

“ENGAGED GOVERNANCE”: A STRATEGY FOR MAINSTREAMING CITIZENS INTO THE PUBLIC POLICY PROCESSES



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Development Management

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Notes

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“Engaged Governance”: A Strategy for Mainstreaming Citizens in the Public Policy Processes

M. Adil Khan¹

Abstract

In recent times, various forces, both global and local, have had enormous impacts on the lives of citizens of most countries. These impacts have been both empowering as well as disempowering. For example, the information revolution, that has been experienced in recent times, has enabled citizens to gain greater access to information and exert greater demands on their governments for better services. On the other hand, the forces of liberalization and globalization have increased uncertainties for governments and citizens leading to, in some cases, shrinkage of governments, which in turn, has reduced the capacity of some governments to reach out to their citizens through normal bureaucratic channels. Some writers contend the opposite, that is, that while governments haven't got smaller, the scope of their activities has been enlarged making reaching out to citizens ever more complex.

Democracies based on elected representatives within a parliamentary system offer, in principle, the most direct mechanism for representing citizens and their interests at the legislative level. Though very useful for those citizens capable of connecting with political spheres, many regard this system as not sufficient. The political economy of electoral governance and the disempowering effects created by the market and capital seem to marginalize the poor and the disadvantaged and remove them from the vital decision-making processes of the state.

The search is on as to how to compensate for these representational gaps. Questions are asked as to what indeed would be the best ways to mainstream citizens into government decision-making processes, more as a complement, rather than in contradiction, to existing democratic practices. Is it possible to devise some sort of framework for direct citizen-government dialoguing, an 'engaged governance' practice, as a means of mainstreaming citizens into the decision-making process, on an on-going basis.

In recent times several partnership initiatives, such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), involved direct citizen involvement in policy and programme formulation, but these initiatives proved mainly ad hoc and lack sustainability. A more sustained citizen involvement is needed to ensure accountability and transparency in governance. The 'engaged governance' concept— a term introduced by UNDESA – is being advanced as a normative rather than ad hoc approach to mainstream citizens at all levels of governance, legislative as well as executive, to ensure inclusiveness in decision-making and to support the implementation of MDGs in an accountable manner.

The Context

This paper builds on an earlier work of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs(UN-DESA) on 'engaged governance'(citizen/government engagement in governance) and argues that several recent developments, both at the national as well as at global level, impact directly on systems of governance and, in turn influence

¹ M. Adil Khan is a staff member of the UNDESA. Views expressed in this paper are his own, though the ideas presented are a continuation of an on-going work of UN-DESA on 'engaged governance'.

development management processes. As such, their impacts on the issues of equity and social justice warrant new thinking on governance².

In recent times, the development arena has been dominated by four major challenges, namely: (i) globalization and liberalization of national economies; (ii) democratisation of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian governments; (iii) an information revolution; and (iv) the Millennium Declaration 2000. The paper briefly describes the uneven distribution of benefits from globalization and liberalization, continuing democratic deficits and unequal access to tools for advancement, which are continuing to marginalize the poor and the disadvantaged. It argues that these issues coupled with the Millennium Declaration of 2000, which focuses on poverty reduction and social integration with time bound numerical targets, underscore the importance of finding ways to mainstream citizens, particularly the poor and disadvantaged, more directly into the decision-making processes of the state to achieve a more just and equal society.

In response to these issues, this report introduces the concept of ‘engaged governance’ as a strategy for mainstreaming citizen/government engagement. The strategy draws its rationale from the democratic political paradigm, which emphasises constitutional liberties and representative government, but seeks to ‘deepen’ democracy through normative and regulative governance arrangements that are truly citizen-based and accountable. As introduction to the ‘engaged governance’ concept, the report recounts a) more recent partnership models, such as those fostered by New Public Management(NPM), that called for public/private partnership in development as well as the World Bank’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Programme, initiated to mainstream the concerns of the poor into public policies and b) argues how these models have either failed or proven inadequate to address the issues of poverty and marginalization. The paper also describes several citizen engagement models that emerged lately around the world and highlights their strengths and weaknesses and finally, based on these experiences, both good and not-so-good, the paper makes an attempt to introduce an operating model of ‘engaged governance’.

