

Citizen Engagement: Catalyst for Inclusive Urban Governance

1. Overview

The paper reinforces the idea of revitalising democracy by promoting citizen engagement and developing a sense of community and belongingness among all sections of society. Understanding the necessity and importance of citizen engagement by taking into account some of the key considerations for Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) and policymakers to put people first in urban governance has also been outlined.

2. Introduction

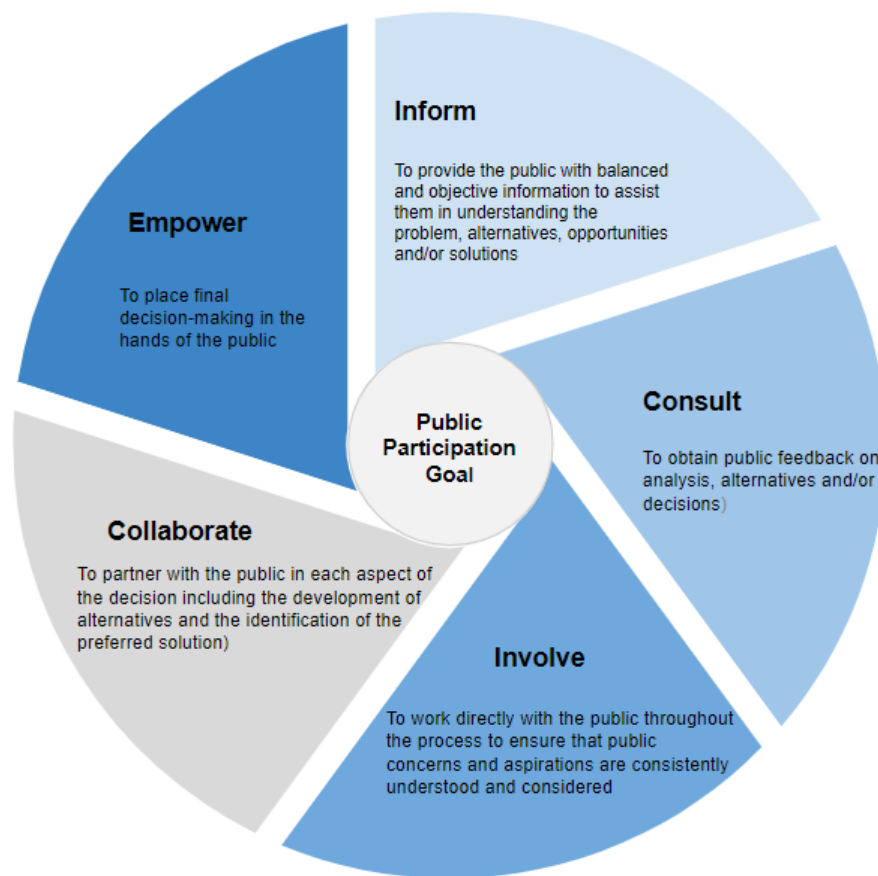
What is citizen engagement?

Citizen engagement is defined as “the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process of the State through measures and/or institutional arrangements to increase their influence on public policies and programmes ensuring a positive impact on their socio-economic lives” (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs). To facilitate citizen engagement in the decision-making process, it is imperative that authorities adopt a system of good governance¹, which includes individuals having access to public

¹ [Good urban governance](#) involves city governments and administrations using transparent and participatory processes to communicate with citizens appropriately, keep them well informed and actively involve them in local negotiation and decision-making processes.

information, actively consulted by governmental entities, and integrated into significant policy deliberations and decision-making procedures to the fullest extent feasible. This could occur in spaces where institutions decide to 'invite' public views or participation in some form or 'create' their own spaces to solve self-defined problems (IDR, 2023; ADB, 2015).

