and functions of these area Sabhas (Boer, 2011) [1]. In addition, the provisions for community participation fund (CPF) under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM), anticipated as a catalyst to drive community participation by creation of local assets (PRIA, 2010).

Despite the efforts of the Indian government in institutionalizing participation and decentralization governance, it is faced with numerous challenges on account of the week implementation of the, legislations, policies, and programmes. In evaluating the performance of Indian democracy, which is often called a 'paradox', Dreze and Sen (2002) recommend drawing a distinction between democratic ideals, democratic institutions and democratic practices. They further concur that though democratic institutions in India have enjoyed popular support and performed and performed well; it is the quality of democratic practice which needs radical enhancement (Sadashiva, 2011).

In light of above, the implementation of the 74<sup>th</sup> CAA with respect to the constitution of Wards Committees has been dismal and slow. Studies show that initially only a limited number of states adopted legislation providing for Wards Committes, and that too only half-heartedly. States were reluctant to empower local urban bodies and also to make them actual centres of self-government, which the amendment

initially aimed for. Existing local power relations and conflicting vested interests prevailed in most states and acted as a barrier for participation and engagement, along with other causes. Local socio-political environment did not foster actual participation, especially when it came to the participation of women, poor and other marginalized sections of the communities. In addition to this, the awareness, confidence and expectations of citizens appeared to be low and capacities had to be built through regular mobilization efforts. As far as the implementation of the NRB is concerned, it has been quite meagre. Although the NRB explicitly entitles residents in wards and areas to participate and contains some provisions with regard to the functions and functioning of the ward Committee and the conduct of Ward Committee meetings, it does not offer much guidance on the actual functioning of ward Committees themselves, nor does the NRB comprise any arrangements with regard to the functioning of Area Sabhas (Boer, 2011) <sup>[1]</sup>. Thus, although there are constitutional provisions and mandates to enhance participation of citizens, there are still gaps in their implementation and understanding.

### **Field situation and public participation in practice**

Having said that citizen participation is instrumental in achieving the tenets of democratic governance and deepening democratic practices, it is important to understand the prerequisites, the enabling and the disabling factors for effective citizen participation. What are the conditions that facilitate the process of citizen participation, what encourages citizens to participate and raise their voice and what hinders the same? As mentioned above, some of it depends on the kind of spaces that are institutionally provided to citizens to participate as well as the motivation and interest among the citizens to engage actively for their own good. It can be said that it takes much more than just the institutional framework and willingness of citizens to engage to truly foster participation in its true sense. Legal frameworks are extremely crucial but they need to be backed up by systems of incentives and sanctions. In addition to this as Andrea Cornwall clearly mentions that if governments are serious about citizen participation, they need to open-up and be ready to set aside resources to establish and maintain spaces for participation.

It is also important to realize that participation cannot be limited within the boundaries of institutionalized spaces. In order to make participation happen outside those invited space, it needs to be brought into practice and understood beyond the notion of a right to that of a value intrinsic for deepening democracy. Thus for citizens to engage constructively with the state and influence the process of decision making, participation needs to be institutionalized on both the sides of the governance cycle i.e. the state and the citizens. Institutionalization of participation by the state would include creating enabling structures, designs, mechanisms, rules and regulations etc. that promote and maintain participation. Institutionalization of participation among the citizens on the other hand would encompass a radical shift in the way communities perceive themselves and their strength/capacity in engaging with the authorities. Provided that communities possess critical indigenous knowledge and to a great extent also have need based practical solutions to most of their problems, institutionalizing participation by

citizens in this context would enable the formulation of more people people-centric plans and policies and ultimately result in achieving participatory governance. For citizens to participate and voice their views it is essential that apart from having the basic awareness and understanding of the local issues/problems, they also have a collective/common understanding on the same. For example, in the context of urban governance, for citizens to participate effectively, it is very important that all of them collectively identify the most pressing issue/concern of their locality and then work towards bringing about a positive change. In doing so, another crucial set of elements is the knowledge on the part of citizens on how to organize and participate in a collective manner as well as be fully aware of the nuances and dynamics of that particular issues. For example, if the identified issue is poor quality of water, citizens need to know which local authority or private agency is responsible for the supply of water. They need to know the formal procedure for grievance redressal and the official they need to be the most appropriate solutions or alternatives for the same. Thus participation is facilitated and is able to produce results when citizens have a collective understanding, analytical skills, the ability to organize into community based groups and also the capacity to negotiate and interact with relevant stakeholders. Many a times these above mentioned attributes have to be enhanced through capacity development exercises which coupled with the existing knowledge on local issues/context enable citizens to participate and engage more constructively.

The processes of citizen participation and engagement have to be strategically thought over, planned and implemented in any given context. When citizens' groups and civil society are mobilized and organized in a systemic way, they are in a better position to identify their issues and challenges and also assess gaps in the governance system especially with regard to service delivery. This results in an increased demand for a more accountable and transparent delivery of services at the local level, which in the context of urban governance are basic municipal services like water, sanitation, education health etc. When the demand for transparency and accountability increases, it improves the access of citizens to crucial information as municipal authorities start opening up and sharing relevant information demanded by the citizens. Gradually, this increased demand on the part of citizens for effective and accountable municipal governance leads to the adoption or improvement of Social Accountability Mechanism, like citizen charters, information disclosure and grievance redressal systems by the municipalities.