Globalization and liberalization: Further entrenching marginalisation

There is no doubt that globalisation and liberalization have opened up new economic opportunities right across the board and while many countries have benefited from the process, not all have equally or enough. The integration of national economies into global markets coupled with the privatisation of public operations also brought about a reduction in both areas for direct state participation in economic and social sectors and the public policy space in which issues of poverty can be addressed. In many instances, the market has become the prime mover in responding to and managing the public’s demands.

Not unexpectedly, it was believed that through globalization and liberalization, the market would improve, among other things, cost-effectiveness in the delivery of public goods and guarantee more efficient use of scarce national resources. However, the outcomes of these market based developments have been mixed at best. While

² UNDESA(2003); Guthrie(2003)

privatisation has helped many governments to rid themselves of many of their loss-making enterprises and thus save scarce national (primarily fiscal) resources, many now realize that the market can fulfil only partial needs and not the entire needs of a society. Moreover, many governments are left carrying the burden of environmental and socio-economic externalities incurred by their private partners. Most importantly, the market only responds to the needs of those who have the capacity (or economic/political clout) to pay and not those who do not possess this capacity but need these services desperately. Furthermore, resources generated through sales of public assets were not always used for development activities but instead were utilized either for servicing accumulated debts (around programs from which the poor rarely benefited) or poured into state activities that were of little or marginal relevance to the socio-economic needs of the broader population.

In addition, in many activities where states continue to maintain control and provide services, they face difficulties in maintaining both the quality as well as equity in the delivery of such services. This is due to a variety of reasons: resource constraint, poor accountability and more often than not unjust and short-sighted decision-making. For example, in many developing countries where the predominant need in the health sector is for preventive public health measures (this is what the poor, especially the rural poor needs), quite frequently, the bulk of the resources are allocated to curative health measures (this is what the rich and the advantaged who also constitute the ruling elite, needs). In other words, the government responds to the most politically-able segments of its 'market'.

Other issues associated with liberalisation in developing countries, such as unregulated market operations, poor implementation of labour rights, corruption in tax administration and other abuses of power, continue to contribute to growing inequality and a rising sense of disenchantment among the disadvantaged and the disempowered, in many countries. While many argue that issues such as poor accountability and inequity in decision-making are not always the direct results of globalisation and liberalisation but existed anyway in many developing countries, arguably the disempowering effects of globalization simply exacerbate the situation even further (Rodrik, 2000). Referring to the effects of globalization and liberalization in Latin American countries one researcher reports, ".social fabric of Latin American countries has been disrupted, the income of general population declined, local wealth transferred out of the region, poverty levels expanded and the indigenous inhabitants excluded from the social pact" (Hernandez, 2003).

The advent of globalization and marketization , which put private property rights, accumulation of wealth and exploitation of both labour and resources at the helm, seems to have also reduced the policy space in many developing countries, especially with matters relating to labour rights, minimum wage standards and environmental standards. In their competition to attract foreign investments many developing countries are outdoing each other to offer cheap labour and lax regulations at the cost of further marginalizing the poor and further degrading the environment. While examining the effects of globalization on poverty reduction, a recent study revealed that though some of the developing countries experienced an overall rise in average per capita income(except

sub-Saharan which experienced a net decrease), the income of the lowest quintile of population increased either only marginally or in some situations, not at all (Cord, Lopez and Page 2003). This reveals two interconnecting trends - on the one hand, the poor who are mostly unskilled and lack capital to participate in skill-based jobs or in income earning activities are missing out in many international market arrangements and are becoming poorer as a result, further losing political power and, consequently, becoming more disenfranchised. On the other hand, the emerging political economy is encouraging governments to undertake policies that are more pro-market and pro-rich, and not ones that favour, or even acknowledge as a goal, lifting the living standards of the poor. A recent study by the UNDP reveals that, after experiencing some gains in the 1980s, during the 1990s, the peak period of globalization, a large number of developing countries registered a fall in the Human Development Index (a summary measure of key dimensions of human development) (UNDP, 2003). Globalization seemed to have widened the income disparities both at the country level as well as at the international level³. At the country level, the income share of the top 20% has risen in almost every country since the 1980s, while the bottom 20% either did not experience any income rise or in some cases, suffered a fall in income (UNCTAD, 1999).

In summary, globalization and liberalization seem to have benefited many countries, both developed as well as developing, but these benefits have not been spread equitably, neither at the international nor at the national level and most importantly, the poor in each country are being increasingly disadvantaged by and disempowered from the state.

Democracy movements of 80s and 90s and the aftermath: How deep democracy?

