



Position paper for the Institute for Public Management and Community Service (IPMCS) by Rachel Emas, PhD Student

## **Position Paper: Citizen Participation Initiatives**

### 1. Introduction

#### a. Governance and Citizen Participation

- i. Governance is the “process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented)”, which includes both formal and informal actors and institutions (United Nations Development Program, 2012). More specifically, the concept of “good governance” reflects eight characteristics. Good governance is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and follows the rule of law (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2014). In order to achieve these key elements of good governance, both formal and informal mechanisms of citizen participation are necessary.

#### b. Governance, Citizen Participation, and Latin America

- i. “Latin America has experienced three decades of uninterrupted democracy. The triumph of democracy in the 1980s and its current day-to-day development are closely linked to the tradition of social mobilization in Latin America” (United Nations Development Program, 2012). However, Latin America is still the most unequal region in the world. With the increasing democratization of the past thirty years, “new actors have emerged, demanding active participation in political systems across varying levels of statehood. These three elements: inequity, the emergence of new actors, and varying levels of statehood contribute” to the increase in social conflicts (Cuentas & Méndez, 2013). Social conflicts are an inherent aspect of societal development, reflecting the diverse needs and interests of different groups of people. The resolution of these social conflicts often occurs within the arena of the State, as the interests of various groups are resolved through political bargaining and negotiation. The government plays a unique role, then, in offering an arena to settle social conflicts, providing public services, and enforcing rule of law.

### 2. Citizen Participation Initiatives

#### a. Why: Benefits

- i. In the 1970s and 80s, the “newly-established democratic governments of the region regarded citizen participation as a means of containing social tensions and strengthening the long-term prospects of democracy through dialogue and consensus-building at the municipal level. Citizen participation was also seen as a

way of improving performance in service delivery by introducing greater transparency into municipal resource allocation so as to better reflect the broad interests of the population” (Nickson, 2011).

- ii. There are a multitude of benefits to be gained from citizen participation in public affairs. First, by involving citizens in the policy making process, decisions are more likely to reflect the needs and interests of the public (Evidence and Lessons from Latin America, 2013). Also, decisions that were made with public input are more likely to be regarded as legitimate. This perceived legitimacy may also increase the effectiveness of the policy, as engagement in the process creates buy-in and strengthens the relationships between stakeholders and government (Pruitt & Thomas, 2007). Finally, citizen involvement in government activities serves to bolster accountability and oversight, thereby reducing corruption and improving public perception of government (Evidence and Lessons from Latin America, 2013; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2007). When successful, participation can transform passive residents into effective public citizens, who use these initiatives as a “voice” to hold states and markets accountable and influence decisions that affect their lives.
  - iii. Citizen participation initiatives offer an arena for resolving social conflicts, create new mechanisms of negotiating tradeoffs during the decision making process, improve government transparency and accountability, and help to establish a positive working relationship between government and individual citizens and groups.
- b. What: Degrees of Participation
- i. The three main levels of participation are information, consultation, and active participation. Information describes a one-way relationship in which government disseminates information to citizens and clients. Consultation (also called “opportunistic participation”) is a two-way relationship in which government seeks and receives the views of citizens, communities, or groups on policies, programs or services that affect them or in which they may have a significant interest. Finally, active participation (also called “normative participation”) recognizes and acknowledges a role for citizens and clients in proposing and/or shaping policy and program dialogue, design, formulation and implementation, and service options (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2007).
- c. Where: Levels of Participation
- i. For marginalized and underserved people to make their voices heard, local institutions of governance are the most important avenue. This is where the poor, women, youth, and minorities can participate in governance and influence decisions affecting their lives (United Nations Development Program, 2012). Therefore, local citizen councils, observatories, and dialogues have found to be the most effective in creating a public discourse with traditionally underrepresented groups.
    1. The two chief methods for fostering local participation are community development and decentralization of resources and authority to local governments. Community development supports those efforts to bring villages, urban neighborhoods, and other household groupings into the process of managing development resources, without relying on formally constituted local government institutions. Decentralization refers to efforts to support village and municipal governments on both

