

Citizen Participation as a Strategic Tool for Enhancing Service Delivery in Urban Local Authorities in Developing Countries: Fantasy or Reality?

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Abstract: The paper examined the role of citizen participation in local authority service delivery in developing countries as these are generally characterised by deteriorating service delivery in the form of poor refuse collection and disposal, potholed road infrastructure and erratic water supply and poor sanitation services. It emerged from the presentation that where local authorities employed active citizen participation, several benefits were enjoyed, including improved service delivery. It was however, observed that despite the multiple benefits arising from citizen participation, local authorities in developing countries generally lack a participative culture. It is thus, critical that local authorities develop and promote citizen participation since it has immense capacity to transform municipal service delivery.

Keywords: citizen participation, local authority, service delivery.

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to explain the role of citizen participation in service delivery in urban local authorities in developing countries. Local authorities in developing countries are generally characterised by deteriorating service delivery in the form of poor refuse collection and disposal, potholed road infrastructure, and erratic water supply and poor sanitation services. Thus this paper attempts to explain how citizen participation could be employed as a strategy to improve service delivery in urban local authorities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Citizen-centred governance principle

This discussion is underpinned by the citizen-centred governance principle. The citizen-centred governance principle is anchored on three fundamental principles, namely responsive governance, responsible governance and accountable governance [1]. Citizen-centred governance has the following distinct features: the promotion of citizen empowerment through a rights-based approach such as direct democracy provisions and citizens' charter; bottom-up accountability for results and evaluation of local government performance by citizens as governors, taxpayers and consumers of public services [1]. The citizen-centred governance principle puts emphasis on the quality of the relationship between the citizens and the government and to services that are shaped around the individuals needs rather than highly standardised services [2].

Thus any attempts to reform the institution of local governance requires revisiting the principles of

responsive, responsible and accountable governance [1]. It is perhaps necessary to briefly describe what each of these three principles entail. The principle of responsive governance demands that governments do the right things by delivering services that are consistent with citizen preferences and doing so at the right time [1]. The principle of responsible governance takes the matter further by demanding that governments do the right things the right way. This requires that governments manage their fiscal resources prudently, minimise fiscal and social risks for the communities and that governments should constantly work towards improving both the quality and quantity of access to public services through adopting best practices such as benchmarking its performance with best performing local governments [1, 3]. The principle of accountable governance demands that local governments be answerable to the electorates. It is crucial to put in place legal and institutional reforms such as use of citizen's charter and creating a legal provision for recall of public officials who fail to meet the accountability test to enable local governments to effectively deal with accountability issues between elections [4]. When talking about accountability, it is important to distinguish between public accountability and administrative accountability in the context of public administration [3]. According to [5] public accountability is a requirement that those who possess and exercise political power must of necessity submit their actions to public scrutiny and approval. Positive answers to the following questions could be a way of testing public accountability in western styled democracies [5]:

- How regularly and efficiently are the views of the public sought by decision - makers?
- How easy is it for the ordinary citizen to participate in the decision-making process at national or local level if he or she wishes to do so?
- How regularly are elections held so that those in power make themselves accountable to the electorate and the electorate can replace them if dissatisfied with their performance?

On the other hand, administrative accountability entails putting in place control mechanisms to keep bureaucracy under surveillance and in check [6]. In addition to internal control measures, public sector accountability in the form of external control measures is essential [3] since the nature of the administrative work in the public sector is such that it is subject to public scrutiny and outcry. Consequently, public employees should carefully think of the potential public agitation, investigation or judgment that their actions could trigger in the execution of their various roles [3].

It can thus, be seen that the citizen-centred governance framework provides a solid and clear theoretical underpinning to a discussion on the role of citizen participation in improving urban local authority service delivery in that at the heart of citizen-centred governance is the creation of high quality relationships between the citizens and the local government as well as shaping the services around individual needs instead of providing standardised services.

Definition of citizen participation

In this paper, public participation and citizen participation are interchangeable. Citizen participation may be defined as the manner in which citizens apply influence and control over the decisions that affect them [7]. Citizen participation may also be defined as the organised effort to increase control over resources and regulative institutions by groups and movements excluded from such control [8]. Both definitions suggest that at the centre of citizen participation is the desire to control and influence decisions that affect the citizens. It is therefore, prudent for local authorities to proactively promote citizen participation in their various programmes and activities in order to accommodate the citizens' interests.