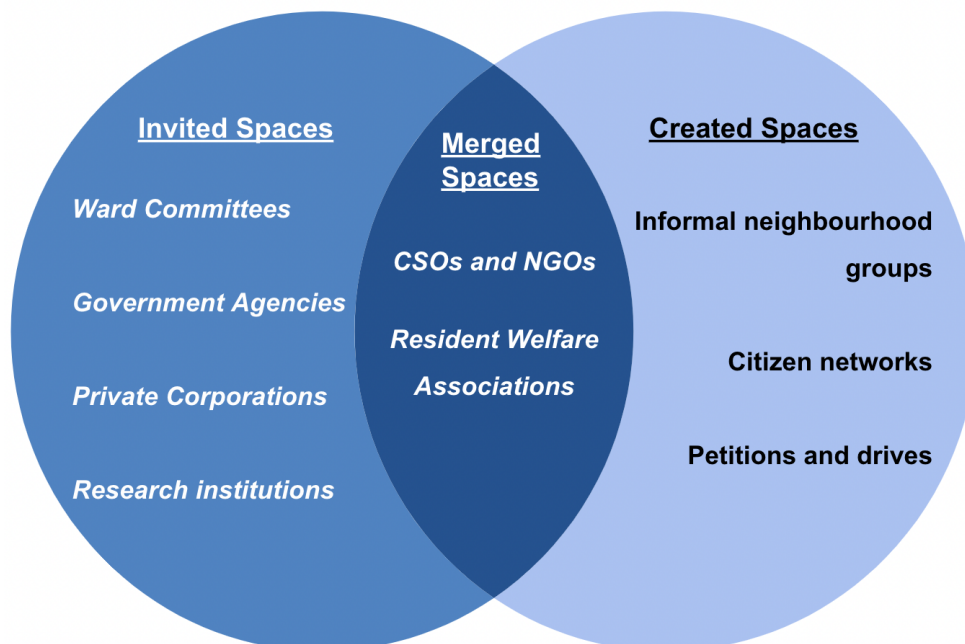
The spectrum of citizen engagement in urban governance described below helps in understanding participation on a progressive continuum - at one end there is no opportunity to influence (the inform level) and on the other end total influence over the outcome (the empower level)- the latter being rarely provided to the public (Bcrenal, 2019; UNESCWA, 2013).



Source:Adapted from the [International Association for Public Participation](#)

Existing mechanisms of citizen engagement in urban India can be understood through invited and created spaces

Post-independence, India's urban development was primarily characterised by a top-down approach, where decision-making power was concentrated at the top and citizen participation was limited. In 1992, the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act introduced an opportunity for citizen engagement in urban governance through the establishment of ward committees. This could be understood as invited spaces, wherein authorities or institutions decide to 'invite' public opinions or participation in some form. Various non-governmental organisations and citizen groups capitalise on these invited spaces for participation, and concurrently 'create' their own spaces, often aimed at addressing self-defined issues. Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) in metropolitan areas, despite not being official governmental entities, serve as representative bodies for citizen interests (PRIA, 2013; IGNOU, n.d.; IDR, 2023).



Source: [IDR, 2023](#)

Mapping Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with Citizen Engagement

Citizens and community-level actors play a crucial part in achieving as well as monitoring SDGs. Some important SDGs that are directly linked and mapped to citizen engagement are highlighted below.



Source: [UNESCAP](#)

Need for citizen engagement

Citizen engagement is related to positive societal outcomes including higher policy legitimacy, increased social cohesion, and increased citizens' satisfaction with political outcomes (Willems et al., 2020; World Bank, 2020).

Citizen engagement is a democratic right

Citizen engagement is recognized as a fundamental right and a necessary condition for the successful practice of democratic citizenship. This recognition is evident in international human rights agreements, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Enhancing citizen participation entails placing them at the core of the political dialogue and empowering them to advocate for their rights (Action Aid, 2023; PRIA, 2023; PRIA, 2013).

Promotes inclusion and diversity

Inclusive participation mitigates potential power disparities among different groups and provides opportunities for previously marginalised population segments (Arnstein, 1969). Research has found that citizen engagement has an impact on social inclusion outcomes, helping to: break down cultural barriers; foster intergroup cohesion; increase economic opportunities; and promote good governance. Thus, when diverse groups of citizens unite to hold the government accountable and influence problem definitions and proposed policies, significant changes can take place (Verf, 2021; Nwachi, 2021).

Better understanding of user needs for improved implementation

Citizen engagement is an interactive two-way process that encourages participation, and exchange of ideas. This facilitates municipal authorities to understand the needs and requirements of communities, improve citizen-state relationships by reducing the gap between the demand and supply side, and enhance transparency and accountability of Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) (MEITY, n.d.).

Pro-poor developmental outcomes

Citizen engagement in service delivery contributes to pro-poor development outcomes for governments, leading to improved program effectiveness, identification and mitigation of corruption, heightened awareness regarding services, and overall cost reduction. As per a 2011 OECD report, citizen engagement has the capacity to facilitate the efficient and effective allocation of resources by simultaneously reducing government costs and increasing user satisfaction (Entwistle and Martin 2005; World Bank, 2020).

