

## **Public participation for sustainable development in local cities**

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### **1.1 Introduction**

Public participation is the process of seeking and facilitating the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision (Mdunyelwa, 2008). The principle of public participation holds that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process. Public participation implies that the public's contribution will influence the decision. Public participation may be regarded as a way of empowerment and as vital part of democratic governance. Public participation is part of people centred or human centric principles.

Public participation may be advanced as part of a "people first" paradigm shift. In this respect public participation may challenge the concept that "big is better" and the logic of centralized hierarchies, advancing alternative concepts of "more heads are better than one" and arguing that public participation can sustain productive and durable change.

The purposes of public participation are to promote transparency, encourage openness in government, and build ownership of development decisions as well as programmes and projects. Public participation encourages citizens to be more engaged in the decision-making processes that have an impact on their local community. It also serves to advance citizens' understanding of how government works and confers upon them the capacity to access governmental decision-making processes. Public participation provides the public with the opportunity to influence and participate in development programmes and projects (UN-HABITAT, 2004).

The linkage between public participation and transparency is clear. Well-developed strategies for public participation build trust, promote accountability, strengthen commitment of all stakeholders towards improved governance, and directly limit the potential for corruption.

Public participation aims at bridging of the gap between the government, civil society, private sector and the general public, building a common understanding about the local situation, priorities and programmes. Public participation encourages openness, accountability and transparency, and is thus at the heart of inclusive decision-making. The level and the nature of public participation in local governance issues are often used as indicators of a healthy civic culture.

### ***1.2 Public participation and decision making in local authorities***

In an ideal democracy in local government, the regular, free and competitive elections enable citizens make known their needs and priorities (DFID, 2002). The councilors they elect then formulate strategies, make key decisions and prioritize expenditure choices

through formal policy and budgetary processes with the help of politically neutral officials who advise them and implement the decisions.

Policy and decision-makers make an assumption that there is a causal relationship between public participation and service delivery. This assumption is observable in the attempt to work with citizens and groups to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and to improve their quality of life-where the emphasis is on working with communities for the betterment of their quality of life. This is emphasized in participatory budgets and performance management, and in the way public participation should give rise to the improvement in the delivery of services.

However, public participation does not bring about a significant improvement in service delivery, if budget allocations are used as indicators. At best public participation is undertaken for compliance purposes and does not necessarily bring about any significant shifts in budgets. This is because of the challenges of financial constraints which results in instances of infrastructure maintenance and recurrent expenditure taking up huge chunk of the budgetary allocation leaving very little for community needs. Every financial year, local authorities have to make choices because of limited financial resources.

Another challenge is that traditionally, municipal and county officials were so used to deciding what is suitable for the people never mind being incapacitated enough to deal with the public in a situation where the public had to voice its discontent (Mdunyelwa, 2009). Thus for many decades, the peoples' voices were not heard in the decision making process in many local authorities.

Problems of political interference render local authorities dysfunctional. Most of the time, politicians are of the view that because they are appointed by the people, they are legitimate representatives of the people and are therefore free to make decisions on behalf of the people. As a result the politicians interests end up at the frontline, regardless of the needs of the people they represent (Mdunyelwa, 2009).

### ***1.3 Public participation and service delivery in local authorities in Kenya***

In every society, the elected in a democracy need to work with mechanisms of citizen participation to enable the elect gauge better what are the needs and priorities of citizens, as well as create a sense of ownership on the part of citizens of the services provided by the government (DFID, 2002).

However in Kenya, local elections are held regularly, and are generally free and fair. However, issues are highly aggregated with candidates rarely presenting clear manifestos or choices (DFID, 2002). This is in addition to the fact that since elections are held only once in five years, it means that local needs, priorities and choices are not identified through the electoral process in sufficient detail for the purposes of planning and budgeting.

On the other hand, councilors are often poorly equipped to formulate strategies or make key choices, but instead tend to intervene on an ad hoc basis and often at implementation stage. The result is that distrust between officials and councilors, with

officials taking the lead in planning and implementation and both sides accusing the other of vested interests and malpractice. In practice, decision making in local authorities is informal, while formally approved budgets are often not adhered to because of the lack of financial resources.

The elected councilors often claim that they know their people, that they meet them all the time, that they hold regular meetings and that the electorate visit their houses for help. On the other hand, citizens claim that they never see their councilor except possibly at election time amidst claims of vote-buying and that sometimes they do not know their councilors (DFID, 2002).

