

# Citizen Engagement in Public Service Delivery

## The Critical Role of Public Officials



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## Foreword

This is the twelfth in our Centre's series of Discussion Papers, which put forward ideas for, and approaches to, improving public service in developing countries, especially with the aim of achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This paper suggests that reform-minded public officials can improve development results by using citizen engagement in a variety of ways: to elicit information and ideas, support public service improvements, defend the public interest from 'capture' and clientelism, strengthen the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of citizens and bolster accountability and governance in the public sector.

Based on analysis of five case studies exploring recent citizen engagement initiatives in different parts of the world this paper posits that there are no blueprints for the design and implementation of such initiatives or standardised and replicable tools. Instead it suggests that successful and sustainable citizen engagement is ideally developed through "a process of confrontation, accommodation, trial and error in which participants discover what works and gain a sense of self-confidence and empowerment".

The key advice for agencies and practitioners promoting citizen engagement is that they should identify pro-reform public officials, elected representatives and citizens, understand their motivations and incentives and think through how broad pro-reform coalitions can be established and supported. It is also important to examine and understand the wider socio-political environment and the power structures in which state-society relations are rooted.

An engaged citizenry working alongside and enabling public officials, in joint stewardship of the public good, can help transform public services and give people the effective, honest and responsive public institutions they deserve. Such transformed public institutions can certainly help nations achieve their SDG targets, not least by helping to improve the morale and motivation of public officials.

**Max Everest-Phillips**  
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## Introduction

Citizen involvement in public affairs is not new – over centuries and throughout the world citizens have actively participated in the deliberation of local issues, decision making within their communities and the selection of their leaders. In the last couple of decades, we have witnessed a profusion of citizen engagement initiatives, such as community development committees, citizen satisfaction surveys, public consultations, participatory planning, budget consultations and social audits. Using such initiatives, citizens seek solutions to specific problems in the public sector by engaging<sup>1</sup> constructively with public officials<sup>2</sup> and the political leadership.

Advocates of citizen engagement celebrate its intrinsic and instrumental value. They relate its intrinsic value to the concept of human capabilities put forward by Amartya Sen, according to which citizen engagement gives people a voice in the development process and enables them to speak up against injustices and discrimination<sup>3</sup>. By fostering human capabilities and promoting fundamental freedoms, citizen engagement contributes to people's wellbeing and quality of life. From an instrumental perspective, citizen engagement is promoted as a means to achieving a range of development and governance goals, such as reduced corruption, improved public services, increased social capital, etc.

From such an excess of virtues and uses, this paper will concentrate on one particular feature of citizen engagement – the way it can be used to support the effective delivery of key public services such as education, water supply, waste collection, etc. Although this topic is relevant to any country, this paper will focus on low and middle income countries<sup>4</sup>, where inadequate public services represent a key development challenge. Citizen engagement will be examined as an instrument for strengthening the delivery process, ultimately contributing to poverty reduction and the attainment of other development outcomes.

Moreover, unlike a lot of the literature on citizen engagement which has traditionally focused on the citizen-state dichotomy (with the state represented primarily by the political leadership or top policymakers), this paper will concentrate on the crucial role of public officials in the engagement process and will explore various strategies of partnership between public officials and citizens in the pursuit of shared goals.

1 The terms "engagement", "involvement" and "participation" have been used interchangeably in this paper. As this paper does not delve into the differences of impact that various forms of engagement produce, all references to engagement (or involvement or participation) apply to the whole continuum of engagement types. Also, throughout this paper, the term "engagement" refers to all levels of government (national and sub-national).

2 The term "public official" in this paper is used to describe non-elected public sector employees.

3 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1999).