Co-creating solutions to local problems

ULBs alone cannot deal with complex local challenges. The potential outcomes of collaboration with citizens for the government include the source of ideas and inspiration for social innovation, enhanced legitimacy of decisions, improved quality of policies, and improved provision of public goods. Citizens become sympathetic evaluators of

decisions that government administrators have to make, and the improved support from the public empowers the government to make decisions it could never make independently (World Bank, 2020).

3. Policy Landscape and Government Initiatives of Citizen Engagement in Urban Governance

The following are the policy and government initiatives aimed at citizen engagement in the context of Urban Governance.

Govt. interventions	Year	Objective
74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (CAAs)	1992	Bringing citizen governance in the urban areas by guaranteeing the existence of municipalities as institutions of <i>urban local governance (ULBs)</i>
Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM)	2005	Citizen participation at ward and neighbourhood levels was further institutionalised by the Government
National e-Governance Plan	2006	To make all government services available to the citizens via electronic media
My Gov Platform	2014	Platform to ensure citizens' engagement in decision-making to achieve Good Governance
AMRUT and AMRUT 2.0	2015	Successor to JNNURM. It covers infrastructure for water, sewerage, drainage, transport, and green spaces. AMRUT Mission has been subsumed under AMRUT 2.0
Smart Cities Mission	2015	Promote cities that provide core infrastructure and give a decent quality of life to its citizens, a clean and sustainable environment through the application of 'Smart' solutions
Ease of Living' (EoL) Index	2017	An index to enable a shift to a data-driven approach in urban planning and management and promote healthy competition among cities
Municipal Performance	2019	Examine the sectoral performance of Municipalities across

Index		a set of 5 verticals namely Service, Finance, Planning, Technology and Governance
National Urban Digital Mission	2020	The goal of facilitating the delivery of municipal e-governance services, including citizens, city managers, States/Union Territories (UTs), and industry partners
India Urban Observatory (IUO)	2020	The Observatory will plug into various sources of data from cities both from real-time and archival sources for generating insights through analytics for cities, academia, industry and governments and also disseminate knowledge in the form of insights/trends generated and serve as a platform for citizen engagement in the urban ecosystem
National Urban Governance Plan (NUGP)	2021	The platform aims to remit accessible and inclusive municipal e-governance services across all 4400+ emerging towns and cities of India
National Mission for Sustainable Habitat (NMSH)	2021	NMSH prescribes key mitigation and adaptation strategies to aid in the development of sustainable habitat for citizens across five thematic areas: (i) Energy and Green Building, (ii) Urban Planning, Green Cover and Biodiversity, (iii) Mobility and Air Quality, (iv) Water Management, and (v) Waste Management
<i>Note: The list of Government interventions is not exhaustive</i>		

Sources: [Ahluwalia, 2016](#), [PIB, 2021](#), [PIB, 2022](#), [PRIA, 2009](#), [NUGP](#), [IUO](#), [NMSH](#)

4. Barriers to Effective Citizen Engagement

Oftentimes administrative or systemic challenges may hamper the smooth engagement of citizens within the urban governance space. A persisting citizen-centric challenge is the lack of open and transparent data which contributes to the unavailability of reliable data and thereby a lack of sufficient technical knowledge and infrastructure, which deters the participation of citizens. Moreover, the dearth of devolution of powers towards the local governments results in state and central legislators being averse to divesting

taxation and granting powers to ULBs. As a result of limited access to financial resources, ULBs are heavily dependent on state governments and are less empowered to invest and borrow funds and finalise budgets. This mechanism therefore leads to a shortfall in active citizen participation. Some of the key citizen-centric barriers discussed below need to be addressed to promote active citizen participation.

Limited Trust in Government

Several studies have consistently stated that the gradual decline of trust in government presents a substantial threat to the integrity of representative democracy (Thomassen 2015). Several factors that can contribute to limited trust include failure to uphold publicly made commitments, perception of widespread corruption, and lack of consideration for community input on development priorities (World Bank, 2020; MEITY, n.d.).

Limited understanding of how to engage with the Government

Citizens may not be aware of their legal right to information, and in certain instances may be reluctant to exercise this right, either because of fear of a repressive regime, or a prevailing culture of not questioning authority. From the perspective of citizens, they need to acquire the ability to organise and form alliances with other citizen groups, politicians, legislators, bureaucrats, service providers, civil society entities, and the media, across all hierarchical levels (local, regional, and national). Thus, the willingness of the government to be transparent, and the ability of citizens to demand and use information to engage with the Government becomes important (UNDP, 2016; MEITY, n.d.).