However, there is a change in the way of doing things due to the growth of civil society and community organizations which highlight the importance of public participation. Also, donors such as GTZ and DFID have emphasized participation over the years, and the requirement to produce a Local Authority Service Delivery Action Plan (LASDAP) has obliged local authorities to identify community organizations in their locality, to consult them about priorities for the use of their resources and to provide information to citizens.

The challenges facing public participation in Kenya include lack of staff skilled in participatory techniques and processes and community development departments generally have very limited resources. Participation is still often dominated by elite groups, and not all CBOs are representative especially of the poor. Many communities and CBOs remain unaware of Local Authority Transfer Fund (LATF) and LASDAP, and have limited capacity to demand engagement and accountability from their local authority.

Also, under LASDAP, local authorities still control who is invited to participate, and some have used that to exclude individuals and groups whom they do not favour (DFID,2002). The use of LATF money for ward-level projects can become a form of patronage by councilors, and in some local authorities there is no proper accounting for money allocated this way.

#### ***1.4 Tools for public participation***

Public participation varies from simply sharing of information to active engagement of citizens in the implementation and management of projects and services (UN-HABITAT, 2004). Tools to build different types of participation range from stakeholder consultations and public hearings to community watchdog groups and public-private partnerships. The common thread that runs through the various tools, however, is the commitment of the local government to share information and engage the community in an open dialogue. The views of the citizens must not only be heard but also reflected in development decisions, thus making governments responsive and accountable to the community.

The make-up of a community and its perception of local governance will influence the level and arrangement of public participation. There are mechanisms already in use, for example, public hearings during government meetings, whereby individuals can comment on local government policy. However, more effective mechanisms for public participation to reduce corruption and increase transparency may include study circles, citizen advisory boards, government contract committees, public hearings and public watchdog groups.

#### **1.4.1 Study circles**

This approach involves channeling discussions through a series of stages which enable participants to discuss alternative views to specific issues and to exchange ideas on, and experiences with, local government administration. The most important feature of study circles is the participation of a diverse group of individuals, representing different educational and professional backgrounds. Study circles can provide the framework to develop long-term goals for good urban governance.

#### **1.4.2 Citizen Advisory Boards**

They are generally structured around specific issues, such as economic development or housing. Citizen advisory boards are comprised of community volunteer residents who provide local authorities with information and recommendations pertaining to local issues. Citizens get an opportunity to play a meaningful role within the government structure, through establishment of a working relationship with government employees and officials. Citizen Advisory Boards can serve as a useful safeguard against corruption and help in establishing transparent decision-making practices.

#### **1.4.3 Government Contract Committees**

Local government officials are often responsible for the award and administration of government contracts which are normally worth millions of shillings. It is upon governmental decision-making entities to establish a venue for citizen participation and oversight of such contracts. This can be done through ad hoc selection committees or through permanent citizen oversight and compliance boards. Such committees can shape the ethical culture of government contracting. In addition, this form of public participation can be an initial step or component in ensuring an open public procurement environment.

#### **1.4.4 Public Hearings**

Public hearings are critical to the operation of open, democratic government administrations. As local authorities deliberate over policies and other administrative matters, public hearings provides citizens an avenue to address policy makers on important local issues, particularly budgetary concerns. Public hearings also allow public officials to request comments and information and access expert advice from the public. Public hearings mean public deliberation and debate and can hold the key to engendering transparent decision-making processes.

#### **1.4.5 Public Watchdog Groups**

These are community-based organizations or grassroots associations whose key role is civic activism and dissemination of information pertaining to government initiatives. These groups have no formal relationship with government entities. Such groups monitor local government issues and policies, correspond with media and government authorities, attend public hearings and speak for or against public policy proposals. Human capital, more than financial capital, drives the success and effectiveness of these watchdog groups. It is thus important that these groups generate visibility with government officials and entities, but maintain an independent spirit. Public watchdog

groups can play a significant role in promoting local governance reforms and demanding stronger anti-corruption measures and laws.

For public participation to be of importance to local governance, it must be supported by key actors including the government, civil society organizations and the private sector.

