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**Application of the principles of effective governance for
sustainable development for the achievement of the
Sustainable Development Goals**

Promoting the governance principle of participation in support of the Sustainable Development Goals

Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat has the honour to transmit to the Committee of Experts on Public Administration the paper prepared by Committee member Najat Zarrouk in collaboration with fellow Committee members Rolf Alter, Juraj Nemec and Sherifa Sherif.

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Promoting the governance principle of participation in support of the Sustainable Development Goals

Summary

The authors examine the governance principle of participation, which is essential to building inclusive institutions at all levels and is a crucial pillar of democracy. Strategies that promote participation are key to strengthening and legitimizing government decisions and actions, and to promoting trust in public institutions. The authors emphasize that policies to implement the Sustainable Development Goals should be developed in a participatory, inclusive and collaborative fashion. Public participation is important to ensure that all stakeholders are being heard and that their views are taken into account. Institutionalized methods of participation can also enhance ownership of public policies and support implementation and monitoring of the Goals at all levels. The authors note that participation at the subnational level has been found to be particularly impactful as it empowers local governments and communities and can lead to better, more targeted development outcomes for those concerned.

The authors elaborate on reasons to promote participation in public policymaking and service delivery, while also describing implementation challenges, notably public sector resistance and political culture, as well as insufficient administrative capacity and absence of standard operating procedures, among other structural and contextual factors. They emphasize the need for Governments to create an enabling environment for public participation, particularly where there may be a lack of trust in institutions or a rise of populist movements and extremism. Political will, capacity-building, civic education, a change of mindsets in the public sector and provision of sufficient funding are some of the main elements of such an enabling environment.

The authors address questions pertaining to the design and implementation of participatory processes and provide an overview of strategies, mechanisms, tools and practices found to be effective in various contexts. Insights into the role of participation in monitoring and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are proposed. The authors conclude with a set of recommendations for enhancing participation in view of ongoing global crises, delays in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and a lack of trust in government observed in many countries.

I. Background

1. The present paper is focused on participation, which is associated with inclusiveness, and is one of the 11 principles of effective governance for sustainable development adopted by the Economic and Social Council in 2018. In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the concept of participation is reflected in target 16.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals, “ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels”. A number of other targets also refer to participation, such as targets 6.b (on participation of local communities in water and sanitation management), 10.2 (on social, economic and political inclusion) and 11.3 (on participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management).

2. The issue of participation has featured in the Committee’s deliberations since its first session in 2002. Initial discussions were focused on enhancing the capacity of public administration, tools for engagement in particular situations and the promotion of collaborative approaches to policy processes. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda in 2015, the Committee has turned its attention to participatory governance for the promotion of inclusive approaches to sustainable development and integrated and inclusive implementation and review of the Sustainable Development Goals, including through civil society and private sector involvement and the engagement of vulnerable groups.

3. Through its analysis and discussion, the Committee has underlined that successful achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and their integration into national policies are associated with effective engagement of non-State actors in decision-making processes. The need for participatory institutions and institutionalized public participation in policy development and service delivery, including the participation of the public in the monitoring and evaluation of the participatory processes themselves, has therefore been stressed.

4. Most recently, the Committee has examined the issue of participation within the context of the application of the principles of effective governance for sustainable development for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. At its twentieth session (2021), the Committee focused on ways to strengthen the analytical basis for reform policies based on the governance principles, including by engaging with and building on the work of the Praia Group on Governance Statistics of the Statistical Commission in this area.¹ At its twenty-first session (2022), the Committee focused on the application of the principles at the subnational level, bearing in mind that subnational governments were very diverse in terms of policies, capacities, access to resources and engagement with other actors.

5. In the light of ongoing global challenges and crises, such as climate change and the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the authors attempt to draw renewed attention to the important issue of participation within the context of the fundamental principles of effective governance by weaving together various threads of discussion and suggesting a way forward. They recall reasons to promote participation and elaborate on how to establish an enabling environment for effective public participation processes while providing an illustration of good practices in the application of the principle of participation that can accelerate delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals.

¹ See for example, Alexandra Wilde and others, “Participation in political and public affairs”, in *Handbook on Governance Statistics* (Praia City Group, 2020).

II. Definitions and typologies of public participation

Different definitions

6. Public participation has been studied extensively and different definitions are being used.² The lack of clarity in the definition of the concepts that are used by different scholar and practitioner communities has been described as an impediment by experts. One among various definitional issues is the fact that many commonly used scales of participation (e.g., the one produced by the International Association for Public Participation) include “information” as one category, thus creating an overlap with the concepts of access to information and transparency. Another is the overlap between participatory mechanisms and social accountability mechanisms as, for many experts, social accountability includes participation and engagement as core components.³

7. The principle of participation holds that, to have an effective State, all significant political groups should be actively involved in matters that directly affect them and have a chance to influence policy. Building on this fundamental insight, public participation is understood for the purposes of this paper as any process that engages and considers input from members of the public (those not holding office or administrative positions in government) when making a decision or taking action, including co-creation, co-production, interactive or citizen-initiated policymaking, or collaboration in service provisions. It excludes discussion of indirect participation through representative systems.