4 The definition of low and middle income countries is based on World Bank categories.

## Box 1: Characteristics of citizen engagement

### Citizen engagement may:

- ▶ Involve citizens individually or in the form of collective action (including civil society organisations). While both forms of citizen engagement are important, a critical mass of people is often crucial for strengthening social accountability<sup>5</sup>.
- ▶ Be achieved through different mechanisms (i.e. citizen satisfaction surveys, public consultations, participatory planning, budget consultations, community scorecards, social audits, etc.)<sup>6</sup>. Often, there are no clear boundaries as they overlap or may be used in combination. Advances in ICT has further expanded opportunities for public participation and facilitated the emergence of new forms of engagement such as crowdsourcing, online consultations, interactive mapping, etc.
- ▶ Be organic or induced, although there may be a degree of overlap between the two. Organic engagement emerges endogenously and is usually motivated by pressing social concerns and led by highly-motivated civic leaders. It may take different forms of civic expression, varying from the agreeable to the confrontational, aimed at contesting and reshaping the balance of power. By contrast, induced engagement is typically initiated by the state through policy action and is implemented by the bureaucracy<sup>7</sup>.
- ▶ Be a short-term exercise or a sustained long-term commitment. Sometimes, short-term engagement is driven by donor requirements and may be undertaken as a "box-checking" exercise. To be sustainable, citizen engagement requires commitment from citizens and the state, and can then become integrated into governance processes.
- ▶ Be constructive, confrontational or even disruptive. Given that it directly affects the balance of power between state and society, citizen engagement can be seen as a process of confrontation and accommodation between the state and citizens. Whether it leads to disruption or conflict depends on a variety of factors related to dynamics of engagement, objectives of stakeholders and the socio-political context.
- ▶ Be spontaneous, informal or formal and underpinned by clearly-defined rules and norms. Organic initiatives, by their nature, tend to be more spontaneous, although they may become formalised over time.
- ▶ Take place with or without the mediation of civil society. Civil society may play different roles: it may initiate the engagement process or mediate the interaction between the citizens and the state. While mediation by civil society could help create the critical mass necessary for collective action, yet on the other hand civil society organisations may get captured by vested interests.
- ▶ Take place at different levels - at the local, regional, sector, national or global level - depending on the objectives of engagement.

5 Anuradha Joshi (2008), 'Producing social accountability? The impact of service delivery reforms', *IDS Bulletin*, 38 (6), 10–17.

6 For a list of various forms of citizen engagement see Annex 1 (page 20) of the following publication: *How-To Notes: How, When, and Why to Use Demand-Side Governance Approaches in Projects*, Social Development Department, World Bank, 2011.

7 Ghazala Mansuri & Vijayendra Rao (2013): *Can Participation be induced? Some evidence from Developing Countries*, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 16:2, 284-304.



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## Value of citizen engagement for public officials

Frontline public service providers, such as nurses, teachers and social workers, interact with their clients on a daily basis, so for them engaging with citizens is nothing new. What is different, however, about citizen engagement in public service delivery is that engagement may take place anywhere along the delivery continuum - from involvement with up-stream policy making to closer interaction with frontline service providers at the point of delivery - and that citizens can be empowered *vis-à-vis* public officials to monitor performance, influence decision making or even take part in the design and delivery of services.

To understand citizen engagement in the context of service delivery, it is useful to consider the roles of the three main sets of actors involved - citizens, politicians and public officials.

- ▶ **Citizens** provide the political leadership with the authority to govern and expect in return effective governance and public services. This is referred to as the “social contract”.
- ▶ **Politicians** (those in positions of leadership) derive their legitimacy from citizens’ acceptance of their authority. They aggregate the preferences of citizens and deploy state bureaucracy and resources to fulfil the citizens’ expectations. For their results, they are largely accountable to the citizens. This is called “*political accountability*”<sup>8</sup>.
- ▶ **Public officials** implement the strategic direction provided by the political leadership and deliver public services to citizens. They are accountable directly to politicians (what is called “*bureaucratic accountability*”) and only indirectly to the citizens. When citizens engage with public officials, they may exact accountability directly from them. This is called “*social accountability*”<sup>9</sup>.