Uneven participation due to demographic differences

Equitable treatment of citizens and allocation of resources according to needs are guiding principles of effective citizen engagement. The power lens demonstrates that if initiatives for engagement are captured by better-educated and more politically connected elites, there is a potential for reinforcing existing power hierarchies, exacerbating inequality, and advancing special interests. In the formulation and execution of participatory methodologies, it becomes crucial to comprehend that citizens are not a homogenous entity. In instances where societies are divided along lines of ethnicity, religion, gender, region, or class, collective action may widen social divisions if

participation and mobilisation align with sectarian lines. Thus, models of bureaucracy require cognisance of local idiosyncrasies (UNDP, 2016; MEITY, n.d.).

Low user engagement on e-governance platforms

The union budget for 2023 alone has allocated ₹1.23-lakh crore specifically for telecom projects, along with an extra ₹4,795.24 crore for initiatives under the Digital India Mission. Despite the allocation, engagement on e-governance platforms is not as expected. MyGov.in platform, managed by the central government, has witnessed uneven citizen engagement in the year 2017 across 89 cities on discussions on smart city proposals. Seven cities recorded participation of more than 0.1 million citizen comments (Bhopal with the maximum number of discussions (.17 million)). On the contrary, 28 cities did not even attract 100 participants including Kavaratti, Guwahati, Ajmer, Thanjavur, Madurai, and Hyderabad – with less than 100 comments on the smart city proposal. Another notable observation is that large metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Ahmedabad, Hyderabad, Jaipur, and Bhubaneswar etc. have failed to draw significant online citizen engagement. The lack of clear feedback on the MyGov platform regarding the acknowledgement of citizens' contributions and the absence of a moderator to oversee discussions are two factors that hinder user engagement on the MyGov platform (Gartner, 2017; Malhotra, 2019).

5. Best Practices

This section will provide insight into some of the exemplary practices and innovations related to citizen engagement in India and countries in the Global South.



Quality of life

i. [Draft Project Proposal on “B-TRAC – Technology Driven Traffic Management”, Bangalore](#)

Bangalore has undergone a shift from manually regulated traffic to a more technology-driven one. Bangalore City Traffic Police has curated a traffic management plan that enables the following:

- A real-time traffic information system that is reliable

- Analysis of traffic-related matters and generation of traffic intelligence in order to carry out smooth traffic planning and management
- Circulation of information in real-time to enable the public to make better decisions while on the go

ii. [Community-based Health Planning and Services, Ghana](#)

The Community-based Health Planning and Services (CHPS) in Ghana is an attempt to achieve the coverage of essential primary health services. It encompasses greater involvement of communities and their ownership of primary health care interventions in order to attain Universal Health Coverage. The program has served as Ghana's primary care system for over two decades using a combination of community-based health nurses, volunteers and community engagement to deliver universal access to basic curative care, health promotion and prevention.

iii. [Safetipin App- Physical design and infrastructure to improve public safety](#)

Safetipin, a social organisation, is striving to make public places safer and more inclusive for women by working with an array of urban stakeholders. Through its mobile applications, it picks up data on the safety of women on the streets and enables users to make informed choices with regard to their mobility and security. The data can draw issues such as poor lighting, broken footpaths, open wiring etc. that help users to gauge the safety of the locations they are travelling to and plan appropriate routes. One of the most salient features of this app is its Safety Audit which evaluates various parameters of safe and inclusive public spaces.



i. [Participatory Budgeting, Pune](#)

Participatory Budgeting in Pune involves citizens stepping in to make suggestions on the budgetary provisions that they want to materialise. To strengthen this process, civil society organisations present concerns about the existing process of budget allocation and ideas for improving citizen's participation in the process of budget allocation. With Pune being the 9th largest city of India with a population of 3.2 million, the initiative accommodates people from different economic statuses. While some are extremely poor and live in slums, others are extremely wealthy as well. This mechanism of participation aims to accommodate the needs of not only a growing population but also a city with a huge economic divide.

ii. [Participatory Budgeting in Brazil, World Bank](#)

Participatory Budgeting took momentum in one of the most populated cities of South Brazil - Porto Alegre - more than a decade back. The process allows citizens to express their demands and priorities to make civic improvements and also enables negotiations around budgets allocated by their municipalities to utilise them optimally as per their needs. Participatory budgeting has helped enhance public services such as a 75 per cent growth in water and sewer connections in households. In addition, it also led to a rise in the city's health and education budget, the creation of new housing units and the multiplication of schools. The number of participants in the participatory budgeting process in Porto Alegre reached 40,000 per year in less than a decade and so far more than 5000 municipalities in the country have adopted it.