Different typologies of public participation

8. Different typologies of public participation have been developed. A seminal example is the “Ladder of citizen participation” developed by Sherry Arnstein (1969)⁴ which describes how empowered public institutions and officials can deny power to citizens and how levels of citizen agency, control and power can be increased. Citizen participation is seen as being equivalent to citizen power ranging from “non-participation” (through manipulation and therapy); to “tokenism” (through informing, consultation and placation) to “citizen control” (through partnership, delegation and citizen control).

9. The International Association for Public Participation developed the Spectrum of Public Participation to help define the public’s role in any public participation process. It comprises five general modes of public participation, namely, inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower, indicating an increasing level of shared decision authority.

III. Reasons to promote participation

Participation as a human right

10. Public participation is the fundamental right of all people to participate actively in governance systems and policies; recognizing the intrinsic value of all people, taking into account their culture, knowledge and experiences, as well as their ability

² See for example, Kathryn S. Quick and John M. Bryson, “Public participation”, in *Handbook on Theories of Governance*, Christopher Ansell and Jacob Torfing, eds. (Northampton, Massachusetts, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016).

³ See also, *Sustainable Development Goal 16: Focus On Public Institutions – World Public Sector Report 2019* (United Nations publication, 2019), pp. 19–22.

⁴ Sherry R. Arnstein, “A ladder of citizen participation”, *Journal of American Institute of Planners*, vol. 35, No. 4 (1969).

to play a key role in governance processes, while ensuring that no one is left behind. It is crucial to building peaceful and resilient societies.⁵

11. Public participation has been highlighted in international law since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, with article 21 containing the right to take part in government, access public services and vote in elections. These rights were later codified in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (art. 25) and have since been reflected in a number of regional instruments, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (art. 13) and a number of European Union directives and regulations. The Human Rights Council recognizes equal and effective participation in political and public affairs as being of critical importance for democracy, the rule of law, social inclusion, economic development and advancing gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, as well as for the realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

12. The importance of participation and engagement of non-State actors specifically for the realization of sustainable development was recognized in Agenda 21, which stated that "one of the fundamental prerequisites for the achievement of sustainable development is broad public participation in decision-making". This notion was later reaffirmed in several other sustainable development outcome documents, such as the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg Plan of Implementation), "The future we want", outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement on climate change, the New Urban Agenda and the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction.

13. The value of public participation in environmental decision-making specifically is, inter alia, reflected in principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, the Guidelines on Access to Environmental Information and Public Participation in Environmental Decision-Making of the Economic Commission for Europe, the Aarhus Convention of 1998 and, more recently, in the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú Agreement).

Stakeholder engagement to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals

14. Stakeholder engagement supporting coordinated action among all levels of government and with non-State actors, paired with the definition of integrated, common visions and strategies for the future, is crucial for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and for tackling global multidimensional challenges and crises. This can be achieved only by working across the internal and external boundaries of public organizations, balancing perspectives from different actors operating in different sectors and engaging vulnerable and marginalized groups to leave no one behind.⁶

15. Success in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals will greatly depend on how effectively Governments engage different groups, such as parliaments, local authorities, civil society, the private sector, scientific and academic communities, and vulnerable groups, such as the poor, the elderly, persons with disabilities, youth, indigenous peoples and women, to be able to better respond to their specific needs and enhance acceptance and ownership of public policies. For example, there is a need to ensure that women and girls are empowered and, through adequate public participation measures, centrally involved in all Goal implementation and monitoring

⁵ International Peacebuilding Advisory Team, "Public participation and citizen engagement: effective advising in State-building and peacebuilding contexts – how", 2015.

⁶ *Working Together: Integration, Institutions and the Sustainable Development Goals – World Public Sector Report 2018* (United Nations publication, 2018).

efforts. In addition, there is a need to create appropriate civic spaces to mobilize young people (currently 1.8 billion worldwide) to give them the opportunity to express their needs, expectations and ambitions, gather their ideas and foster their active involvement in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

16. While participation is often portrayed as the path to consensus on policy decisions, consensus may not always be reached. How trade-offs and synergies among Goals are addressed depends on the views and interests of the various stakeholders involved in participatory processes and on how far their influence reaches. While governments are expected to exercise judgment in decision-making, being able to improve understanding among stakeholders through dialogue could be an important result in itself, and potentially lead to enhanced policy coherence and public acceptance of policies intended to advance sustainable development when compromise is required.

Public participation for effective governance

17. Well-designed, public participation can have considerable benefits. Public participation is crucial for inclusive decision-making and an indicator of a healthy civic culture which can pave the way to higher citizen satisfaction.⁷ It can support effective governance by promoting transparency, justice and accountability and limiting the potential for corruption, while enhancing the effectiveness of public action, the legitimacy of and trust in institutions, and ensuring adherence to and acceptance of and support for policy decisions.