When municipalities adopt these mechanism, they are better equipped to deal with the increased demands of citizens and address the complaints/issues raised by them. The adoption of tools like citizen charters and information disclosure helps the municipalities in communicating with the citizens about their services and standards, and the grievance redressal system helps in resolving the problems faced by citizens. Thus, with the adoption of SAMs, the municipalities become more responsive towards the citizens' needs and are also able to improve their performance and service delivery. When these experience of the municipalities are shared widely with multiple stakeholders at different levels, i.e. the policy makers, concerned ministries and officials at the national

level; other municipalities, practitioners, civil society at the sub-national level, they initiate deliberations around the institutional is action and adoption of these mechanisms. This creates a ground for influencing national and sub national governments to bring about necessary changes and modifications in policies so that practices at the local level could be improved.

### **Civil society interventions to promote citizen participation in urban governance in India**

Realizing the advantages of citizen participation and the positive changes that it has been able to generate, citizens, civil society and governments all across the world are engaging in meaningful dialogue and interventions to promote this practice and eventually improve the standards of democratic governance. Especially in the context of urban governance, where civic engagement is more challenging than the rural areas, it has been found that increasing number of initiatives are being implemented to promote greater interface and communication between the citizens and the authorities in order to bridge the gap between them. Citizen participation in urban areas, be it in small towns or metropolitan cities, is more challenging and difficult to achieve due to a number of reasons. Firstly, as most of the urban poor, whose participation matters most, are the ones who have migrated from villages and rural areas, in search of better livelihood opportunities, education etc. They find it difficult to come together and participate collectively on various occasions on account of their heterogeneous characteristics. For most of them, it is not easy to relate to their other counterparts despite the fact that they suffer from the same challenges and problems. Also, participation in cities is tough as there is a lack of interest and therefore weak agency, on the part of citizens to engage with governance institutions. Secondly, as cities are increasingly becoming centres of financial and fiscal growth as well as hubs of commercial activities, more and more citizens are inclined towards economic activities and making a living, where it becomes a challenges to engage them in development related activities.

### **Community mobilization and awareness generation**

Participation is a central pillar of any community driven development approach. The participatory process gives communities the opportunity to analyse and discuss their local situation in systematic fashion, identify community needs and implement action plans. The participatory process is inclusive of all the different social, ethnic groups within a given community. It provides the space for the heterogeneity of the community to be exposed and thus would lead to identification of community needs and priorities that are reflective of all the different social groups involved. For participation to take place and show its results, the community needs to be well mobilized and aware of their roles and responsibilities as potential change makers.

### **Training and capacity building**

In order to enable citizens to participate and effectively articulate the emerging issues of their communities, it is important that their capacities are built and they have the skills to interact and negotiate with the concerned authorities.

Provided that they are well-equipped with the local realities and also certain immediate need-based solutions, what most citizens especially the poor and marginalized require is the capacity to fruitfully engage with the authorities.

### **Formation of neighbourhood committees (NCs)**

Another way of enhancing citizen participation and creating a platform for citizens to come together and discuss critical issues was through the formation and strengthening of NCs. These NCs were formed with the objective that they would be capacitated to monitor, assess and analyse municipal services and engage with the municipality to further negotiate and establish services and engage with the municipality to further negotiate and establish service standards/benchmarks. One of the other aims of forming these committees was to ensure that citizens of the particular area get mobilized and join hands to raise their voice collectively on issues of common concern and act as a pressure group or community watchdog in effective delivery of services.

### **Conclusion**

Strengthening the capacities of citizens is an important step to empower them and help them make informed choices. In designing cross-country programmes that aim towards civic engagement, it is important to understand and take into consideration the local socio-economic and political realities. The interventions need to be planned in a manner that is suitable to the local context and sensitive to the needs and requirements of the citizens. It has been observed that communities engage in development activities only when they realize they have the potential to change their current realities and bring about some positive results. Therefore, in order to seek the support of citizenship and also ensure that community mobilization activities are able to deliver expected results, they need to be adequately designed. It is important to dialogue with all relevant stakeholders, especially the government line departments and ministries to influence them to take favourable decisions. In order to create an enabling environment for citizens to participate, efforts need to be put in on both the demand and the supply side. Most civil society interventions are observed to be inclined towards the demand side i.e. mobilizing and encouraging citizens to participate, which is extremely important. However, what also need to be strengthened are the mechanisms and systems for facilitating citizen participation, which can be modified or created by influencing policies and legislations at the national level. In order to see some changes in practices at the level of local governance institutions, it is essentials to engage with district, state/provincial and national level governance institutions as the authority to take decisions and bring forth policy based changes/modification is still in the hands of sub-national and national governments. Also, if certain new practices/mechanisms have to be institutionalized widely in the long run, for a set of governance institutions at the local level (for example if social accountability mechanism like CRCs, CCs, PGRS and information Disclosure etc. are to be institutionlised for municipal authorities and private service providing agencies) it is more effective if the respective central government authority or ministry is approached and engaged since the beginning. The role of Civil society

organization is extremely critical in enhancing citizen participation and motivating communities to engage with the state. In most cases it is observed that the dissatisfaction that citizens have with the authorities due to the gaps in service delivery and other systemic limitations often leads to a sense of disdain amongst the citizens because of which they do not participate pro-actively in governance issues.

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