

A QUESTION OF DEVELOPMENT

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SYNTHESES OF AFD STUDIES AND RESEARCH

Citizen participation: leverage for better public services?

THE CASE OF WATER AND SANITATION SERVICES

Citizen participation could leverage public action to improve access to water in remote areas and address second-string subjects such as sanitation. However, this still very incantatory notion with its variable configurations first needs to be empirically explored and defined if it is to have the potential to be applied to each specific context.

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Citizen participation issues

Although the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have raised development players' ambitions for safe water and sanitation services, a great deal will need to be done ahead of 2030 to achieve access for all and improve service quality. One of the main brakes on delivering on access for all appears to be the lack of political will to find responses to geographical issues (poor districts and isolated rural areas) and policy concerns (such as sanitation and price-based financing). Moreover, once the service is available for all, maintaining its quality depends on the regulatory systems (including the technical and financial monitoring systems) and accountability mechanisms (such as local elections). Without a feedback system (bottom-up information to the decision-making level) helping to correct poor management by contractors and operators (such as postponing infrastructure renewal and preventive maintenance), service quality could deteriorate.

Citizen participation is seen as a good way to solve these shortcomings and lift obstacles, especially where there is distrust in the political system. It can also be used in tandem with other emerging and re-emerging notions such as the new forms of governance (especially those based on the social and solidarity economy), the commons approaches (Leyronas & Bambridge, 2018) and the rights approaches (Huyghebaert & Alpha, 2011).

Although no mean task, the notion of citizen participation needs to be defined for each situation. First of all, what is meant by 'participation'? This umbrella term encompasses a range of actions, from simple information to public policy co-construction and even the emergence of a countervailing power (Arnstein, 1969). Secondly, what 'citizens' are we talking about? To give meaning to this notion, we need to define their legitimacy to influence public policy decisions, understand their collective organisation practices, formal and informal, and identify the most representative players.

DIAGRAM 1.



ContreEauverses seminar summary grid. Proceedings available at: <https://www.gret.org/publication/la-participation-citoyenne-un-levier-pour-des-services-plus-etendus-plus-fonctionnels-et-plus-justes>, AFD/GRET, February 2018.

Source: author

Multiple, evolving types of citizen participation

The notion of 'citizen participation' can be analysed in terms of a combination of five main components: (i) goals, (ii) levels of scale, (iii) stakeholders, (iv) gradations of participation, and (v) citizenship modalities. In practice, it is shaped case by case, morphing to adjust to the levels of each of these components. This produces a range of citizen participation, changing and evolving in keeping with the particular issues of each situation.

Citizen participation support tools are also deployed to respond to the issues, either by using new media or explaining the subjects and issues in layman's terms. In all cases, it is underpinned by concrete dialogue spaces.

• An array of interpretations of citizen participation

'Participation' and 'citizenship' are polysemous terms that, when combined, mutually reinforce their conceptual ambiguity.

The first term is based on the idea of co-opting the 'participation' of 'beneficiaries' to generate 'appropriate' and therefore useful outcomes. In 1969, Sherry Arnstein, the concept's inventor, drew a ladder of rungs of participation as 'beneficiaries' gradually gain in voice from mere information through consultation and advocacy to the notion of co-decision-making. 'Beneficiaries' can even have the power of initiative. This ladder has been used regularly since.

The notion of 'citizenship' applies to people who come under the protection and authority of a state of which they are nationals. The citizen benefits from civil and political rights and is bound to fulfil duties to the state (e.g. pay taxes, respect the laws, perform national service, vote in elections, etc.). Citizenship is not defined solely from a legal point of view. It is also defined as participation in the life of the city (IRAM, 2017). There are inhabitants who are not citizens of the states in which they are living, but who need to be able to have a say in the decisions that concern them. Such is the case with migrants, for example.

¹ The ContreEauverses seminar organised by AFD and GRET on 2 February 2018 on the subject of citizen participation for the co-construction and control of public water and sanitation policies was held to discuss the preliminary lessons drawn from research conducted by GRET, IRAM (Institute for Research and Application of Development Methods) and AFD. <https://www.gret.org/projet/30576/>

- **Three types of political goals for citizen participation**

What is the purpose of seeking citizen participation in development interventions? Three main goals can be identified and associated with three political registers.

(1) *A utilitarian goal (serving the 'policy')*: citizen participation serves to implement appropriate, better quality projects and policies as they are specifically designed for a local demand, i.e. for actions that contribute to the management of public affairs.

(2) *A control or regulation goal ('politics')*: citizen participation as a form of countervailing power to regulate the power games and competition between individuals and groups.

(3) *An idealistic goal ('polity')*: citizen participation as a building block of a society's democratic governance – participation makes citizenship – plays a part in the government's organisation and systems.

- **From local to national: citizen participation structured by levels of scale**

Participation is deployed at distinct, interconnected levels of scale. At the local level, for example, it is used to negotiate rules for the use of a water resource. It can make a contractor accountable for its responsibilities with respect to the continuity of a drinking water service. At the national level, it can use advocacy to influence legislative work. In 2015, citizen participation in Burkina Faso secured the inclusion of the right to water in the Constitution. Accountability has been improved by the actions of Forum

Civil in Senegal since 1993 and Dynamique Citoyenne in Cameroon since 2005 in their work as watchdogs over the government's budget allocations (see box above). Lastly, at the international level, civil society structures' lobbying activities can influence aid debates and decisions. Coalition Eau helps African civil society collectives make their voice heard in negotiations regarding Sustainable Development Goal 6 on water and sanitation. It also guides them in the Conferences of Parties (COPs) on the implementation of climate policies under the Paris Climate Agreement.