18. Public participation can serve as a convening mechanism that links the government, civil society and the private sector and help build a common understanding about opportunities, challenges and needs, priorities and programmes.

19. Public participation can also lead to a better understanding of specific challenges that the Government wants to address by giving a better sense of the related priorities, needs and expectations of people. Public participation can thus improve the quality of decision-making processes by avoiding adopting unpopular or inadequate policy decisions, which might not lead to concrete results or lack significant impact on sustainable development and might be too time or budget consuming. It can generate new ideas on how to tackle specific issues while reducing the risk of taking into account only the interests of selected (elite) groups in a country. Lastly, it allows governments to gain support for the implementation of policies and projects and their impacts.

Public participation to empower subnational governments and communities

20. At its fourteenth session, the Committee pointed out that decentralization of power to the provincial and local levels – as written into constitutions, laws and regulations – is pertinent within the context of responsive service delivery and the building of trust in government. Experience shows that the further removed citizens are from a connection to the political decisions that are taken, the greater the effort needed to inform and convince them of the benefits accruing from such decisions. Decentralization allows for the participation of local communities and grass-roots organizations, and it is the proximity of subnational government representatives, responding to citizens' concerns and taking into account their needs and well-being in the decision-making process, that increases the feeling of people of being taken seriously and participating effectively. Policy decisions based on public participation

⁷ See for example, Shaocheng Shi and others, "Is life satisfaction higher for citizens engaged in political participation: analysis based on the Chinese social survey", *PLOS One*, article No. e0279436 (2022).

can foster local and territorial development and empower local stakeholders while increasing their well-being.

Public participation and sustainable State-building

21. To build responsive and accountable States and bring about sustainable change, the contributions people can make to decision-making processes need to be recognized and supported. Public participation methods are well suited to the task as, taken together, they can empower people and raise their awareness of their rights and duties, making them well informed and well equipped to take on an active role in the sustainable development of their local communities. Effective citizen participation contributes significantly to democratic outcomes and can support the building of peaceful and stable States, while supporting sustainable development.

IV. Creating an enabling environment for public participation

22. Public participation is a key lever to strengthening and legitimizing government decisions and developmental actions and promoting trust in public institutions. It supports effective governance and is a crucial pillar of democracy.

23. Ongoing global crises, such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, threaten Goal achievement and the sustainable development of countries worldwide. The democracies of some countries are threatened by increasing lack of trust in public institutions and leaders, combined with the rise of populist movements and extremist parties. In addition, several developing countries today find themselves in challenging situations in terms of stability, peace, security and sustainable and resilient development after attempting to directly adopt models of Western democracies. To build and/or rebuild trust in public institutions, it is important to create an enabling environment for public participation, but there is no ideal formula or one-size-fits-all approach.

Political will and change of mindset

24. An enabling environment for public participation requires political will, a change of mindset and daily efforts, at all levels of governance. It should be created in an integrated, coherent, coordinated and consultative way, ideally based on dialogue and consensus, to ensure that appropriate reforms are undertaken when necessary and in due time.

25. Decisions on whether to promote public participation in policymaking should be independent of the views or personal preferences of public servants and political leaders. Ideally, open and inclusive consultations by public sector entities should be made mandatory through a constitutional or statutory act, and supported by the development of related regulatory provisions and frameworks that adhere to human rights standards.

Equal involvement of all stakeholders

26. In line with its own constitution, each State has the duty and responsibility to create, promote and anchor an enabling environment for public participation, allowing the involvement of all stakeholders on the path to sustainable development, in a spirit of mutual trust and respect. By doing so, it should take into account its history and culture, the maturity of its citizenship, its level of development and past reforms, while adhering to and respecting international and regional legal provisions.

27. Participatory processes are frequently dominated by interest groups which are better equipped, more experienced and well connected with decision makers. Efforts

to leave no one behind are therefore not just an issue of broad inclusion, but also of giving equal consideration to the voices of different stakeholders, independently of their capacities and capabilities. One option is to constitute citizen councils comprised of all population groups, which can increase representation and allow public institutions to provide equal support to all stakeholders.

Proactive role of civil society

28. Participation is frequently interpreted as governments inviting stakeholders to debate or contribute to policy proposals and be involved in decision-making processes. However, in some countries, members of civil society increasingly take a much more proactive approach. Rather than waiting for an invitation by governments to contribute or be involved, members of civil society identify their own agendas that they would like to discuss with governments. The “right to propose” is even codified in some countries, such as the Netherlands and Switzerland. Since governments and citizens should ideally interact as equal partners, the demand for governments to be more responsive to participatory initiatives taken by civil society is likely to grow.

Means of implementation

29. An enabling environment should also be created through the provision of sufficient financial and human resources. Skills and capacities of public servants and non-State stakeholders will have to be enhanced through adequate capacity-building efforts and awareness-raising. Learning by doing and peer learning among all stakeholders should be fostered, taking into account best practices and lessons learned.