At the political level, democratization movements of the 80s and 90s would suggest positive steps have been taken in creating space for the representation of citizens' interests through a legislature of elected representatives of the people. In the last two decades of the 20th century some 81 countries – 29 in Sub-Saharan Africa, 23 in Europe, 14 in Latin America, 10 in Asia and 5 in Arab States took steps towards democratization. Often this meant overthrow of an authoritarian one party regime and/or the introduction of multi-party elections. Undoubtedly, these were major advances, however, the results have been mixed demonstrating that the process of deepening democracy and making it work for people has hardly begun. Furthermore, a recent study suggests that, “even where democracy is more firmly established, people are disappointed by the economic and social results” (UNDP, 2002). Many believe that this dissatisfaction is due to the political economy of electoral governance which is often dominated by the rich and the powerful and fails to co-opt both the poor and their interests into the governance of the states.

Fareed Zakaria (2004), the International Editor of Newsweek, states in his book, *The Future of Freedom*, that elections in many newly democratic countries are a farce due to the existence of poor accountability, large-scale inequities and powerlessness of the masses. Instead of providing universal representation for citizens as expected, these elections contribute to nothing but, “plundering rotating governments”. According to this

³ There are now 50 Least Developed Countries(LDCs) as against 24 in 1971 and in 2003, LDCs' share of world GNP is 0.5%(Dowlah, 2004)

author, in many of these countries, multi-party elections are but a vehicle to legitimize an existing political economy and perpetuate an equation of patron/client dependency relationship in a society. Drawing a distinction between “liberal democracy” (democracy with civil liberties) and “illiberal democracy” (democracy with no or inadequate civil liberty), Zakaria (1997) reports in another study that nearly half of the “democratizing” countries in the world today are “illiberal democracies”. For obvious reasons, in the latter political arrangements the ordinary citizens remain far removed from the decision-making entities of the government.

Is universal representation of citizens’ interests better achieved in countries that are economically and socially more advanced - where people are more educated and therefore are, or at least expected to be, politically more conscious? Mostly yes, though not completely. Even in the more developed countries where ordinary citizens are either apathetic to, or are offered a rather limited choice of, electoral candidates, they are subjected to various forms of informational manipulations by the party-backers, lobbyists, the funders and the so-called election strategists all seeking to shape the political agenda. These vested interests provide money and tactical advice to their chosen candidates and make extensive use of TV and other media opportunities to influence the voters to support an agenda not of their making so that ordinary people end up getting what someone has suggested, “ the government that you vote for and not the government that you want”(Roy, 2004).

Furthermore, if elected governments are to be regarded as trustees of people, the outcomes of two recent studies seem to reveal very different trends. According to a recent study, only 23% of America’s population trusts their government (the figure was 65% thirty years ago). Similarly, according to Arundhati Roy, in India - a third world success story in democracy - people often view their government as an adversary and not as a mentor.

It is apparent from the above that at present the world seems to be confronted with a situation where “democracy” is on the rise, but the universal representation, or the processes of empowerment, of the people, the end goal of all democracies, is either lagging behind, or is on the decline somewhat.

It has been argued that, in its current form, so-called representative democracy can guarantee only partial and not the most inclusive representation mainly because the infrastructure of democracies are largely built on unequal conditions, favouring the ruling elite. For example, citing the case of American democracy Rothenburger(2001) argues that its arrangements are highly skewed in favour of the rich and the powerful due to the fact “that at the time of writing the constitution, the distribution of power and wealth in America was already unfair and unjust...” .

In general, as stated by a recent study, “people around the world seem to have lost confidence in the effectiveness of their governments – and often seem to be losing faith in democracy” (UNDP, 2002)⁴.

As an alternative many prescribed decentralization as a means of bringing governments closer to the people and building trust, transparency and accountability. But there have been disappointments in this endeavour as well. A recent study suggests that there is clear evidence to indicate that far from strengthening local participation “decentralization can actually reinforce the power and influence of the local elites” (UNDP, 2001). The same study concludes from a 12 country survey that there is weak evidence “decentralization (automatically) empowers more people, reduces poverty or mitigates spatial inequality” but rather decentralization works and empowers people only when, “structures are open to participatory practices”.