MAIN DISCUSSION

There are several objectives of citizen participation and some of them will be discussed in this paper. For instance, active citizen participation is as a vehicle through which a local authority can provide information to the citizens. In this instance, the objective of citizen participation is to provide information to the residents. The local authority can

provide feedback information to the residents through citizen participation mechanisms such as budget implementation feedback meetings at ward level. The local authority can get information from the residents through active citizen participation. For instance, the local authority can get to know the citizens' priority needs and whether or not the citizens are satisfied with the quantity and quality of services delivered. Citizen participation seeks to improve public decisions, programmes and services. Since decisions are made on the basis of the available information, the practice of citizen participation enable local authorities to get information from the residents about their level of satisfaction with service delivery in the local authority. As a result, the local authority will make informed decisions and develop programmes and services tailored to meet the needs and aspirations of the residents and by so doing delivering public value to the residents. Citizen participation affords the marginalised members of society opportunities to be heard and to contribute to the to the designing, planning and delivery of municipal services. In this respect, the objective of citizen participation is to protect individual and minority group rights and interests.

Citizens may engage in either direct participation where the citizens whether individually or in the various forms of self-organisation engage in active decision making processes on matters affecting them or indirect participation, where citizens express their preferences through their elected local representatives. This form of participation can however be less effective in situations where the councillor quality is low or intergovernmental relations are not cordial. Citizen participation improves service delivery through affecting the key measures of service delivery which include allocative efficiency, accountability and reduction of corruption and equity [9, 10]. Allocative efficiency refers to the degree to which services provided match citizen preferences and the satisfaction level of citizens with the service rendered. Accountability refers to the extent to which the local government officials give account to the citizens on the resources at their disposal and how they have been used in service delivery. Reduction of corruption is the extent to which abuse and misuse of public resources for private gain has been controlled and minimised. It is considered that by putting in place effective accountability mechanisms it should be possible to reduce corruption. Equity is the extent to which the voice and preferences of the marginalised are included in decision making. It implies that citizens contribute according to ability but are allocated according to need [10]. It is important to point out that citizen participation mechanisms may be grouped into vote and voice [11, 10]. For instance, citizens select their representative at the local level through the vote. However, voting has the disadvantage of limiting

participation to elections only. Participation in terms of voice presents citizens with the opportunity to influence the making, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of decisions that affect their socio-politico-economic wellbeing and to demand accountability from the local leadership [10, 11].

Important studies that provide the relationship between citizen participation and decentralised service delivery include: one on demand-responsiveness of decentralised water service delivery in Central Java, Indonesia [10, 12]. Important lessons drawn from this study are that only if users are directly involved in service design and selection are services likely to match users preferences and that informed participation saw households willing to pay for more expensive technologies than the leaders would have chosen for them. The study conducted in Colombia established that community participation increased demand for effective local government and opened the window for building the capacity for the citizens [10, 13]. Additionally, the study of Italian regional governments found that governments that opened themselves to constituent pressure were able to manage and deliver services efficiently [9]. As a result of citizen participation in decision making through the Local Authorities Service Delivery Action Plan, a shift in expenditure priorities in Kenyan local authorities was observed [7]. Sadly, it was observed that citizen participation appeared to decrease as the process moved from needs identification to implementation and monitoring and that there was no concrete participation in the evaluation of service delivery [10].

The study by [14] show that local governments are increasing the role of the citizen in Victoria state in Australia as they are aware of the impact that community perceptions have on their performance. Allowing citizens to participate in the development activities of their local authorities help them to develop long term commitment to the improvement of council services [14]. Citizens can participate through consultative public meetings, participatory budgeting, community workshops, participatory local waste management, special purpose forums and public questioning and comments sessions during stipulated times at council meetings, elections, monitoring and evaluation and hotlines [14, 10]. Managers are of the view that increased community knowledge increases accountability [14]. Increased community knowledge leads to a community whose perceptions approach the reality of services that are driven by limited resources [14]. In South Africa, public participation is a legal requirement. Section 152 (1) of the constitution of South Africa requires local government to promote the involvement of communities and community organisations in local government. In South Africa, [15] deals specifically with public participation. In fact, the

Systems Act lays emphasis on three important elements namely: (1) Municipality to promote public participation in the integrated development planning process, performance evaluation through performance management, budget process and strategic decisions pertaining to service delivery (2) Municipality to enable participation through capacity building in the community, among staff and councillors and (3) Municipality should sufficiently support (1) and (2) by allocating sufficient funds to drive the implementation. It is necessary to emphasise that citizen participation should not be left to chance and convenience of the council officials and councillors but that it should be carefully planned for in terms of time and resources [10]. The capacity of the citizens to participate effectively should not be assumed, hence in addition to resource allocation for service delivery, there should be allocation of resources for raising awareness and capacity building of both the local government officials and the citizens so that they become effective in the participatory process. Empowering citizens through capacity building should be seen as an equally important aspect of service delivery and it shows the value the local government places on its citizens [10].

