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PRIA

Participatory Research in Asia

policy brief

Institutionalising Citizen Participation in Urban Governance

Introduction

Participation of citizens and their engagement in the governance cycle in cities and towns has its own set of challenges. Ground realities reflect that citizens in urban areas are rarely included or involved in decision-making, especially the marginalised and vulnerable ones, who indeed are the most effected by emerging crises of urbanisation.

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 system on the other. In the three countries in focus in this policy brief i.e. India, Bangladesh and Cambodia, it has been observed that though spaces and opportunities for citizen participation in urban areas have been created through rules, policies and constitutional provisions, often they are not implemented in letter and spirit and there is a huge gap in their execution.

The fact is that in most developing nations, the urban local bodies (ULBs) in themselves, which have been entrusted with the task of managing towns and cities, are not adequately equipped to

Five Reasons Why Citizens Should Participate in Urban Governance:

Citizen Participation....

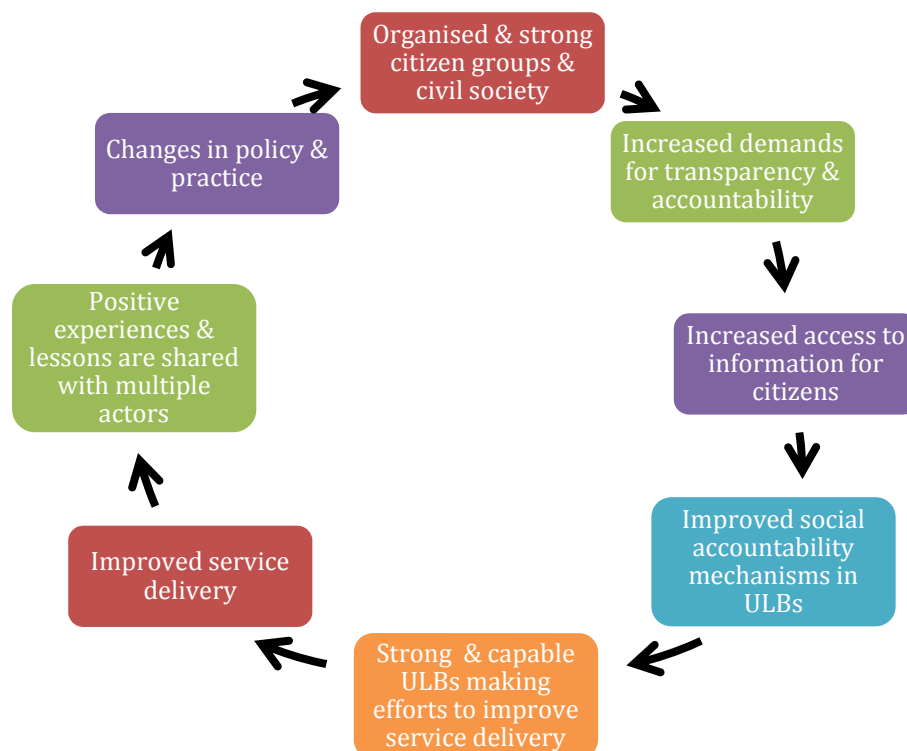
- Helps municipal authorities understand the needs and requirements of communities, thus helping them develop demand-based and inclusive governance systems/procedures
- Improves citizen-state (ULBs) relationship by reducing the gap between the demand and supply side
- Enhances transparency and accountability of ULBs
- Creates a greater sense of agency, collective understanding and ownership among citizens on the governance issues that affect their cities/towns
- Strengthens local democratic governance as citizens exercise their citizenship rights and engage with local bodies

ensure citizen participation, as decentralisation 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 marginalised communities in order to earn a living and survive in cities has further kept them away from engaging with governance institutions, 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.

Citizen Participation and the Theory of Change

Strengthening democratic and participatory practices in local democratic governance gets citizens closer to government, which helps them in guiding public institutions, policies and programmes. Citizen participation expands public spaces, enhances the relationship between society and government, gives greater legitimacy to democratically elected authorities, promotes respect for citizenship rights, enhances the quality of politics, and strengthens solidarity and cooperation. It is also the bearer of a new culture that expresses the defence of collective interests and the search for collective solutions.