Investing in civic education

30. Civic education is a crucial prerequisite for effective public participation, which should target both urban and rural citizens and include vulnerable groups, such as youth and women. A precondition for well-functioning democracies is the participation of educated citizens in public affairs. As participants, citizens should know their rights and demonstrate dedication to their duties so as to contribute to advancing societal interests. Good citizens are more than voters, consumers of public services and taxpayers. They are responsible for how well public life is organized, how issues are addressed and which politicians are elected as members of parliament, as members of locally elected councils and (in many countries) as heads of State.

31. Effective participation requires early and intensive capacity-building for public servants and non-State stakeholders, including by providing training and education to foster awareness of sustainable development. Several countries have integrated the Sustainable Development Goals into curricula and educational programmes and produced related educational materials. The next generation of political leaders is being shaped by schools and universities, which are critical to provide the tools and generate ambition and inspiration for new and innovative development solutions to be created and tested. There is therefore a need to invest in training and peer learning, based on appropriate needs assessments, including by developing sound curricula and allocating adequate budgets.

32. National schools of administration and research centres are key players in public participation, since they can support public authorities, nationally and locally, in training, capacity-building and scientific research efforts, as well as in the development of public policies and conceptual frameworks for public participation. They can also support the training of a pool of organizers and facilitators of public participation events. Lastly, public participation and related trends can be researched, monitored and evaluated in academic and research settings.

33. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs developed the Curriculum on Governance for the Sustainable Development Goals, the aim of which is to promote critical understanding of sustainable development issues, enhance governance capacity, and strengthen public servants' awareness of their active role in contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. It contains a comprehensive set of training of trainers' capacity development toolkits, which contain ready-to-use training materials on key governance dimensions needed to advance the implementation of the Goals. The curriculum training material can be used to run face-to-face and online training workshops at the national and local government levels.

V. Design and implementation issues

A. Designing public participation processes

34. Public participation can be undertaken and designed in different ways, depending on a country's context, history, social capital, level of development, priorities, objectives and available resources. Governments need to choose the right form of public participation to gain legitimacy, promote justice and inclusiveness and ensure effectiveness of public action.

35. Any public participation process needs to be based on a conceptual framework taking into account the following elements:

(a) **Issues to be addressed.** Issues to be tackled will need to be identified and described, including by deciding under which jurisdiction they fall (e.g., parliament, ministry, local government), identifying their potential causes and quantifying them;⁸

(b) **Stakeholders.** There is a need to identify the stakeholders which should be engaged, including by conducting mapping exercises and having criteria for the selection process in place. Special interest groups and vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as the poor, the youth, the elderly, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and women, will need to be identified to ensure that no one is left behind. It is also important to address the urban-rural divide given that people in rural areas tend to be less educated and poorer and are often underrepresented in the process of public participation. People and communities living in rural areas, often far from centres of power, are often not involved in decision-making processes, and their needs, priorities and expectations are not or only partially integrated into public policies, which reduces the impact of these policies and worsens the situation and well-being of rural people and communities. This can result in increases in rural exodus, anarchic urbanization, unemployment and poorly controlled migratory movements. Inclusive strategies to reach all stakeholders will have to be developed and their roles in the participation process clearly defined;

(c) **Objectives of the participation.** The goals and expected outcomes of the participation process will have to be clearly defined, including by giving a rationale for the participation process and applying scenario analysis.⁹

36. These elements are in line with the democracy cube introduced by Archon Fung, which is based on the assumption that participation has three dimensions: (a) who participates (issue of participant selection); (b) how participants exchange

⁸ Luigi Bobbio, "Designing effective public participation", *Public and Society*, vol. 38, No. 1 (March 2019).

⁹ Katrin Hofer and David Kaufmann, "Actors, arenas and aims: a conceptual framework for public participation", *Planning Theory* (2022).

information and make decisions (issue of communication and decision-making); and (c) how their inputs are linked to outcomes (issue of authority and power).¹⁰

37. The format of the participatory process, including timing, locations (appropriate and accessible venues), transportation to venue and language used, will have to be decided upon. Effective participation processes need to be developed, finding the right balance between participation and (hot or cold) deliberation and between face-to-face and virtual participation while guaranteeing fairness, neutrality and respect. All details should be clearly communicated to stakeholders and timely notice given by the government for participation, designation and mobilization of empowered facilitators. The figure provides a summary of the different aspects of effective public participation.

Elements of effective public participation



Source: Authors' elaboration based on good practice examples.

B. Main challenges hampering public participation

Resistance to public participation

38. Several forms of resistance to public participation can exist in countries, in particular owing to difficulties in changing the mindsets, attitudes and behaviours of public servants, including elected officials and political appointees. Public servants can sometimes be very attached to their roles, responsibilities and competences and averse to change, thus hampering public participation efforts, not allowing them to achieve their objectives or, in some cases, allowing only an “illusory” form of participation that misleads citizens into believing they are being given power in a

¹⁰ Archon Fung, “Varieties of participation in complex governance”, *Public Administration Review*, Special Issue: Collaborative Public Management, vol. 66 (December 2006).

process that has been intentionally crafted to deny them power. Public participation and opening decision-making processes to public debate is often seen as a risk of undermining and reducing the authority and the power of government officials, especially when they have been elected or appointed without free and fair elections, transparency, merit or respect for equal opportunity.