Empowering consumers including giving them the power to exit has the capacity to fundamentally transform the culture of public services [2]. For instance, introducing and implementing a citizen's charter in a city council is one way of allowing the residents to provide feedback to council pertaining to how they perceive the council's service delivery. The citizen's charter also called the service charter or client charter or user's charter empowers the consumer and promotes his or her rights in the market place of public service delivery and provision with the ultimate aim of reordering the accountability system by making public service providers directly accountable to their customers by assuring them of quality, access to information and guarantee of redress when things go wrong [16].

In principle the decentralisation policy promotes grassroots participation in the planning processes. However, in practice, stakeholders are rarely invited to participate, for instance in Ondangwa Town Council of Namibia and on the rare occasion when the council holds meetings residents feel that council staff comes with a decided agenda already and that their coming is merely to inform the residents of their decisions instead of seeking dialogue with the residents [17].

One area where citizen participation should be promoted is in budgeting, called participatory budgeting. There are several definitions of the term budget. However, in this paper the term budget has been defined as the annual activities of an organisation which

are tied to expected revenues and expenditures and expressed in financial terms while reflecting the citizens' aspirations [18]. The last part of this definition states that the budget should of necessity reflect the aspirations of the citizens implying that the formulation, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of a budget should enable citizens to participate in it so that their needs are captured in terms of their priorities. Participatory budgeting is a direct democratic approach to budgeting which affords citizens an opportunity to learn about government operations, deliberate, debate and influence the allocation of public resources [19, 18].

Participatory budgeting was first used in Brazil in the city of Porto Alegre in an attempt to deal with the country's established history of patronage politics, social inequity and corruption [18]. It has multiple benefits which include:

- opportunities for enhanced decision making through debate and consensus building with all key stakeholders
- capacity to improve government transparency, accountability and increases citizen voice in government decisions
- redistribution of resources from the advantaged to the less advantaged by the involvement of the general citizens in the prioritisation and allocation of local resources
- promotion of effective citizen participation in public choices and this improves trust in government and commitment to the trades-offs made
- building social cohesion which offers the practical benefit of increased tax collection as was the case with the city of Porto Alegre which saw a 50 per cent rise in government revenues as a result of the trust the citizens had developed over their government and its spending
- is a tool for strengthening the demand for good governance through citizens' education, engagement and empowerment
- promotes transparency and accountability while at the same time reducing government inefficiency, waste, clientelism, patronage and corruption

In a study conducted by [18] in Bangladesh, 63.8 per cent of the respondents indicated that the budget did not reflect their needs and aspirations, 61.7 per cent did not get enough information related to the budget, 66.0 per cent were not invited to the municipal budget meetings while 58.5 per cent of the respondents said that they were not involved in designing the budget. The statistics from the above study shows that it important for both local authority councillors and staff to genuinely engage citizens in all the phases of the budget process, namely formulation, implementation and evaluation. In sum, participatory budgeting allows citizens to: identify their needs and priorities, be involved in the implementation of the budget and be

involved in the monitoring and evaluation of budget formulation and implementation. In spite of the numerous benefits that arise from increased public participation many developing countries are not genuinely promoting citizen participation. For instance, [20] bemoans the existence of weak legal provisions in Zimbabwe for public participation in local government affairs citing the High Court case (*Gwanda Rural District Council versus Gwanda Residents*) in which the court ruled that section 76 of the Rural District Council Act does not make consultations with residents a legal requirement but a mere forum in which residents could lobby council. Thus, a local authority that is sincere about improving service delivery should among other things create strong legal provisions for public participation.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, citizen participation was defined and the link between citizen participation and service delivery in urban local authorities was made clear. Participatory budgeting as an illustrative example of citizen participation was discussed including the benefits of participatory budgeting. The notion of co-creation or co-production of public services reinforces the need to continuously promote citizen participation in the planning, monitoring and evaluation and delivery of municipal services. Urban local authorities could promote citizen participation through, consultative public meetings, participatory budgeting, community workshops, participatory local waste management, special purpose forums and public questioning and comments sessions during stipulated times at council meetings, elections, monitoring and evaluation and hotlines, citizen's charter and the establishment of effective ward development committees. In fact, citizen participation should be premised on a long term development framework. That is, citizens should identify strategic goals which should then guide the choice of public investments.

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