More recent events such as 9/11 seem to contribute to another set of challenges threatening the democratizing process in several parts of the world. The so-called “fight against terrorism” seems to contribute to two inter-connected processes. On the one hand, concerns with security are encouraging many countries, including some developed countries, to divert resources away from development towards investment in the security sector and on the other, to curb civil liberties through the introduction of draconian public security laws. Furthermore, the West (lead by the USA) in their desperation to build, at any cost, the so-called anti-terrorist alliances, especially among many of the so-called front-line states, have given a somewhat tacit endorsement to some of the latter either to continue with their existing largely authoritarian or semi-authoritarian institutions or go slow in reforming those institutions. The result has been that many of these countries are taking advantage of this geo-politically motivated concession, to brutally suppress all forms of public dissent, abuse human rights and obstruct further the growth of democracy.

In summary, the results of recent democratic movements are at best, mixed. Basic inequities that exist virtually in every society render the existing arrangements of representational democracy somewhat ineffective in co-opting the concerns of the poor and the marginalized into the body politic of a state. Further, recent events demonstrate that the path towards democratization is, in practice, determined as much by geo-political and economic exigencies as much as, if not more so, than any supra-ordinate moral agenda.

Information, Communication and Technology (ICT): Access is everything

In recent times, ICT has opened opportunities to connect citizens to the market as well as public service related information. Though more the exception than the rule, the rural poor in some developing countries now have access to ICT either through cost-affordable

⁴ UNDP (2002) reports that in a global survey when 500000 people in 60 countries were asked, “Would you say that your country is governed by the will of the people?”. Nearly 70% said “no”. The same survey also asked, “Does the government respond to the will of the people?”. Only 10% said, “yes”.

internets or through mobile phones⁵. Many governments are also offering services through e-government, but these are mainly confined to urban areas and relate to business initiatives. Nonetheless, these are encouraging signs, though the potential of ICT to contribute to poverty reduction is still lagging behind. Due to obvious financial and technological deficiencies ICT is slow to enter the developing countries and, within the developing countries, to reach the rural and underprivileged areas (the example cited in Footnote 3 below is a rare example but demonstrates the potential of ICT in poverty reduction). As a result, many in poor countries who do not have access to these facilities are falling on the wrong side of the technology divide, creating communities of “digital haves” and “digital have-nots” and, eventually, widening further the gap between the economic haves and have-nots.

In summary, these emerging developments, namely (i) globalization and liberalization that are contributing to the *entrenchment* of the marginalization of the poor; (ii) deficits associated with the functioning of representative democracies which seem to constrain adequate representation of the interests of the marginalized and the disadvantaged into the body politic of a state; and (iii) the ICT revolution that has the potential to benefit both the rich and the poor but due to inequities in accessibility is contributing to a situation of digital divide, are challenging each and every nation, both developed and developing, in ways that are not only economically disadvantageous, but also politically disempowering for the poor.

Inequities and The Millennium Declaration

Some of these challenges, especially those that concern the developing countries were articulated in the autumn of 2000 when World leaders gathered in New York at the United Nations. The World leaders agreed that poverty, hunger and social inequity that accompanied the accomplishments of decades of economic development and globalization are some of the major challenges with which the developing nations are confronted. Those present crystallised their concerns into what has come to be known as the Millennium Declaration and gave themselves eight goals with time line to overcome these challenges. These goals, now known as the Millennium Development Goals(MDGs), later included “good governance” as a ninth goal, regarded both as a strategy for, as well as an outcome of, achieving the MDGs. Moreover, careful analysis of the MDGs reveals that seven out of the eight goals are poverty and/or social development related⁶. Further, good governance includes as a centrepiece the requirement that states become politically more engaging and developmentally more equitable. These

⁵ In Bangladesh, the Grammen Bank (Bank of the Poor - a non-governmental micro-credit institution) has introduced mobile phone facilities in the rural areas. The poorest of the women in the villages qualify to receive these phones on a rental basis and, in turn, can re-rent these phones to the villagers, enabling Bangladesh’s poorest women to earn an income for themselves and the villagers the opportunities to connect more directly to the market and obtain better prices for their produce. In the past, urban-based middle men monopolized market information which they then used to exploit the farmers by offering them lower prices.

⁶ The eight goals of MDGs: (i) Eradication of extreme poverty;(ii) achieve universal primary education; (iii) promote gender equity and empower women; (iv) reduce child mortality; (v) improve maternal health; (vi) combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other communicable diseases; (vii) ensure environmental sustainability; and (viii) develop global partnership for development.

combined goals imply that not only the analytical framework of public policies will need to be underpinned more clearly by the agenda of the poor, but the processes of decision-making that are expected to provide inputs into the formulation and implementation of a pro-poor agenda will also need to become more engaging and citizen based.