39. Some public servants justify their lack of support of public participation efforts by assuming a lack of interest from citizens in getting involved or a lack of education or understanding of the challenges discussed. In addition, they may list time and cost needed to put in place public participation mechanisms as deterring factors. In some countries, crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated such negative positions, attitudes and behaviours of public servants towards public participation at all levels of government.¹¹

40. If public servants are not well prepared, trained and motivated to facilitate and implement public participation, they can represent a serious obstacle and even play a harmful role in its design and implementation, since they have great influence, deciding on the degree to which the public will be involved and to what degree its inputs will be taken into account when making policy decisions while also controlling administrative resources and informing politicians and leaders.

Structural and contextual challenges

41. The design and implementation of public participation may have to overcome challenges which can be structural or contextual, depending on the context and state of democracy in each country. Socioeconomic factors, such as per capita income, education, digital literacy and geographical location, can have significant effects on the level of public participation.

42. Several challenges exist, which, if not addressed, can lead to ineffective public participation and increasing frustration among people, potentially leading to a lack of trust in public participation processes and public institutions, such as:

- Absence of standards to clearly define public participation and its expected results.
- Inadequate coordination among government agencies, resulting in duplication and competition.
- Lack of or insufficient inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized population groups, including rural population groups, due to lack of mapping and targeting of stakeholders.
- Lack of clear and consistent communication regarding public participation processes.
- Inadequate funding, or resources exist but are not allocated efficiently.
- Logistical issues (e.g., accessibility of location, available transport, languages used).
- Ineffective mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation, feedback and learning.

¹¹ Koen Migchelbrink and Steven Van de Walle, “A systematic review of the literature on determinants of public managers’ attitudes toward public participation”, *Local Government Studies*, vol. 48, No. 1 (2022). In this article, the authors emphasize, among the determinants of public managers’ attitudes towards public participation: the personal characteristics of the public managers; the process characteristics; the organizational structure and culture and the contextual features. The results of this study suggest that public managers’ attitudes are multidimensional and context specific.

- Minimalist attitude by public servants with efforts made only to ensure compliance with the law and regulations, without effectively advancing and enhancing public participation.
- Lack of continuity of public participation efforts.

43. In some countries citizens have begun to raise serious doubts about classic components of democracy, such as political parties, electoral processes and public institutions, owing to awareness of ongoing misconduct and corruption or the feeling of being left behind. Young people in particular are often less interested in party politics. In many developed and developing countries, a decline in political participation or an increase in extremist or populist movements has been noted.

44. Some citizens lack adequate awareness of their rights and responsibilities and those who do may lack the understanding, knowledge or skills for processing the issues at stake. These deficits require civic education that often remains inadequate. In addition, the lack of or inadequate implementation of citizens' priorities and feedback can discourage people from engaging in public participation processes in the future.

VI. Methods, tools, and examples

45. The implementation of public participation processes should be based on an action plan. Criteria for success include:

- Sufficient financial and human capacities at the national and local levels, including through possible funding and capacity-building support through partnerships in line with Sustainable Development Goal 17.
- Respect for cultural diversity and need to ensure that no one is left behind; for example, taking into account possible language, accessibility or literacy issues, and the income of target groups.
- Investment in information and communications technologies (ICTs) to facilitate public participation.
- Continuous evaluation of public participation processes by using impact assessments and feedback and reporting mechanisms, including systems for complaints and redress mechanisms.
- Adaptation of public participation processes, especially where new issues or needs are emerging.

46. The success of public participation also depends to a large extent on the existence of effective governance based on robust public institutions, effective public service delivery, a responsible, ethical and engaged leadership and engaged and enthusiastic public servants at all levels of government.

A. Strategies, mechanisms and tools for public participation

47. Public participation can vary from country to country regarding government openness and inclusion in public governance and decision-making processes. Commonly used strategies to operationalize the principle of public participation include regulatory and well-organized and managed processes of public consultation, multi-stakeholder forums and community-driven development.

Different mechanisms and institutional arrangements for public participation

48. The past few decades have witnessed the development of a multitude of participatory mechanisms, including consultation mechanisms; participatory management and co-management of natural resources; environmental and social impact assessments; co-creation/co-production and participatory budgeting. Participation is also a central component of social accountability initiatives, including social audits.

49. Co-creation and/or co-production, for example, is based on the idea that innovative solutions in public service delivery can be found, especially through collaboration with different stakeholders. One example is the active participation of local communities and grass-roots organizations to produce social outcomes that really matter to them.¹² Participatory budgeting is credited with bringing public administration closer to citizens' needs and preferences and has in some countries resulted in improvements for people living in poverty.¹³ The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy, for example, an international network open to all cities, organizations and research centres interested in learning about, exchanging and applying experiences of participatory democracy at the local level, supports local governments in fostering public participation.¹⁴

50. In addition, a great variety of institutionalized mechanisms exists, which may involve several types of stakeholders, operate at various levels of government and perform functions at different stages of the policymaking cycle. Some structures are led by governments, others by non-State actors. Some institutions have decision-making powers, while others are advisory bodies. Sometimes stakeholder representation is part of the high-level body that provides overall strategic direction for Sustainable Development Goal implementation, sometimes it is included at the technical or thematic level. Examples of such institutionalized mechanisms are sustainable development commissions, multisectoral committees or councils (e.g., national economic and social councils; national councils of sustainable development) and advisory and expert committees, which are established either by adapting existing (sustainable development) institutions or creating new ones.