The role of each set of actors is equally important because the way they interact and collaborate largely determines the effectiveness and quality of service delivery. However, citizens and politicians often receive disproportionate attention in development research and practice compared to public

officials. The interests and motivations of citizens and politicians are carefully identified and their roles in promoting change in the public sector closely examined, whereas public officials, by contrast, are often treated as the target of the intervention - i.e. the matter that needs fixing - rather than potential agents of change. Sandwiched between citizens and politicians, public service is often seen as a monolithic structure that needs to be reined in by politicians and kept in check by citizens. Few attempts have been made to understand the internal dynamics of public organisations and disaggregate the interests and motivations of public officials whose actions are just as important for service delivery as those of other actors (see Box 1). Questions about the usefulness of citizen engagement from the perspective of public officials are rarely raised. This section will examine the value of citizen engagement for public officials and will answer the following questions:

- ▶ *Why should public officials care about citizen engagement?*
- ▶ *What does it mean for them and how can they benefit from it?*
- ▶ *What may be the impact of engagement at the organisational/system level?*

## Box 2: Heterogeneity of the public service and diversity of attitudes to reform

- ▶ The state bureaucracy is typically a large structure with a lot of diversity in terms of performance, culture, interests and motivations. Horizontally, across organisations and sectors of government, there is a lot of cultural and performance heterogeneity, with ineffective sections co-existing with more effective domains<sup>10</sup>. Some sections of the bureaucracy may be in favour of reform and responsive to change, and others not. Broader reform dynamics in the public sector are largely shaped by the interaction and power struggles between the various sections of the bureaucracy.
- ▶ Similarly, there is a lot of heterogeneity vertically, with various levels in the organisational chain performing differently and having different interests and attitudes to reform. This can be within an organisation (i.e. managers vs. frontline workers) or between the levels of government (i.e. national vs. sub-national).
- ▶ It is also important to think of public officials as individuals whose actions are shaped by the incentives they face, as well as intrinsic motivations. They may act on an individual basis, using their discretion and based on personal preferences, or an organisational basis, driven by the culture, standards and procedures of their organisation.

The main point here is that the state bureaucracy is not a homogeneous structure. It consists of various actors with differing interests, motivations and predispositions to change. Therefore, citizen engagement as an instrument of reform will be met with varying degrees of receptivity and opposition in the public service. It will be embraced by those who are in favour of reform and will be opposed by those whose vested interests appear threatened.

<sup>8</sup> This description applies largely to democracies and some authoritarian regimes. Exceptions are the highly repressive totalitarian regimes where the actions of the political leadership are highly disconnected from the preferences of the citizens.

<sup>9</sup> See Annex I for the definition of social accountability and a description of how accountability works in the public sector.

<sup>10</sup> Levy, Brian and Walton, Michael. *Institutions, Incentives and Service Provision: Bringing Politics Back In* (February 1, 2013). Effective States and Inclusive Development (ESID) Working Paper No 18.

As a process, citizen engagement is not a magic wand that can automatically resolve any delivery issue. But, if deployed effectively, it can help public officials improve the quality and accessibility of services. The rest of this section will focus on four key reform challenges public officials face in middle and low-income countries, i.e. improving the effectiveness of service delivery, serving the public interest, enhancing legitimacy and strengthening accountability.

**Improving the effectiveness of service delivery** – The delivery of public services is typically a highly complex undertaking, which involves a large number of transactions between service providers and recipients. To deal with such complexity, standardized and impersonal systems of public administration have been adopted by developing countries based on Western bureaucratic models<sup>11</sup>. Implementing such models elsewhere can be highly problematic because they restrict the discretion of service delivery staff, which is essential for the delivery of transaction-intensive services such as education. These models also downplay the idiosyncrasies of context and underestimate indigenous knowledge and tradition, which are crucial for effective uptake of supplied services. Some researchers<sup>12</sup> advocate more organic models of bureaucracy, which are more cognisant of local idiosyncrasies and evolve incrementally around the needs of citizens based on social innovation and bureaucratic entrepreneurship<sup>13</sup>. From this perspective, citizen engagement can help public officials deal with such complexity in a number of ways.