the demand and sides of the equation; the demand side involves strengthening citizens' participation in local government, and the supply side refers to increasing the capacity of local governments to provide services and meet the public's needs (Mansuri & Rao, 2013)

d. How: Means and Methods of Participation

- i. Citizen consultations (also known as referendums<sup>1</sup>, plebiscites<sup>2</sup>, popular consultations, *cabildos* or *cabildos abiertos*<sup>3</sup>) allow the government to ask citizens directly for their opinion on a law, constitutional reform, administrative decision or large-scale development project before the decision is formulated or implemented (Evidence and Lessons from Latin America, 2013).
- ii. Participatory budgeting began in Latin America in 1989. Participatory budgeting is now implemented in more than 2,500 local governments in 15 countries in the region. This form of participation can provide a powerful mechanism for ensuring that vulnerable citizens receive greater public funds and services and for deepening democracy (Evidence and Lessons from Latin America, 2013).
- iii. Local citizen councils take on different names and forms across the region, though they do share common features. Generally, they gather actors from different sectors of civil society, bringing them together with local political authorities in a single body, where they collaboratively make public policies or development plans.
- iv. Multi-stakeholder dialogues do not tend to be permanent spaces of deliberation nor mandated by law, as are local citizen councils. Instead, they seem to arise around a particular issue. Multi-stakeholder dialogues have played an important part in the consolidation of democratic processes in Latin America, particularly by promoting the inclusion of relevant social issues in the public agenda and by enhancing the formulation and implementation of public policies that reflect the interests of historically underserved groups (Evidence and Lessons from Latin America, 2013).
- v. A Supreme Audit Institution (SAI) is the government body that monitors the spending of other government bodies. In the last few decades, Latin American countries have been strengthening their SAIs in order to improve oversight and control of public spending. One of the reforms includes the creation of social control mechanisms that enable citizens to participate in SAIs' oversight activities (Evidence and Lessons from Latin America, 2013).
- vi. A citizen observatory is a monitoring body formed by citizens or organizations to identify, highlight, assess and monitor relevant social issues, and to evaluate particular policies or programs. To undertake their monitoring activities, citizen observatories gather information and knowledge through the use of different tools (Evidence and Lessons from Latin America, 2013).
- vii. Citizen assessments of service delivery include surveys, focus groups, and social media feedback mechanisms.

### 3. Trends in Citizen Participation Initiatives

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<sup>1</sup> A referendum seeks citizens' opinion on legislative texts, such as constitutional reforms, to decide whether or not the text should be implemented.

<sup>2</sup> A plebiscite seeks citizens' opinion on an administrative decision, to give it more legitimacy.

<sup>3</sup> The *cabildo abierto*, translated as open town hall meeting, is a public meeting of district or municipal councils or of the local administrative reunions, in which inhabitants can directly participate in order to discuss issues that are of interest for the community.

- a. Electronic Government (e-government) is defined as “utilizing the Internet and the world-wide-web for delivering government information and services to citizens” (Ronaghan, 2002). E-government potentially increases citizen involvement in the process of governance at all levels by introducing new voices to the dialogue through online discussion groups, thus expanding outreach and influence while enhancing the rapid development and effectiveness of interest groups.
- b. Electronic Governance (e-governance) is “the public sector’s use of the most innovative information and communication technologies, like the internet, to deliver to all citizens improved services, reliable information and greater knowledge in order to facilitate access to the governing process and encourage deeper citizen participation” (Ronaghan, 2002). It is a commitment by decision makers to strengthening the partnership between private citizens and public institutions.
- c. Engaged Governance is defined as “an institutional arrangement that links citizens more directly into the decisionmaking processes of a State so as to enable them to influence the public policies and programmes in a manner that impacts more positively on their social and economic lives” (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2007). This approach is “expected to enable the expression and co-ordination of political, administrative and civic interests for the achievement of policy coherence, social justice, equity and sustainable development” (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2005).