PRIA's past interventions and strategies on citizen participation rest on a theory of change that has been based on the organisation's experiences through the years. This can be explained as follows:



When **citizens' groups and civil society are mobilised and organised** 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 (through community monitoring and use of social accountability tools). 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 mechanisms**, like citizen charters, information disclosure and grievance redressal systems by the municipalities. When municipalities adopt these mechanisms, 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 experiences 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 institutionalisation 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.

Deepening Local Democratic Governance through Social Accountability in Asia: An initiative to Enhance Citizen Participation

Deepening Local Democratic Governance through Social Accountability initiative was implemented by PRIA in partnership with local partners in Bangladesh (PRIP Trust) and Cambodia (SILAKA) from 2011 to 2013. The initiative was supported by the United Nations Democracy Fund¹. The following interventions were implemented in both the countries to enhance citizen participation:

- a) Community mobilisation and awareness generation (with identified citizen leaders comprising youth, women, and marginalised sections from the communities)
- b) Training and capacity building
- c) Formation of neighbourhood committees
- d) Use of social accountability tools by citizens (like Citizen Report Cards and community monitoring)
- e) Organising interface dialogues

As a result of these interventions, a number of changes could be observed in both the countries. These can be listed as follows:

- a) Enhanced awareness and capacities of citizens

¹ To know more about this initiative and efforts made towards citizen engagement, please read the PRIA paper on 'Citizen Engagement in Urban Governance'.

- b) Emergence of new spaces for citizen participation
- c) Greater interface between citizens and ULBs
- d) Enhanced responsiveness and improved service delivery from ULBs

The following paragraphs present a brief description of the institutional arrangements like laws, policies etc. that promote citizen participation in India, Bangladesh and Cambodia:

India

In India, the 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (CAAs) passed in 1992 were breakthrough reforms that bestowed constitutional powers to institutions of local self-governance like municipalities and provided space for citizens' participation. In the case of urban areas they provided for setting up of ward committees having a population of 300,000 or more, consisting of one or more wards, through which citizens could participate and put forward their concerns.

Citizen participation at ward and neighbourhood levels was further institutionalised and promoted by the government in 2005 with the launch of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). Along with other significant reforms brought through the mission, it required State Governments to:

- a) Enact Community Participation Law (CPL) with a purpose to establish appropriate accountability relationship between ULBs and the citizens;
- b) Enable constitution of Area Sabhas (Neighbourhood Committees) within municipal wards;
- c) Enact a Public Disclosure Law mandating ULBs to periodically disclose information to its citizens;
- d) Developing City Development Plans are prepared in consultations with stakeholders at the grassroots level;
- e) A Community Participation Fund (CPF) is established to catalyse the process of community participation.

Civil society participation was thought to be enhanced with the provisioning of structures like the Technical Advisory Group (TAG-national level), City Technical Advisory Groups (CTAGs) and the City Volunteer Technical Corps (CVTCs) under JNNURM. Both the CTAG and CVTC at the city level were supposed to guide and support the municipalities in ensuring transparency and accountability. The CVTCs were to be formed in the seven areas of urban engineering, urban planning, urban poverty, urban governance, heritage, urban environment and urban financial services.

Thus, there are a number of efforts that have been made by the government to enhance participation of citizens, however, the enactment and execution of these laws, provisions and policies has been dismal and slow. Although the CPL explicitly entitles residents in wards and neighbourhood to participate and contains some provisions with regard to the formation of the Ward Committees and the conduct of Ward Committee meetings, it does not offer much guidance on the actual functioning of Ward Committees or the Area Sabhas.