- ▶ Citizens may have a better idea than public officials about the kinds of services they need, so they can help service providers better understand their requirements and identify solutions. They may become directly involved in the design and delivery of services, a process referred to as *problem-solving collaboration*<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, public officials may use citizen engagement to elicit specific indigenous knowledge to help them tailor public services to the specific needs of the community.
- ▶ Citizen engagement can also be a powerful source of ideas and inspiration for social innovation and bureaucratic entrepreneurship.
- ▶ Citizens may be better positioned to assess the relevance and effectiveness of services, so they can contribute to the evaluation of programmes and services.
- ▶ Faced with funding constraints, public officials can mobilise additional funds from citizen contributions.
- ▶ Citizen engagement can provide a platform for inclusive deliberation, consensus and collective wisdom, which has been found to lead to better decision making.<sup>15</sup>

**Serving the public interest** – When the political leadership pursues special interests through clientelist policies, favouring

one group against the interests of the majority, government priorities do not reflect the needs of the citizenry at large and public funds are diverted to non-priority programmes (e.g., military upgrades). Consequently, key public organisations and programmes are starved of necessary funds and manpower to respond to citizen demands. This has serious implications for the equitable treatment of citizens and allocation of resources according to need<sup>16</sup>, two guiding principles of an effective public administration. Public officials may rely on citizen engagement initiatives to act as bulwarks against special interests and clientelist policies. The participatory budget initiatives which became popular in Brazil and have now spread throughout the world are good illustrations of citizen engagement being used in this way. By participating in the allocation of state resources, citizens may contribute to restraining the politicians' clientelist policies and build support for programmes which deliver priority services.

**Enhancing legitimacy** – State representatives (both politicians and public officials) have an inherent interest in strengthening trust in the public sector and ultimately their legitimacy in the eyes of society. Depending on the context, citizen engagement can strengthen state legitimacy in two ways:

- i) Where legitimacy is built on democratic processes that enable participation for all and promote decision-making that reflects shared values and preferences, citizen involvement in the governance process may add to state legitimacy<sup>17</sup>. This happens in countries with open, democratic systems where citizen engagement boosts state legitimacy through democratic governance.
- ii) Where legitimacy is built on performance and the ability of the state to effectively provide security, welfare and justice for the public, citizen engagement supplements the democratic deficit by increasing trust between society and the state through its effects on corruption, state responsiveness, service delivery, etc. Viet Nam's Doi Moi model is a typical example of state legitimacy derived mainly from state performance and responsiveness to citizens' needs when other sources of legitimacy are limited<sup>18</sup>.

**Strengthening accountability** – Lack of accountability in the public sector is perhaps the single most important factor for failures in service delivery (see Annex I for a short description of how accountability works in the public sector)<sup>19</sup>. Accountability may fail anywhere in the long chain of command that starts with the political leadership and ends at the point of delivery. For instance, accountability may fail when politicians interfere on the basis of patronage with appointments and decision making in the public service, undermining its two key pillars – meritocracy and the culture of effectiveness, both of which have a direct impact on the quality of service delivery<sup>20</sup>. As another example,

11 Lant Pritchett, Michael Woolcock and Matt Andrews (2010) *Capability Traps? The Mechanisms of Persistent Implementation Failure*. Center for Global Development Working Paper 234. Washington, D.C.

12 Ibid.

13 The term "bureaucratic entrepreneurship" refers to the entrepreneurship spirit of public officials within the bureaucracy.

14 Archon Fung, "Recipes for Public Spheres: Eight Institutional Design Choices and Their Consequences" in *Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 11, No. 3. (September 2003): 338-67.

15 Helene E. Landemore (2012) "Why the Many Are Smarter than the Few and Why It Matters," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 7.

16 Peter C. Humphreys, (1998) *Improving Public Service Delivery*, Committee for Public Management Research Discussion Paper 7, Institute of Public Administration.

17 Archon Fung, 2007. *Democratic Theory and Political Science: A Pragmatic Method of Constructive Engagement*. *American Political Science Review* 101(3):443-58.

18 Le Hong Hiep, *Performance-Based Legitimacy: The Case of the Communist Party of Vietnam and Doi Moi*. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2012), pp. 145-72.

19 World Bank, "World Development Report: Making Services Work for Poor People", 2003.

20 James E. Rauch and Peter B. Evans (2000), "Bureaucratic Structure and Bureaucratic Performance in Less Developed Countries," *Journal of Public Economics* 75: 49-71.

accountability may also fail at the point of delivery<sup>21</sup>, when, given the transaction-intensive and discretionary nature of public services<sup>22</sup>, it becomes difficult to monitor the performance of service providers, especially in remote and poor areas where the services are most needed. In both cases, citizen engagement may play a positive role in service delivery. In the first instance, committed public officials may enlist the support of citizen initiatives to defend meritocracy and the culture of effectiveness from political interference. In the second example, public officials may rely on citizen monitoring to reduce corruption and strengthen service delivery at the grassroots in their sectors or departments. An illustration of the monitoring role citizens can play at point of delivery are social audits which have gained traction in several countries.