51. Some countries apply whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches which are multilevel and collaborative governance frameworks that emphasize the need to approach policymaking processes in an integrated way, factoring in all government entities and members of society. Adopting these approaches is critical for advancing sustainable development, since they constitute the basis for policy coherence by requiring policymaking to happen in an integrated manner beyond institutional silos, promoting synergies and improving public accountability. Putting such governance frameworks in place requires the establishment of adequate coordination and participation mechanisms that ensure that public servants at all levels and all members of society take part effectively in policy design, implementation and monitoring processes.¹⁵

Different tools of public participation

52. A number of tools can be used to implement public participation processes, which can be used either to inform the public, generate and obtain input or to build

¹² Victor Bekkers, Lars Tummers and William Voorberg, "From public innovation to social innovation in the public sector: a literature review of relevant drivers and barriers", paper presented at the conference of the European Group for Public Administration, Edinburgh, September 2013.

¹³ Sónia Gonçalves, "The effects of participatory budgeting on municipal expenditures and infant mortality in Brazil", *World Development*, vol. 53 (January 2014).

¹⁴ See <https://oidp.net>.

¹⁵ United Cities and Local Governments, *Towards the Localization of the SDGs: How to Accelerate Transformative Actions in the Aftermath of the COVID-19 Outbreak* (Barcelona, 2019).

consensus and seek agreement. All these tools should enable stakeholders from different educational and professional backgrounds to present and discuss their alternative views on specific issues and to exchange ideas and experiences with government representatives.

53. **Tools to inform the public.** These include in-person tools, such as public meetings and briefings and remote tools, such as printed information, websites, information hotlines and kiosks, press and media, including social media.

54. **Tools to generate and obtain input.** These include interviews, focus groups, community (watchdog) groups, study circles, public meetings and hearings and public workshops. Public hearings, for example, are critical for open, transparent and democratic institutions. They facilitate public deliberation and debate over policies and other administrative matters, providing citizens with an avenue to directly address policymakers and voice their thoughts and concerns, especially regarding budgetary and planning issues. At the same time, they allow public officials to gain information about local challenges and needs and learn from the expertise and experiences of stakeholders.

55. **Tools to build consensus and seek agreements.** These include consensus workshops, advisory boards and citizen juries.¹⁶

56. All tools require the commitment of national and local governments to share information and engage the community in an open and fair dialogue. The views of stakeholders must not only be heard but also reflected in decisions and actions, thus making governments responsive, inclusive and accountable.

The use of information and communications technologies

57. Public participation can benefit from the use of new technologies and the ongoing digitalization of public institutions. E-participation, namely, the process of engaging citizens through ICTs, can serve as a catalyst towards greater inclusion but also carries the risk of privacy issues and of potentially excluding some stakeholders owing to the digital divide, which is affecting many population groups, as a consequence of lack of access and connectivity infrastructure, insufficient capacity-building and digital illiteracy.

58. To date, 2.9 billion people remain without access to the Internet – a major challenge that must urgently be addressed. The least developed countries are the least connected, with only 19 per cent of the population linked to digital networks. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs e-Government Survey 2022 found that, while most countries were committed to improving the provision of online services and user experiences, government efforts to actively engage the public in e-consultations and other forms of e-participation remained somewhat limited.¹⁷

Public participation in monitoring and oversight

59. Governments should also establish a venue for citizen participation in monitoring and oversight efforts, for example, through ad hoc selection committees or permanent citizen oversight and compliance boards. This form of public participation can help ensure an open public procurement environment which fosters ethical conduct in government contracting.

60. Community-based organizations or grass-roots associations can also play a role in monitoring and disseminating information about government initiatives. Some monitor local and national government issues and policies, correspond with media and government authorities, attend public hearings and speak for or against public

¹⁶ United States of America, Environmental Protection Agency, *Public Participation Guide* (2022).

¹⁷ *E-Government Survey 2022: The Future of Digital Government* (United Nations publication 2022).

policy proposals. They can play a vital role in complementing traditional accountability mechanisms and support building and/or rebuilding public trust in public institutions and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

61. Public participation can also extend to data collection activities. Governments should apply evidence-based policy planning and budgeting for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. The use of reliable data is the key to ensuring evidence-based government interventions, which should ensure that the most vulnerable and marginalized population groups are not left behind. Governments need solid baseline data and integrated data sources. They should also use data collected by the private sector, academia and civil society to supplement national statistics.