#### 4. Special Situations and Lessons Learned

**Table 1: Innovations and Examples of Citizen Participation Initiatives in Latin America**

Nation	Citizen Consultations	Participatory Budgeting	Local Citizen Councils	Citizen Observatories
<b>Argentina</b>		In 2009, La Plata launched a participatory budgeting initiative in which citizens gather in neighborhood assemblies to debate their needs, and to develop projects that propose public works, services, and programs. This is followed by a larger process of voting, where a secured system allows votes to be cast through either paper or electronic ballots. In 2012, it became the first city in Argentina to enable participants of the public assemblies to decide on rules and regulations for the participatory budgeting process.	A mixed network of control, comprising horizontal agencies and civil society organizations, the Civil Society Body (CSB) of Argentina is tasked with oversight of the cleanup of the Riachuelo/Matanza basin. The role of the CSB is to monitor compliance with the obligations set out in the court sentence and to make the relevant recommendations to the basin's jurisdictional authority (ACUMAR).	
<b>Bolivia</b>	Bolivia’s 2009 Constitution allows recall of elected officials, provides for citizen referenda on various issues, and mandates popular consultation when the potential policy deals	Bolivia’s 1994 Law of Popular Participation (LPP) transferred 20 percent of the national budget to the country’s 311 municipalities and, in a departure from the policies usually associated with	San Ignacio de Velasco and La Guardia are two Bolivian towns that have been recognized for their use of effective local administrative practices, and their impact on boosting local development. A key part of that	

	with the exploitation of natural resources.	decentralization, mandated grassroots participation in local planning and budgetary oversight.	recognition comes from the priority the municipalities give to citizen participation in their version of a local council, called the Local Economic Development Commission (CODEL). The CODEL have contributed to important economic and social progress at the local level.	
<b>Brazil</b>	The 1988 Constitution establishes the use of plebiscite, referendum, and popular initiative.	Participatory budgeting, first introduced in the Municipality of Porto Alegre in 1989, has achieved worldwide interest as a novel form of citizen participation in the formulation of the municipal budget. By 2007, this policy had spread to more than one hundred Brazilian municipalities.	Local citizen participation in LCCs has perhaps its most elaborate expression in Brazil, where 99% of municipalities have tripartite councils, which many argue have been successful in giving citizens a voice in decision making in their municipality.	
<b>Chile</b>			Local Committees and other community organizations operate within the local areas. Each of the local committees is elected democratically, by the inhabitants of the Local Unit ( <i>Unidad Vecinal</i> ), a subdivision of the commune and an area (the equivalent to a borough) that is determined by law.	The Public Health Observatory (Observatorio de Salud Pública) of the Public Health School of the University of Chile monitors and conducts analysis and reflection about the health situation of Chilean communities and territories and the institutional responses of state agencies in terms of policies and programs. The analysis and outcomes of this observatory aim to support decision making at the local level and are shared with relevant stakeholders.
<b>Colombia</b>	The 1986 municipal reform legislation introduced the most comprehensive range of mechanisms in Latin America for promoting citizen participation in local governance. These include local planning committees, local administrative boards to monitor municipal service delivery, citizen representation on the boards of municipal companies, and outsourcing of municipal investment projects to local communities.  The constitutional reform law of 1991		Medellin's Youth Municipal Councils, first established in 1995, served as a model for the national law that was adopted in 1997; by 2010, 425 Youth Municipal Councils had been created in Colombia.	