By citing practical examples from participatory budgeting in Brazil, some argue that connecting people directly to the decision-making processes of a state, helps to create an additional, if not a better space, for mainstreaming citizen's concerns into the policies and programmes of the governments (Wampler and Avritzer, 2004). From a purely market perspective, one could argue that governments produce public goods that are mostly not traded in the market and thus need to look to citizens - the consumers - to judge the quality and relevancy of a product that it chooses to deliver. Others argue that direct citizen participation has the benefit of building trust and accountability in government actions. Both of these elements - correct assessment of, and required response to, people's expressed needs and trust building, are crucial for achieving MDGs, especially poverty reduction.

Such a pro-poor orientation to both the analytical framework and the policy-making processes entails significant institutional changes in governance arrangements including arrangements that accommodate not only partnership building and sustained engagement between the state and organised entities but the state and ordinary citizens, especially the latter. This is mainly because globalisation and liberalisation stress government-private sector partnerships, primarily for economic development with little attention paid to social development and broader social justice and equity goals. If anything, the MDGs require governments to look beyond narrow economic development goals and provide impetus to look for new partners and policy informants and engage in different and more sustained ways for broader socio-economic goals. In any case, all governance arrangements are political arrangements and any governance system will reflect the values-in-action of any political regime.

Search for a New Governance Paradigm: The Emerging Partnerships/Engagement Initiatives

In the last two decades, especially with the advent of globalisation and liberalisation, governments in every country saw partnership with non-government (both private and civil) organisations as a key element of governance reform and an important methodology for implementation of socio-economic development in a country. Mostly driven by public/private partnerships, these practices took different forms in different countries.

According to Felts and Jos (1996), throughout the twentieth century, the public service tradition of the politically disinterested, aloof, 'expert' bureaucracy was slowly eroding in many of the developed nations as it became mired in crises related to the growing costs of public services due to the increasing scale of provision and alleged inefficiencies. In developing countries, these arrangements were often maintained as a colonial legacy and degenerated into self-serving elitist institutions serving, in a collusive manner, the interests of those who ran them and those of the ruling political elite (Khan, 2004). The

emerging patron-client-agent nexus perpetrated through elite bureaucracies and non-accountable political regimes that made the rich richer at the neglect of the poor, was a phenomenon seen as the rise of “coalition of indifference” (Korten,1983)

Private/Public Partnership

With the onset of globalization and liberalization, principles and practices of New Public Management(NPM), that is, private sector ‘solutions’ to public sector ‘problems’, were introduced and emphasised strategic planning, performance measurement, accountability, results, purchaser/provider split, contracting out and ‘doing more with less’ etc. (Hood, 1991). These managerial tools were constitutive of a corporate governance focus adopted by governments. Again, this emerging public/private synergy seemed to have been fraught with one major dilemma - the public became connected now to the State as “consumers with the ability to choose and complain [although] not the ability to proactively shape services” (Corrigan and Joyce, 1997, p. 419). The NPM phase also saw downsizing of the public sector and, in some cases, some improvements in the reduction of the cost of delivery of services, but these measures seemed to have also constrained citizens’ ability to influence the decision-making processes of the governments. Results in developing countries especially have shown that the interests of the powerless, the hard-core poor, the ethnic minority and the aged have been sidelined while the existing democratic institutions (the representative democracy) have been hijacked by the rich and the lobbyists and continued to function as a platform for the vested interest and not that of the poor. In this regard, a UN CEPA (United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration) report noted that “the period of intense liberalization and extensive use of market based solutions in developing countries was accompanied by a rise in asymmetrical partnerships where the public sector became a minor or disadvantaged partner compared to the private sector”.⁷

Acemoglu (2003), the promoter of the *institutions hypothesis* concept, argues that it is not so surprising when the same market-managerialist solutions of the West were applied to the developing countries, which contained what he called *extractive institutions* (a colonial legacy), the outcome was that many of these reform initiatives either failed to produce any tangible result or yielded only marginal benefits. In some cases, neither the objectives of cost reduction nor of poverty reduction, the avowed goals of privatization, weres achieved and, in some cases, just the opposite had happened.