Participation in voluntary national reviews and related processes

62. As part of its follow-up and review mechanisms, the 2030 Agenda encourages Member States to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels, which are country-led and country-driven. Such voluntary national reviews are aimed at facilitating the sharing of experiences, including successes, challenges and lessons learned, with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The voluntary national reviews are also intended to strengthen policies and institutions of governments and to mobilize multi-stakeholder support and partnerships for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

63. Countries have established different national stakeholder engagement formats for delivering the 2030 Agenda and contributing to voluntary national review drafting processes. In the Arab region, for example, countries established participatory multi-stakeholder consultation processes to prepare for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Multi-stakeholder implementation initiatives do not exist yet in all countries of the region, but Egypt, Lebanon, Oman and the United Arab Emirates have taken initial steps to set up cross-sector initiatives. The involvement of parliaments, local governments, and vulnerable groups, such as youth, also varies. Morocco, the Sudan and Tunisia in their voluntary national reviews, for example, confirmed the involvement of these three stakeholder groups in the Goal implementation process.

64. In addition, as part of their advocacy and mobilization for the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals, local and regional authorities in different regions have initiated voluntary local reviews and voluntary subnational reviews to monitor and analyse Goal achievement at the subnational and local levels, based on participatory and inclusive approaches. These can also help reinforce vertical coherence and complement and contribute to national voluntary national reviews.

65. The Africa voluntary local review guidelines, designed in 2022 in partnership between the Economic Commission for Africa, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and United Cities and Local Governments of Africa, serve as a practical tool to support the preparation of voluntary local reviews by African local governments, drawing on both global best practices and specific experiences from African cities, towns and districts to set out key guiding principles and define a detailed voluntary local review template that can be adapted by local governments. A variety of specific tools are included to facilitate the mapping of local priorities against the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 of the African Union, data sourcing and analysis and stakeholder engagement. A framework is also provided to promote peer learning among localities. Better integrated policies and multi-stakeholder engagement, as advocated in the guidelines, will ensure that no

one is left behind, especially women, young people and other vulnerable and marginalized groups.¹⁸

66. In the European region, the *European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews – 2022 Edition* provides policymakers, urban practitioners and experts with a consolidated method and examples of indicators that European local and regional governments can use to monitor the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. It includes detailed and updated information on 72 indicators and related data sources, which can enable cities to measure their progress towards the 2030 Agenda.¹⁹

B. Examples of good practices in public participation

67. In New Zealand, the Local Government Act 2002 is designed to generate effective local governments that recognize the diversity of local communities. It enables local authorities to play a broad role in promoting community well-being, taking a sustainable development approach, by directing them to promote effective public participation. Inter alia, it includes provisions to consult with Māori and involve them in decision-making processes.²⁰

68. In Morocco, the Constitution of 2011 contains many chapters referring to public participation, and the Government of Morocco uses it to affirm its objective of consolidating and strengthening its institutions, based on the principles of participation, pluralism and good governance, developing a united society where everyone enjoys security, freedom, including freedom of worship, respect for cultural diversity, equal opportunities and social justice. These constitutional provisions are also reflected in institutional arrangements at all levels of governance, and in the laws governing the three levels of decentralization (regions; prefectures and provinces; and communes).²¹ However, it is important to underline that this system has its deep roots in an accumulation of judicious reforms since the accession to independence, a committed leadership at the highest level of the State and the involvement of all stakeholders of the country.

69. In Kenya, the Government developed a policy with the objective of providing a framework for the management and coordination of public participation to fulfil the constitutional requirement on citizen engagement in development and governance processes in the country. The policy has nine specific objectives, to be applied at all levels of government:

- (a) Ensure citizens continually access timely information on public issues in a language and format that is easy to understand;
- (b) Provide a framework for coordination and enabling environment for non-State actors involved in civic education;
- (c) Undertake coordinated and integrated capacity-building towards empowering responsible citizens and public institutions;
- (d) Promote effective public participation in planning, budgeting and implementation of approved plans and budgets;

¹⁸ Economic Commission for Africa, United Cities and Local Governments of Africa and United Nations Human Settlements Programme, *Africa Voluntary Local Review Guidelines* (2022).

¹⁹ Alica Siragusa and others, *European Handbook for SDG Voluntary Local Reviews* (Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022).

²⁰ See www.lgnz.co.nz/local-government-in-nz/local-government-basics.

²¹ See www.maroc.ma/fr; and www.collectivites-territoriales.gov.ma/fr/accueil.

- (e) Promote effective participation of minorities and marginalized groups at all levels;
- (f) Guarantee adequate, secure and sustainable funding for public participation;
- (g) Promote well-resourced, updated and effectively implemented monitoring, evaluation and learning systems for public participation;
- (h) Promote responsive, functional and timely feedback and reporting mechanisms in order to build confidence in public participation process;
- (i) Promote effective handling of complaints.²²

70. In addition, the Government of Kenya established the Kenya National Integrated Civic Education Programme, as a national framework for civic education in recognition of its important role for public participation.