	assigned new functions to departments and municipalities in matters relating to consultation, decision-making, implementation, control and financing. Forums and mechanisms for citizen voice and participation were also established, such as the legislative initiative, popular consultation, referendum, open community hall meetings ( <i>cabildo abierto</i> ), the tutelage or guardianship judicial resource ( <i>tutela</i> ) the accomplishment action ( <i>acción de cumplimiento</i> ) and the popular action ( <i>acción popular</i> ).			
<b>Costa Rica</b>	The 1949 Constitution and the 2003 Constitutional Reforms establish the people's right to utilize popular initiative and referendum. Open meetings called <i>cabildos</i> provide the public with a forum to comment on decisions or issues pertaining to the district or municipality.	Participatory mechanisms are in place throughout the formulation, monitoring, and oversight of cantonal public works budgets in Costa Rica.		
<b>Cuba</b>	The Constitution allows for recall of elected officials			
<b>Ecuador</b>		In 2008, Ecuador approved a new Constitution aiming to promote human rights, democracy and transparency. In addition, the country has adopted a policy that all public budgets must explain how they promote gender equality.	In Ecuador, citizen participation in local planning has been heavily promoted in response to the loss of trust in national political parties. This has taken the form of participation by parish councils in formulating provincial and municipal plans, over which they exercise the power of veto.	
<b>El Salvador</b>		In July 2001, the Council approved a Municipal Law that institutionalized the Participatory Budgeting in Villa El Salvador and gave it a legal basis in the municipal budgeting and planning. The municipality of Villa El Salvador was the first municipality in Peru that has incorporated		

		participatory budgeting into municipal law. The success of Villa El Salvador's participatory budgeting experiment led in part to the national government's requirement in 2002 that all municipalities undergo some amount of participatory budgeting.		
<b>Guatemala</b>	The new Municipal Code of 2002 includes two forms of direct democracy which are binding in nature: community consultation and consultation with the indigenous population.			
<b>Honduras</b>			Under the 1990 Law of Municipalities, each municipality has a Municipal Development Council named by the corporation and consisting of representatives of the various economic and social sectors of the municipality. The Municipal Development Council functions in an advisory capacity by providing the corporations with information and input for making decisions. The law also calls for a special law to be enacted to regulate the organization and functioning of a national Institute of Municipal Development to promote the integrated development of municipalities in Honduras.	
<b>Mexico</b>	At the local level, the States' Citizen Participation Laws in Mexico allow for referendum in 27 states, plebiscite in 26 states, and popular consultation.			The Federal Code was modified in October 1996 to allow the appointment of "citizen counselors" to safeguard the autonomy of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) from political manipulation, a process known as <i>ciudadanización</i> ("citizenization"). The incorporation of respected figures from civil society into the board of IFE is considered a major institutional breakthrough that changed the logic of political subordination that has characterized the IFE, initiating a series of reforms that made

				possible the holding of free and competitive elections for the first time in more than six decades.
<b>Nicaragua</b>		The 1997 Law on Municipalities mandates participatory budgeting practices and requires that mayors hold town meetings to make the local budgets public knowledge.	The 2003 Citizen Participation Law promotes participation through local departments and groups within municipalities.	
<b>Paraguay</b>		Some municipalities have begun introducing participatory budgeting to include citizens in the financial decision making process.		
<b>Peru</b>	The country's 1993 Constitution and 2005 Constitutional Reforms provide for recall, referendum, initiative, and popular consultation at the national level.	In 2003, municipalities implemented the "Framework Law on Participatory Budgeting," and progress has been made in involving local citizens in the budgeting process.	Peruvian CCLs include local councils that come together to elaborate the Participatory Development Plan (Plan de Desarrollo Concertado) for their Provincial or District Municipality. These plans cover issues related to social, economic and urban development, as well as public investment. The CCL also coordinates the Provincial and District-level Participatory Budget that is meant to feed into the plans.  In Santa Rosa, Puno, Peru, in 2007, the Local Self-government Council, composed by 93% of civil society representatives, participated in the implementation of a capacity development plan that led to the creation of the Decent Housing Program, which benefited 25,000 families and created 15 virtual classrooms.	
<b>Uruguay</b>	The Constitution provides for plebiscite by the people.			
<b>Venezuela</b>	The Constitution has set up means for public participation to take place. At a local level, these include: local public planning councils; open town councils ( <i>cabildos</i> ); the participatory budget; citizens' assemblies; referendums; public consultation; amongst others.		The 2005 Organic Law of Municipal Public Power mandates that municipalities divide up into civil parishes and other local organized structures in an effort to promote public participation.	



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