Citizen participation in cities in India has also witnessed in the recent years, the growth of Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) in the metropolitan cities. RWAs are not official organs of government, and even slums and [unauthorised housing localities in India](#) can form RWAs to represent citizen interests. They are typically registered through Co-operative Societies' Acts, which require groups to have a minimum of fifteen members from a given area. A number of RWAs have come into prominence primarily with the objective of addressing issues of basic services and creating space for interaction among the residents. Although the RWAs are an innovative means of enhancing citizen participation, they have their own sets of challenges. Most of them have been criticised of being centred on and comprising of middle-income households and working for a closed locality, not really taking into consideration larger development issues. In most cases, RWAs have been focused on development of parks in the locality and organising small cultural events and functions. There are instances when the government has tried to join hands with these RWAs (e.g. *Bhagidari* Scheme in Delhi), however, this has been limited to only planned neighbourhoods.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh has democratic and unitary forms of governance, though democracy is at a “teething stage”, and is still growing. The constitution provides for many fundamental rights including the rights of equality before law and freedom of movement, assembly, association, thought-conscience-speech and profession or occupation. The Right to Information (RTI) Act 2009 was enacted with the aim of empowering the citizens through the promotion of transparency and accountability in the working of the public, autonomous and statutory organisations/ other private organisations constituted/ run by the government/ foreign financing.

In 2009 the Local Government (*Pourashava*) Act was also enacted to further strengthen local governance institutions. The provision recognised the concept of participation by citizens and communities through the Town Level Coordination committee (TLCC) and the Ward Level Coordination Committee (WLCC). The history of Bangladesh shows that each government's stated objective was to establish decentralised local governance and ensure people's participation in the local development. Nevertheless, the two crucial elements of self-governance, that is, devolution of power and the expansion of financial boundaries of local institutions have not been initiated in the locally elected bodies. Therefore, the issue of people's participation remained limited to theory only.

Cambodia

The Rectangular Strategy, 2004 of the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) acknowledged good governance to be the most important precondition to economic development which required wide participation, enhanced sharing of information, accountability, transparency, equality, inclusiveness and the rule of law. The RGC also adopted the strategic framework on Decentralisation and De-concentration reform (D&D) in June 2005. One of the long-term reform objectives of D&D was to provide equitable opportunity for all citizens to participate in community development and improve public service delivery in response to people's needs and alleviate poverty with a special emphasis on vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities, women and

children. The Law on Administrative Management of the Capital, Provinces, Municipalities, Districts and Khans enacted in 2008, further creates space for citizen participation and democratic governance in the country. Article 38 says that in the formulation and implementation of its development plan, the council shall consult with the citizens within its jurisdiction, other categories of council within its jurisdiction, relevant ministries, institutions and units of the government and relevant stakeholders. In spite of the above mentioned provisions for citizen participation through various institutional mechanisms, democracy and citizen participation in reality is still in its infancy in Cambodia.

Learnings on Citizen Engagement

Initiatives across the world on civic engagement and enhancing citizen participation have showcased that consistent and planned efforts towards organising and mobilising citizens can lead to substantial improvements in their capacities to negotiate and interact with the authorities. These processes have also brought to light some critical lessons for the future.

Values and principles of citizen participation

In promoting and implementing initiatives on citizen participation, it is crucial to keep in mind a few principles and values of participation. These are:

- a) ***Acknowledging multiple meanings and expressions of citizen participation based on the interests of collective actors:*** The history of citizen participation, over the decades, has been the history of struggles and movements over how it is to be defined, who should define it, and deciding whose participation is crucial. Although some of these struggles and movements have been able to create 'new spaces' for citizen participation, they often do not include the issues, views and perspectives of a large section of excluded citizens in all societies. In order to exert their rights, these excluded groups innovate new meanings, new mechanisms and new spaces for citizen participation. Local governance institutions must acknowledge and embrace them to pursue the overall goal of an inclusive society.
- b) ***Acknowledging multiple outcomes of citizen participation:*** Participation of citizen in local democratic governance should be considered as both a means and an end. The overall universal purposes of local democratic governance are (i) to deepen the roots of democracy, (ii) to ensure justice and equity, (iii) to make the development process more inclusive, and (iv) to ensure effective service delivery. Citizen participation in local democratic governance is to be interpreted, promoted and evaluated in light of both democratic and developmental outcomes.
- c) ***Shared control and influence over decision-making processes:*** The overall purpose of citizen participation is to enhance the degree of shared control and influence of citizens on key decisions related to public policies, institutions and resources. It broadens the bases of decision making, instead of keeping decision making as an exclusive domain of a handful of experts. As participation enhances inclusivity in society, the final outcome must produce just and equitable governance in society.