Discussed thus far are the main ways in which citizen engagement can help public officials effect change in service delivery and strengthen quality and transparency. Yet, the actual outcomes will depend on the types of engagement chosen and will largely be shaped by the context. The rest of this paper will focus on analysing these factors – i.e. the forms, strategies and contexts of engagement – from five country case studies.

### Conventional wisdom and alternative thinking about strategies of citizen engagement

Public sector reformers, community leaders, development practitioners and others interested in leveraging citizen engagement to improve public services want to know what forms and strategies of engagement are more effective in supporting reform. When getting involved with or supporting participatory initiatives, they need to understand which actors are more likely to participate, for what reasons and when they choose to engage, and how the engagement process takes place and produces desirable outcomes. Although our knowledge of what works and what doesn't remains limited, there are valuable lessons to be drawn from a number of initiatives around the world that have resulted in success or failure<sup>23</sup>. The rest of this section will examine key engagement strategies<sup>24</sup> by drawing distinctions between traditional models, that are largely promoted by donor agencies<sup>25</sup>, and alternative approaches which are based on a more dynamic and disaggregated understanding of engagement<sup>26</sup>. All along, the focus will remain on the role of public officials in the process.

21 Teacher absenteeism, leakages of public funds, bribing of doctors and nepotism in recruitment are all examples of inadequate behaviour resulting from accountability failures.

22 Lant Pritchett and Michael Woolcock. (2002). *Solutions When the Solution is the Problem: Arraying the Disarray in Development*. Center for Global Development Working Paper 10, Washing. DC; Center for Global Development.

23 For a definition of success and failure and many examples of citizen engagement initiatives see John Gaventa and Gregory Barrett. (2010) *So What Difference Does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement*, IDS Working Paper 348, Brighton: IDS.

24 It should be noted that the strategies discussed in this section are by no means all that exists or matters in the realm of citizen engagement. The strategies presented in this section are selected based on the fact that they provide an alternative to what can be considered traditional approaches to citizen engagement.

25 By donor agencies this paper refers to multilateral and bilateral development organisations like the UNDP, World Bank, Swedish SIDA, etc.

26 These alternative approaches mark a departure from the widely used World Bank "long-route accountability framework" described in Annex 1.

Figure 1: The Spectrum of Public Participation



Source: International Association for Public Participation ([www.iap2.org/](http://www.iap2.org/)).

### Technical approach vs. power relations

Development agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have traditionally conceived citizen engagement as a "technical tool" for stimulating citizen demand for better services. Their focus has been on strengthening citizens' motivations and capacity to engage, with much less attention paid to the willingness and capacity of state actors, especially public officials, for engagement. Most participatory projects have been implemented on the basis of standardized "best-practice" models, copied from successful cases and almost invariably consisting of the following stages: 1) identify a specific problem to be addressed (i.e. health, education, infrastructure, etc.); 2) create an interface for public officials to share information with the citizens (i.e. community committees, user associations, town hall meetings, budget deliberations, etc.); 3) incentivise and build the capacity of citizens to use the information and voice their concerns (e.g. financial incentives and training); and, 4) establish formal rules to keep the space for participation open. The basic assumption behind this approach is that if some space for participation is created, training is provided and information is shared, better public services will follow<sup>27</sup>.

Reform<sup>28</sup>, however, rarely emerges as a technical solution to a governance problem. Effective support for participatory initiatives requires a more nuanced and political understanding of citizen engagement.

- ▶ First, experience suggests that technical approaches to citizen engagement uniformly applied to any environment, regardless of context, rarely work because they ignore and depoliticise the political processes that underpin power relations within and between state and society<sup>29</sup>. Power and interests are tightly intertwined in a process that shapes public choices that are made - interests determine policy preferences, power determines whose interests prevail and

27 Bjorn-Soren Giggler and Savita Bailur. (2014). *Closing the Feedback Loop Can Technology Bridge the Accountability Gap?* Washington, The World Bank, 2014.