## **2.0 Strategic Planning**

### ***2.1 Strategic planning and public participation***

A strategy may be defined as a way of tackling a problem or working towards an objective (Tyler, 2007). A strategy is a framework within which individual activities can be linked to produce movements towards a set of higher-order objectives. This framework may be shaped by the activities that take place within it. A strategy should therefore be seen as a dynamic and not static concept.

A strategic plan is a document containing information on the existing situation, future objectives and proposals for moving from the existing situation towards these objectives. It may include written material, diagrams and spatial plans (Tyler, 2007). Strategic planning is concerned with desired outcomes but pays attention to the existing situation and options for moving from that situation to those outcomes. Three basic issues are addressed in developing a strategy. These include assessing the current situation, the objectives of the plan or programme and the options for moving from the first to the last.

Strategic planning should be institutionalized in the local authorities for improved performance. Public participation can be entrenched in the strategic planning process by having the public take an active role in the various principles of strategic planning. The principles include structuring overall objectives in relation to the town or city as a whole. In this, development options should be tested and demonstrated more locally such as in a ward or location, as the first initiative and consideration given to ways in which these options can be widely replicated to the city as a whole. Options that are unlikely to be replicable due to challenges in resources such as land or finances should not be pursued.

A strategic plan should have a household centered approach considering the needs and demands of individual households and exploring the options for dealing with problems as close as possible to the households. It should also consider different options for different areas, depending on local circumstances. Different areas have different needs for services and facilities. These should be considered and put in place during planning.

Strategic planning should always start from a consideration of household demands and need. It should also be concerned with the wider needs of the community. It should also ensure that each plan component is clearly related to the overall plan objectives to ensure that activities have an overall direction and reduce the possibility that resources will be wasted on fragmented efforts that have no clear purpose. This is to avoid wastage of resources.

A strategic plan should also include any necessary measures to establish and inform demand for improved services. Demand implies willingness to pay directly or indirectly for service provision. When people are convinced of the need for improved services, they may need guidance on costs and benefits of paying for services. This is reflected

through charges on water provision, sewerage and garbage collection, market fees and bus part fees. The plan should also take into account any need to develop capacity and willingness to respond to user demand. There is importance in establishing user demand for improved services. Capacity should be put in place to respond to demand for services. If resources are limited, the plan should include proposals to overcome them.

The strategic plan put in place should be financially viable. It should take account of the combined ability and willingness of the various stakeholders to pay for activities, facilities and services. The government being the lead agent should be at the frontline with the civil society and private sector bringing in their contribution.

The strategic plan should also involve stakeholders in the planning process. They may be community groups, the public, NGOs, local politicians, private sector operators and government departments in appropriate ways. It may rarely be possible to involve every stakeholder group at every stage in the planning process but all stakeholders should be consulted and actively involved in developing aspects of the strategic plan.

A strategic plan should recognize and take into account stakeholder roles. Due to challenges in staff and finances in local government, different individuals, groups and organizations are already involved in different aspects of service provision and this should be documented in the plan. For organizations or groups operating informally legislation procedures should be identified to formalize them and actions listed down to be taken in order to facilitate the required changes. Finally, a strategic plan should also provide appropriate incentives including rewards for positive actions and practices. Various stakeholders or groups may be rewarded or recognized for their contributions to the community.

### **3.0 Conclusion and recommendation**

There are signs of change in local authorities in citizen participation and local government accountability in Kenya. The lead role should however not be dependent on local leadership only, but also in individuals who can make a difference.

Due to past history on the way of carrying out business in local authorities the challenges facing public participation are still rife such as bad relationship, conflict, lack of trust, corruption, opportunism and poor use of resources. However, with the current requirements of LATF and LASDAP, which require more open, participatory and accountable systems that deliver tangible improvements for citizens, there is hope for entrenchment of public participation in the decision making process in local authorities in Kenya.

Modern democracy requires active roles from the population and participation from members of the community. It should no longer be the case that those who are governed act only to elect, and then, whatever the outcome they are governed without opportunities to interact with their representatives. Participation transforms systems by creating a lasting linkage between the elected and electorate. Therefore creating room for rational decisions, better understanding of problems in communities and close cooperation in working towards achievable solutions to these problems.

Public participation fosters transparency and accountability in government therefore mitigating corruption. It also presents opportunities for sanctions to be applied to those performing reproachable actions.

To build a participatory democracy, citizens should be provided with an institutional framework that allows efficient participation in public issues.

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