

Education for Citizens Participation in Governance

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Abstract

In this presentation will be presented some of the arguments why its so important to educate citizens to participate in local decision making processes. Respect toward human right cannot be achieved in a society if citizens do not have full access in governance by offering them all opportunities to participate as important tool for the development of a democratic system. In order to build a participatory democracy, it is necessary to provide citizens with education programmes that will allow for effective participation in public issues. Numerous international documents have expressed the importance of public participation and the need to institutionalize it.

This paper presents why and how communities should be actively involved in governance not simply as a way to find solution of their concerns but as an important channel to build communication and cooperation with government and strength democracy. Citizen’s participation, it’s a fundamental right which shall be considered both from citizens and government officials to strength the democracy. That’s why its important to educate citizens to participate in the local decision-making processes. This safeguard was put in place to ensure that citizens have an opportunity to provide input on local decisions before they go into effect. In spite of this public notice requirement, many towns and cities around the world still conduct policy-making without full disclosure to the public. In some instances, this occurs due to time constraints or lack of understanding of the public’s role in the decision-making process. In other cases, public officials intentionally neglect to engage the public, as the public might derail their agenda.

First of all, local citizens know best what the local needs and issues are. Secondly, engaging the public in the decision-making process serves to educate both citizens and policy-makers about the various facts of a particular decision or issue from a variety of perspectives. Third, engaging citizens in decision-making makes the implementation of a decision or policy more likely and build trust among them. Finally, engaging the public helps to build accountability for both public officials and the citizens. Our society shall establish education programs which effectively engage citizens in local decision-making, whether these decisions focus on Master Plans, local schools, capital improvement projects, economic development, or other local issues? The paper will try answering this question by promoting a variety of tools that public officials can use to educate citizens to participate in decision-making but as well it will be a good “appertif” for promoting the debate among experts in the field.

1. Citizens as partner in governance

The involvement in the decision making aims to influence the quality and volume of public services at the benefit of citizens. At this stage more voluntary contribution is requested as for example: direct citizen’s participation into governance through development and protection of the community or the environment. Furthermore, in accordance with the level of participation is made the distinguishment between active and passive citizens[1]. *There are several reasons why participation is important for community development such as:*

- 1) Citizen participation is not only a way to help citizens for improving their life quality but it serves as well the government itself, to improve its performance quality.
- 2) It helps government to find out which are the public's preferences by making it more effective, democratic, transparent and legal.
- 3) It plays an important role in the decision-making process, by improving decisions through collection of considerations among local knowledge.
- 4) The process of participation helps to protect as well equality and justice.

This is why, it’s so important to educate citizens for participation as far as they are considered as partner in governance sharing responsibilities and elaborating local plans of actions. Some of these reasons to educate citizens i engagement in local decision-making process are:

- a) Citizen's inputs are best resources, who know best what the local needs and issues are. So far engaging citizens in policy-making allows governments to obtain new sources of ideas and exchange information, during decision-making process.
- b) It develop a process of education where citizens and policy-makers when working together during the decision making process by trying through serious efforts to do the best for their community, reflects about various issues.
- c) Although the process of citizen's participation is not simple, engaging them in the decision-making it's important because it results that citizen's involvement makes the implementation of a decision or a policy more likely.
- d) The public would be not likely to assist with implementation of a decision, plan or policy unless public officials have their constituents on board with a particular decision plan.
- e) Citizen's involvement in governance helps to build accountability and responsibilities for both public officials and the citizens.

For that purpose governments must invest in educational programmes and use all resources on building legal framework. They should develop and use appropriate tools, ranging from surveys to conferences and workshops with small groups of interest up to wide participation level which includes even the right for referendums¹.

2. How can we increase citizen's participation?

Today on of the most important issues for well functioning of democracies is how to effectively engage citizens in decision-making processes, whether these decisions focus local or national issues?

As mentioned above it's important to create a good environment for citizen's participation. This starts with elaboration of a good framework legislation which encourage and transforms in a task for governance to invite citizens and encourage their participation. An encouraging legislation shall give the maximum of space to the citizen's participation providing as well the possibility for referendums it's important that governance shall be near to citizens needs and for that one of the main conditions is the process of decentralisation. Doing that it's important the development of a dialogue and a normal interaction between local and central authorities which promotes civic participation and reaction. This shall start with a fair process of election which would build trust among citizens and institutions. Building strong institutions would happen through citizen's participation providing their feed back and inputs in the direct fight against corruption. Their active involvement and participation of citizens in media will make governance more transparent and responsible toward citizens concerns.

Through the experiences in different democratic countries concretely there are a variety of tools that public officials can use to engage citizens in decision-making. These tools include citizen advisory committees, survey questionnaires, community meetings, forums, public review and comment periods, public hearings, counter planning, etc. The following provides a brief description of a few of these public engagement tools from previous experiences:

1. **Citizen commission for specific issues:** intendeds to foster positive relations with the community by engaging citizens in the development of policies/programs and to ensure that they are enriched by diverse perspectives[2].
2. **Questionnaire Survey** to gather Community opinions: Community surveys help public officials gather data about local attitudes regarding precisely defined issues, problems or opportunities[3].
3. **Dialogue development** with stakeholders and beneficiaries in workshops with targeted focus groups: This form intends to gather ideas and opinions from targeted groups of citizens. In this way each one has more space to give their opinion and ideas regarding a specific issue which affect them. In this way new idea come and the concluisions and agreements are easier to be achieved[4].
4. **Community Forum:** A community forum is a public meeting intended to bring together a variety of community perspectives to discuss salient issues, visions, problems, or concerns that the community is facing[5].
5. **Public Hearing Review and Comment:** Hearings are public meetings that enable residents to express their concerns about public plans, decisions, or issues. It may give a window of time to review public plans or policies and to provide comment prior to the ratification or revision of a plan or policy[6].

¹.Article 150 of Albanian Constitution says: "*The people, through 50 thousand citizens who enjoy the right to vote, have the right to a referendum for the abrogation of a law, as well as to request the President of the Republic to hold a referendum about issues of special importance.*"

6. **Referendum**, public officials should be forced if citizens request that or address the issue to the citizens choice to be decided by majority of votes through a wide participation process in decision making.

3. Conclusions and final remarks:

Building programs of education for citizen's involvement its of mutual benefit as far as it improve governance as one of the fundamental requirements in the development of democratic systems. In order to have more active citizens' participation in governance are required several measures to be taken. Education is the basic conditions in one side and the legal framework creates more space to exercise the theory into practice. Initially it's a basic condition to exist a legislative basis ensuring the community's active participation in the decision-making process. Public participation is by no means an easy thing to be accomplished. It requires much energy, time, and resources. Accordingly the process should be accompanied with a twofold awareness raising campaign. One hand the community itself should be awaken applying educational programmes which invest on the important role citizens can play in the agenda-setting process and on the other hand local public institutions shall fully recognize that a more active citizens' participation in the policy elaboration would eventually facilitate their efficient and sustainable implementation.

Education is the best tool to effectively bring the citizens voice in the proper way. Through education there are better chances to start listening to what citizens are saying and recruit their assistance in crafting effective policies and decisions.

Citizens at the other side, should use all legal areas to increase their participation as far as public opinion about important issues increase transparency as necessary to guarantee the exercise of a balanced power oriented to civic concerns. It directly affects the lives of citizens. In this way promoting public debate and development of the accountability process between voters and elected officials is an element that seeks to be developed permanently. Democracy theorists have argued that the entire edifice of democracy rests in the final analysis, of the public opinion[7].

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