When the subjects discussed are further removed from everyday practices, i.e. when the scale is more global, two major questions need to be addressed regarding the connection between the collectives and their base. First, how can the average citizen get involved when the individual cost of participation is high in financial and/or symbolic terms? Some advocacy platforms solve the problem by using information and communication technologies to reduce the individual cost of participation. Second, does the collective represent its base? For example, during discussions on the management of water resources in Senegal in 2017, GRET observed that the real issues were not raised for lack of a spokesperson. Building civil society's capacities in sectoral issues such as water management remains a major area for improvement to enable constructive analyses and advocacy. Knowledge of the distribution of responsibilities between the national public establishment, private operators and local authorities is a prerequisite to be able to have an effective and relevant voice in the debates.

- **Tools designed for citizen participation**

Citizen participation is being advanced by tried-and-tested or piloted tools designed to make it more effective. These tools may seem relatively classic, but they work extremely well. Note, for example:

- **Advisory groups**: when these groups benefit from institutional recognition, they enable consultations with civil society organisations. They can become decision-making bodies by involving users in 'prioritising' new investments or choosing management methods.

- **The media**: this classic citizen participation tool (and player) contributes to the production and effective circulation of information. Coalition Eau targets the media in its actions and helps the national networks to do so by regularly holding 'media cafés', for example.

- **Civic tech**: the Présimètre launched in Burkina Faso in 2017 is an example of this. This tool posts an online scoreboard of the President of the Republic's commitments. Citizens can comment on the indicators measured on the website.



CITIZEN MOBILISATION IN CAMEROON: THE EXPERIENCE OF DYNAMIQUE CITOYENNE

Dynamique Citoyenne is a national network set up in Cameroon in 2005 to monitor public policies and cooperation strategies. It comprises a range of civil society organisations (CSOs) – such as associations, unions and faith-based organisations – working in ten regions in the country. Its prime objective is to make the government accountable for its commitments with its citizen watch work. The structure has gradually centred on three sectors: education, water and sanitation, and health. Budget analysis is the main instrument used by Dynamique Citoyenne in its work. This veritable 'public action radar', which sometimes draws on external expertise, deciphers the national budget and associated trade-offs to reveal the actual share allocated to the sector. This task is ongoing throughout the year and is accompanied by advocacy with the administration and members of parliament – mainly at 'MP dinners', which are key moments for legislators working on the subject. Dynamique Citoyenne also sees to it that the information is available at local level, posting it in sub-prefectures, town halls and markets. The collective welcomes the significant increase in the budget allocated to the water sector (tripling from 2011 to 2018), but points out that budget size does not guarantee output quality, which remains another challenge to be taken up.

- **Citizen ratings:** this has been set up by Forum Civil in three regions of Senegal. It is designed to assess the performance of water and sanitation investments (see box below).

CITIZEN RATINGS IN SENEGAL: THE EXPERIENCE OF FORUM CIVIL

Forum Civil is a Senegalese association set up in 1993. Its brief is to fight corruption and promote democratic governance. With the help of many partners since 2008, the association looked into involving citizens in assessing local governance. A tool was developed and tested in 70 municipalities. Following the signature of an agreement with the mayor, a local citizen participation committee of some 15 to 20 people is set up. The committee starts by conducting a 'pre-audit' to serve as the baseline situation. A mark out of 100 is given based on the assessment of the extent of the application of five democratic governance principles in the local authority (participation, accountability, integrity, effectiveness and equity). Recommendations are also made. The marks given are regularly tracked to encourage healthy competition between the successive mayors of a given municipality and between the mayors of neighbouring municipalities. Today, this is a well-known tool nationwide. It lends legitimacy to the mayors who have taken part in it and who can proudly show that they have managed their municipality well. Forum Civil and GRET recently got together to replicate the tool in the water and sanitation sector. They developed a citizen certification support project for transparency in the hydraulic and sanitation sectors (PACT), which was launched in 2017.

Some tools, such as those mentioned above, can be used for forms of citizen control. Others can contribute to the production of legislation, giving members of parliament arguments upstream of important debates (see the MP dinners held by Dynamique Citoyenne in Cameroon since

2012). International instruments ratified by the states, particularly the 1966 UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, can also be used to defend the right to water and sanitation, even where this right does not appear in the national legislation. The states are accountable for its implementation, but legal action (for enforceability) is not the only course of action. Shadow reports produced by civil society in Kenya (KEWASNET network) are another tool used for a voice in politics. An open data policy for citizens is also key. The effects of the 2007 EU Inspire Directive for public access to environmental data and the 2005 Indian Right to Information Act have yet to be analysed.

Conclusion

It is therefore useful to take examples to clarify what lies behind the concept of citizen participation in order to identify the diversity of goals, scales and means used. Leverage can then be identified to improve the services: by combining information on sector policies, budgets and activities with training and advocacy, citizen participation increases the budgets allocated to the water and sanitation sector. It uses dialogue to improve the steering of investments and management methods. It uses digital monitoring tools and sharing indicators on actual investments to prompt mayors to better manage the sector's activities. Nevertheless, funding and capacity building remain key challenges, as does the difficulty of evaluating citizen participation scale-up actions. Lastly, where citizen participation effectively helps build public services, improving access to services does just as much to create citizenship. ■

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