

# Building Citizen Participation and Local Government Accountability

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## Limitations of local government

The traditional view of local government is that local electors elect councillors who make decisions about local services and levy local taxes to pay for those services. The only role for citizens is to vote in elections every four years or so and pay their local taxes. This view of local government is being increasingly challenged. Citizens expect to have a greater say in the running of services that affect them. They are dissatisfied by the lack of accountability of those they have elected for the taxes they have levied and other resources they have used. And in many countries they are concerned about the level of corruption in local government.

Elections are, of course, a key mechanism of accountability for local government. But elections are a very crude instrument of choice. Manifestos, if they offer anything at all clearly, offer a package of generalised policies. Elections are often fought on the basis of personalities or ethnic identities. Electoral practices are often not inclusive (first-past-the-post elections tend to marginalise women and minority groups as well as the poor) and are open to abuse. Once elected, councillors may make decisions behind closed doors, without any opportunities for participation by others or accountability to citizens until the next election. Local level political processes are often dominated by local elites, who may be able to rely on patronage networks to ensure their re-election. And there is little information available on which to judge the performance of those who have been elected.

Thus, the range of choice is highly constrained, occurs only infrequently (typically, once every four years) and with little information available. Consequently, for decisions on more specific issues, other mechanisms of participation are needed. There is also the need for the development of programmatic political parties, with clear policies and manifestos, as well as for more inclusive political processes at local level.

## Participatory mechanisms

Because of the limitations of representative democracy, more direct participation of citizens is needed. This is particularly the case when dealing with detailed issues – proposals for particular developments or the management of schools – which cannot be

handled through the broad manifestos of political parties at infrequent elections. There are numerous participatory mechanisms:<sup>1</sup>

- Public meetings
- Consultation exercises
- Opinion surveys
- Referenda
- Formal grievance procedures
- Ombudsman and appeals procedures
- Participatory budgeting (PB) (see below).

One particular example is participatory budgeting. PB has been adopted by a number of municipalities in Brazil as a way of opening up the municipal budgeting process to a much larger number of people. In some cities, the process is elaborate and seeks to obtain the views of a wide cross-section of citizens, particularly the poor. PB has increased the transparency of decision-making, reduced patron-clientelism and redirected expenditure towards services for the poor. However, PB raises many issues, not least what is the relationship between this process and the elected councillors' responsibility for budget approval. (For a further discussion of participatory budgeting, see Souza (2001).)

There are often mixed motives for adopting such participatory approaches, ranging from a genuine desire to listen to the views of citizens to more cynical attempts, for example by local councillors, to manipulate and forestall opposition. Where legislation requires participation, this may be undertaken simply as a formality. At the same time, participatory processes can easily be hijacked by the articulate and powerful, so that the results do not reflect the views of the participants. Participatory processes may also disadvantage the poor, who lack the time, resources and education to participate effectively.

What matters is:

- a) The attitude and commitment of the politicians (and officials) involved in the process;
- b) The steps taken to ensure that the results reflect the views of all citizens (or all those affected), particularly the poor and the marginalised, and not just the articulate and powerful;
- c) The resources available to implement the agreement – since there is little point in going through a participatory process if there are no resources to implement what is agreed upon.

Of course, it is important to be realistic about what can be achieved within a particular situation. The obstacles to effective participation caused by the existing power struc-

tures and power relationships at the local level need to be recognised and understood. Nevertheless, changes can and do happen over time, not least through the power of civil society.

## **Mechanisms of accountability**

Democratic local governance requires accountability in a number of directions:

- Horizontally – of the executive to the elected representatives
- Downwards – of the elected representatives to the citizens
- Upwards – of local governments to central government, particularly for the use of funds.

Periodic elections are not sufficient, especially where information is lacking. Using the principal-agent analysis, the principals (citizens) must be able to hold their agents (the elected representatives) to account for what has been done, and the elected representatives (principals) have to hold the executive/paid officials (agents) to account. All this requires information and transparency, since the typical problem in the principal-agent relationship is asymmetry in access to information.

The following will be important in achieving local accountability:

- Mechanisms for reporting by the executive to the elected legislature;
- Publication of information about local government performance to citizens, in an understandable form;
- Preparation, approval and publication of budgets, showing the proposed use of resources;
- Preparation, approval and publication of accounts in a timely manner, showing the actual use of money;
- Auditing of accounts and publication of auditors' reports.

Publication of other performance indicators can be useful: performance against standards and targets, league tables and citizens' charters. These can do much to heighten awareness among citizens and so build local accountability. In the UK, much work has been done on this, including the publication of league tables of performance against targets, best value studies and public service agreements.

Publication by central government of grant allocations to local government and to units such as schools or health centres (as in Uganda) can also help citizens and service users to demand accountability from local government or service managers. In some systems, central government inspectors are charged with examining local government practices. Where these operate professionally, according to clear criteria and perform-

ance standards, offering constructive advice, they can do much to enhance accountability and performance. Where they act arbitrarily, or in a rent-seeking manner, their actions can be destructive.

### **The role of civil society**

Democratic governance depends on the active participation of civil society, which includes:

- CBOs (community based organisations) or GROs (grassroots organisations);
- NGOs (national, local and international);
- Private businesses and business organisations (e.g. chambers of commerce);
- Trade unions (although these often represent only those in formal employment) and trade associations of the informal sector;
- Religious organisations;
- Traditional leaders (chiefs, elders, etc.);
- The media – local and national press and other media, as well as local radio, which is important in some countries.

Local democracy needs to be open to and responsive to civil society, and civil society can be a way of holding local government to account. Examples include (Devas *et al.*, 2004):

- Villages in some parts of India calling officials to account for the use of grant money;
- The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India, lobbying on behalf of poor women;
- A federation of NGOs in Cebu, Philippines, scrutinising and reporting publicly on the electoral platform of mayoral candidates in terms of whether the candidates were likely to deliver on a pro-poor agenda.

Civil society is, of course, riddled with divisions – racial, ethnic, religious, political, class, income – and with conflicts of interest. It is not surprising to find that the rich and powerful tend to dominate civil society organisations. In Johannesburg, for example, the most powerful CBO is the Sandton Ratepayers Association, established to protect well-off citizens from local tax increases (Devas *et al.*, 2004). The media are often owned by business interests that have their own agenda. Even within small communities there may be major conflicts of view or interest. Thus, while being open and responsive, local governments must not listen only to the loudest voice.

## Note

- 1 See Goetz and Gaventa (2001) for a review of a fuller range of participatory mechanisms in local governance around the world.

## References

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