28 Reform in this context can be broadly defined as a process of change aimed at improving service delivery for all citizens.

29 Shantayanan Devarajan, Stuti Khemani, and Michael Walton. 2011. *Civil Society, Public Action and Accountability in Africa*. HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP11-036, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

political interactions convert policy preferences into policy decisions. When seen as a corollary of power relations, reform is fundamentally political and as such it requires not only technical inputs but also political mobilisation and support to be sustained. It is unrealistic to assume that carving out space for citizen engagement will automatically change the outcome of power relations in favour of reform and effective service delivery.

- ▶ Second, by focusing primarily on the citizen, traditional approaches underestimate the important role state actors play. First, it is not only citizens who initiate engagement initiatives - they may be stimulated and led (or suppressed) by politicians and public officials when it is in their interests to have citizens make demands on the government. But even when they are initiated by citizens, the state's response is just as important because the state is the other half of the equation and what it does shapes the outcome of the interaction. Therefore, it is essential to take into account not only the interests of citizens, but also the (vested) interests of public officials and politicians.

**“Citizens vs. State” vs. “pro-reform vs. status-quo coalitions”**

The orthodox view of citizen engagement has other limitations. First, it downplays the importance of collective action, by placing disproportionately more emphasis on the role of the individual. This is reflected in the importance donor-funded projects give to the capacity needs of individuals (i.e. training on processing and analyzing information, formulating priorities, etc.), as opposed to the needs of the collective for organisational and political skills and capacities to forge coalitions and alliances across boundaries. Second, the prevailing orthodoxy views the state and society as two monolithic structures clearly divided by a boundary, with citizens on one side demanding quality services and state actors on the other one supplying them<sup>30</sup>. The focus of this approach is not so much on what goes on within the state or society, but on the interaction that takes place along the boundary. Seen through the lens of power relations, however, the reality is a lot more complex and nuanced than this model suggests.

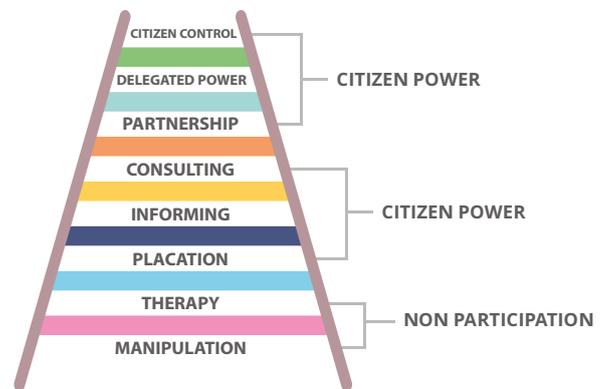
- ▶ First, given the unequal positions of power between the state and the individual citizen, collective action assumes greater importance than individual action<sup>31</sup>. It aggregates citizen power, amplifies citizen voice and strengthens the

citizens and turn them into active agents of change. A lot of potential is thus left untapped.

- ▶ Second, instead of seeing the state and society as homogeneous entities, it makes more sense to think of them as heterogeneous networks of power-wielding actors, complete with their internal hierarchies, conflicts and power dynamics and competing with each other on the basis of interests. Some of these networks may be in favour of reform and others opposed to it or even complicit in “bad” governance. From this perspective, supporters and opponents of reforms may be found on either side of the state-society divide. Reform may originate and be driven from below (by citizens), above (by politicians), within (by public officials) and outside (by international organisations and donors)<sup>32</sup>.

Therefore, instead of talking about “citizens versus the state”, it makes more sense to frame the discussion in terms of “reformers versus supporters of the status-quo”<sup>33</sup> and think how to create and sustain pro-reform alliances that compete with status-quo coalitions and how to avoid the capture of social movements by anti-reform groups<sup>34</sup>. What ultimately matters is which coalition gets to set the agenda and make the decisions based on the power they have, which depends on how organized each group is and what kinds of networks and alliances they have established<sup>35</sup>.

**Figure 2: Ladder of Participation**



Source: Arnstein, Sherry R. "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," Journal of the American Institute of Planners, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 1969, pp. 216-224.

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