71. In Slovakia, a successful co-creation project was carried out in Kojatice. The goal of the project was to build social houses for Roma citizens who are often underprivileged and poor. University students and Roma citizens were co-designers and co-initiators of the project, with the local government. Another actor was ETP Slovakia, a financial non-profit body, managing the common fund. The Roma citizens were involved in both building and financing the new houses with the hope to increase ownership and improve long-term maintenance.²³

72. In the United States of America, the Center for Public Service of the State University of Portland supports local governments in fostering public participation. Its goal is to build leadership and improve the effectiveness of public service professionals and organizations.

73. In the Arab region, different countries that presented their voluntary national reviews at the high-level political forum on sustainable development noted how effective public participation can lead to less corruption, more transparency and better laws and policies, as well as budgetary allocations that advance whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches. They also emphasized that raising public awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals and good governance practices can enable citizens to hold their Governments more accountable. Several voluntary national reviews, for example from 2017, highlighted participatory approaches used and innovative awareness-raising activities to increase ownership of the Goals.

74. In France, a citizens' council was established, comprising all population groups, which was used to generate citizen proposals for climate change initiatives. In October 2022, a permanent citizens council was established which will discuss a set of key societal issues.

75. In South Africa, the Constitution (1996) has a number of sections dealing directly with public participation, such as sections 59, 72 and 118, which charge both houses of the national parliament and all provincial legislatures with the responsibility of promoting public participation. In 2005, the Department of Provincial and Local Government drafted a "National Policy Framework for Public Participation". In 2022, the President signed the Local Government: Municipal Systems Amendment Act into law, which provides for community involvement in local development planning and budget processes and monitoring and performance review initiatives (sects. 2 and 5). This legislation also imposes a duty on municipalities to create an enabling environment for continuous and systematic

²² Republic of Kenya, Office of the Attorney General and Department of Justice, "Kenya draft policy on public participation", September 2018, pp. 5–6.

²³ Maria Svidronova, and others, "Inclusion by co-production of social housing: the Slovak experience", *Central European Public Administration Review*, vol. 17, No. 2 (2019).

involvement of citizens in decision-making processes regarding matters having a direct impact on them. In addition, section 4 calls upon municipalities to contribute towards building the capacity of local communities, to enable them to participate in the affairs of the municipality.²⁴

IX. Conclusions and recommendations

76. Public participation is now more important than ever in view of ongoing global crises, delays in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and a lack of trust in government and political processes observed in many countries. Participation can help build inclusive institutions at all levels by promoting transparency, justice and accountability and reducing the potential for corruption. It can enhance the effectiveness of public action and the legitimacy of public institutions and foster acceptance of and support for policy decisions. Participation is key to enhancing the trust of stakeholders in public institutions and in a country's broader cultural, social and economic systems.

77. Public participation is a human right under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which stipulates that every citizen, without distinction of any kind, should have the opportunity to participate actively in the conduct of public affairs. Ensuring responsive, inclusive and participatory decision-making at all levels is an integral part of the 2030 Agenda. Success in achieving all Sustainable Development Goals will greatly depend on how effectively governments engage different population groups, including at the subnational, local and grass-roots levels.

78. Through decentralization (and/or devolution depending on each national context), local governments are empowered to engage citizens, who can in turn become engaged and active actors in their communities, while being listened to and respected, thus reinforcing their feeling of belonging and increasing their support for and ownership of local decisions and policies, including regarding the Sustainable Development Goals.

79. Accordingly, the Committee could encourage countries to ensure effective and inclusive participation by:

- Building their own models of public participation and setting up related normative and institutional frameworks and arrangements, allowing for the participation of all relevant stakeholders on an equal footing.
- Adopting whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, encompassing a truly multilevel and multi-stakeholder governance system that puts people at the centre of development.
- Urgently addressing challenges hampering the implementation of public participation to accelerate action and delivery for sustainable development.
- Developing policies to implement the Sustainable Development Goals in a participatory, inclusive and collaborative fashion and institutionalizing participation and engagement to ensure that various members of civil society have an opportunity to make their voices heard. This can enhance ownership of the Goals and support effective implementation and monitoring at all levels.
- Establishing an enabling environment for public participation, particularly taking into account the needs of vulnerable and marginalized groups to ensure that no one is left behind. Political will and means of implementation, such as sufficient funding at the national and subnational levels, are some of the main

²⁴ See www.gov.za/documents/constitution/constitution-republic-south-africa-1996-1.

elements of creating such an enabling environment. A change of mindsets, attitudes and behaviours on the part of public officials who may be reluctant to widen the use and scope of participatory processes is a crucial step that calls for direct attention.

- Taking a holistic approach and empowering and training and/or upskilling public servants and non-State stakeholders at all levels, through education and capacity-building measures, including the provision of adequate training to increase their awareness of their rights, duties and obligations. A holistic strategy for capacity-building needs to be developed, focused on local authorities, territorial managers and citizen empowerment.
 - Ensuring that public participation mechanisms, processes and tools used are well designed, implemented and monitored, including by making use of ICTs and reliable data.
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