- d) *Participation in governance is an innate human right*: Citizen participation in local democratic governance must be considered as an innate human right and this must be respected, protected, nurtured and continuously enhanced. This understanding of citizen participation as an innate human right holds governance institutions squarely responsible and accountable to the citizens for fulfilment of such rights and also obligates citizens to participate actively and responsibly.
- e) *Participation is a political process of developing and enriching collective citizenship*: Citizen participation is a political process of the people directly engaging governance institutions where demands and agenda are presented through collective action with collective interests. It requires a process that builds common objectives and joint strategies for action. It allows for reviving the idea of collectivisation in its multiple meanings, such as social movements, political parties or other collective manifestations that seek social and political transformation.

Pre-conditions of participation

Over the decades, the practice of participation has revealed that in order to make it effective and transformative certain pre-conditions are necessary. These can be elaborated as follows:

- a) *Facilitating access to information*: Citizens can exercise their right to participate only when they also have the right and access to information. Quality of participation is directly proportionate to access to quality of information.
- b) *Generating awareness and sensitisation*: The degree of awareness among citizens about their rights and entitlements as well as responsibilities vis-à-vis local democratic governance is crucial for exercising the right to participation. An aware and sensitised citizenry about local governance processes and structures is an important precursor to effective participation.
- c) *Creating universalised spaces through collectivisation and mobilisation*: Organised citizenry stands a better chance of exercising their right to participation when faced with unresponsive governance institutions. Even in cases where governance institutions are responsive, collective bargaining produces more just outcomes as compared to individual engagement.
- d) *Creating particularised spaces through building organisation of the excluded and marginalised*: Organisation building of hitherto excluded marginalised citizens – women, indigenous people, racial, ethnic and religious minorities, young and elderly, and other special interest groups whose issues and interests are yet to find a place in mainstream policy discourse – is crucially important for ensuring their participation. In particular, these citizen organisations must be promoted, supported and strengthened, in addition to universalisation of a citizen's right to participation through universal collectivisation and mobilisation.
- e) *Enhancing citizen capacities to engage with local governance institutions*: The capacities, skills and confidence of citizens and their organisations must be strengthened to promote constructive engagement and negotiation with local governance institutions. In doing so, while existing spaces and mechanisms of participation should be harnessed and utilised, opportunities and support must be provided for continuous facilitation and capacity

development to social movements and critical voices as alternative forms of checks and balances in a democracy as well as forms of social accountability and participation.

- f) *Promoting mechanisms for transparency and accountability in local governance institutions:* The capacity and willingness of these institutions to promote and institutionalise various social accountability approaches, methods and tools are crucially important. The ability of local governance institutions to design mechanisms for seeking citizen feedback about their conduct and performance on a regular basis, ability to act upon the feedback with urgency and communicate the results in a transparent manner are important capacities that these institutions must acquire.
- g) *Promoting multi-stakeholder engagement:* The developmental problems that most local governance institutions need to address are complex and interconnected, the resolution of which requires engagement of multiple stakeholders. In an increasingly complex environment, it is neither possible nor desirable that only local governance institutions make decisions on behalf of all citizens and provide solutions which work for all. Local governance institutions must also be able to engage other stakeholders, including market and business organisations, to pursue the goal of sustainable, equitable and just development and governance.
- h) *Active and responsible citizen and civil society:* It is ultimately the responsibility of citizens and civil society to ensure their own participation in local democratic governance. This responsibility cannot be off-loaded or left to local governance institutions alone. While local governance institutions must enable the environment to ensure the right of citizens to participate, citizens and their organisations along with civil society must participate in the affairs of the local governance institution.

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