Reward and Recognition Program

i. [Swachh Survekshan 2018](#)

Swachh Survekshan is an annual cleanliness survey conducted by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. It assesses the sanitation and cleanliness of cities, and the results are used to promote the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Campaign). Cities that perform well are recognized and rewarded. The competition has led to a significant improvement in cleanliness and sanitation across Indian cities. Participating cities compete for top rankings, leading to better waste management, public awareness, and infrastructure development.



Citizen Report Card

i. [Philippines - Filipino report card on pro-poor services](#)

The Report card mechanism, built on a national client satisfaction survey by the World Bank, has allowed citizens the space to offer public agencies credible and collective feedback on their performance. It caters primarily to the quality of public services in these specific spheres: health care, housing, water supply, elementary education and subsidised rice distribution. Additionally, the report also accounts for how citizens are treated in their exchanges with service providers, specifically government officials. Such a report card offers recommendations at a policy and programmatic level to mitigate constraints facing the poor and under-served sections.

6. Way Forward

Putting people first in urban governance not only increases public participation, enhances accountability and transparency, and builds civic capacity, but also leads to increased buy-in and better decision-making. The following recommendations are intended to embed a rights-based approach based on equity, diversity, accessibility, local capacity and empowerment to support the creation of an enabling environment for citizen engagement in practice.

- Design and develop citizen engagement indicators for good urban governance- Measuring citizen engagement helps to track the quality of participatory activities, improve related processes, and show all stakeholders how their input influences decision-making. It is also beneficial to determine the impact of public spending and prioritise citizen engagement practices that can be measured and improved upon over time.
- Context-specific urban governance frameworks instead of a one-size-fits-all model- It is important to develop citizen engagement approaches that are both participatory and context-specific/context-appropriate that account for local conditions, needs and capacities. Contextual realities have different forms such as political, economic, social, cultural, and linguistic. Thus, context-specific citizen engagement interventions result in cities that are responsive to the diverse needs of their residents and foster a sense of ownership and responsibility among them leading to more sustainable outcomes.
- Facilitate civic engagement through technology- The use of digital tools and technologies is one of the most efficient ways to promote citizen engagement, especially in a post-COVID scenario where the demand for such tools has exponentially increased. Technology adoption can be more effective in cases where traditional channels of two-way communication such as public forums, town halls, and council meetings already exist. Thus, it is important to note that digital participation through ICT and new media supplement existing citizen engagement mechanisms, rather than replace them (Hovik & Giannoumis, 2022).
- Foster attitudinal change through behavioural change interventions- Urban governance needs to integrate behavioural insights into its operations to design and implement behaviorally informed interventions for active citizen participation. The objective is to improve citizens' sense of belonging and motivate active participation and mobilisation

through tools such as incentives, information campaigns, and nudging.

- Capacity building and training of civic officials- Citizen engagement may be met with varying degrees of opposition and receptivity depending on the motivations, interests and predispositions of public officials along the public service delivery continuum. This has far-reaching implications for the equitable treatment of citizens and resource allocation. In order to turn citizens into active change agents, it is critical to build the capacity and willingness of public officials for a good citizen engagement strategy.
- Focus on building specific civic capacities which people can use to engage with locally relevant issues- Most of the focus on citizen engagement has been on strengthening citizens' motivation and capacity to engage. The kind of capacity support to be provided to citizens is not only about how to obtain, analyse and use information but also about how to organise, and manage political relations and form alliances with other citizen groups, legislators, politicians, civil society, bureaucrats and the media across all levels depending on the broader local context.
- Promote equitable and inclusive citizen engagement- Social inclusion² is the ultimate goal towards promoting sustainable citizen engagement. Important social groups such as women, people with disability, senior citizens and people living on the margins such as migrants and slum dwellers, ethnic and religious minorities, etc. tend to be excluded from civic participation. It is important to create opportunities and respond to the needs of vulnerable groups wherein they are enabled to engage in civic matters concerning their lives.

7. Recommended Readings

- [ADB- Engaging Citizens and Civil Society to Promote Good Governance and Development Effectiveness](#)
- [IDR - How do citizens engage with their cities](#)
- [MEITY- Framework for Citizen Engagement in eGovernance](#)
- [MoHUA- National Urban Policy Framework](#)

² Amartya Sen describes social inclusion as “being characterised by societal elements that would include the active participation by citizens, equality of opportunities, and basic levels of wellbeing.”

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