Citizen/Government Engagement Models: Some Selected Examples

However, in response to concerns about macro-economic instability and the experience of the deterioration of conditions for the poor and the marginalized, several citizen-government engagement/dialoguing models emerged in recent times. Among these is Ireland’s National Economic and Social Council (NESC), a policy-making body which was started during the 1970s to tackle the challenges of structural adjustment. The NESC is a consultative mechanism made up of (initially) business organizations, trade

⁷ See, Strengthening Public Administration for the Millennium Development Goals: A Partnership Building Approach. UN Committee of Experts. E/c.16/2004/5

unionists and the government although it has since moved on to include more extensive participation of the civil society organizations to help mainstream the concerns of the disadvantaged and the marginalized. NESC did not play much of a prominent role in its first decade-plus of existence, though it succeeded in institutionalizing a rigorous consultative mechanism to work out economic strategies that involved compromises and trade-offs among partners. Though not started as a pro-poor initiative, NESC's contributions in stabilizing and energizing economic growth helped create jobs and reduce poverty, underscoring a growth strategy that was pro-poor. However, since the mid-nineties, NESC's emphasis has shifted more exclusively to social protection and poverty, though the results have been somewhat mixed. Some have criticised the model as "extra-constitutional", yet others laud it as a good example of inclusive democracy.

Similar to Ireland, Mauritius also introduced in the mid-seventies a corporatist consultative citizen-based mechanism for the formulation of public policies and programmes, especially the budget at the national level. Extensive pre-budget discussions are held with different groups of citizens, which are then widely publicised both in the print media as well as through television. This ensures full transparency and accountability. Mauritius' initiatives in citizen-based policy-making have had very positive impacts on the poor and the disadvantaged. When compared with other neighbouring countries, Mauritius' record on pro-poor impacts are very impressive (for example, Mauritius' access to sanitation and clean water is 100% as against 48% in South Africa and 65% in Latin America and the Caribbean; its under-5 mortality rate is 19 per 1000 as against 164 in South Africa and 34 in Latin America and the Caribbean).⁸

USA's Direct Democracy methodology, though not a federal system, has been in practice since the early 1900s. Direct Democracy follows a variety of mechanisms – citizens *initiate* petitions by-passing the legislature to pass a law; the legislature invites citizens, through a *referendum*, to vote on and ratify a bill; and citizens use the *recall* mechanism to remove a law maker before his or her time. Direct democracy is employed more frequently in tackling social rather than fiscal issues.

The Queensland Government's (Australia) engagement initiative, another sub-national engagement model introduced since the early 1990s involves extensive community consultation for all public policies and programmes, especially in infra-structure development, natural resource management and regional development. The State government of Queensland has introduced several guidelines, manuals, handbooks and training programmes to guide and support community engagement processes and practice. Though systematic evaluation of the impacts of the initiative has yet to be made, initial experience of the community engagement experiment suggests improved quality, accountability and transparency in public programmes.

The most widely talked about model of engagement is Brazil's Porto Alegre's 'people budgeting' system. This is the most explicitly designed citizen-engagement initiative at the local government level. The Council of Participatory Budget is made up of 44 members drawn from different neighbourhoods, civil servants, trade unions and

⁸ Brautigam(2004)

community organizations. Though the people budgeting initiative demonstrated visible pro-poor impacts, many criticise the initiative on the grounds that it weakened the legislative process in the budget. Some applaud it saying the initiative has helped to wrench control of the budget process away from the elitist legislature to citizens who now directly negotiate with the technical offices of the mayor for policies and programmes. The Porto Alegre initiative has made significant impacts on pro-poor development (for example, between 1989 to 1986 the number of households gaining access to water increased from 80% to 98%; school enrolment especially among the poor households doubled). The people budgeting concept has been taken up now by 140 municipalities in Brazil.

Several left leaning states in India such as the West Bengal, Karnataka and Madhyapradesh are empowering the poor through successful devolution, right through to the villages. Pursued through state pro-poor mandates, these devolution efforts seem to have greatly enhanced participation of the poor in the decision-making processes and been associated with significant impacts on poverty conditions of these states (UNDP, 2003).

In recent years, the most significant initiative in citizen engagement, especially for least developed and highly indebted countries has been the introduction of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process. The PRSP process, facilitated through the NGOs and civil society organizations, involved extensive citizen consultations within a country for the formulation of, what is claimed to be, pro-poor public policies and programmes. Though the PRSP process involved wide citizen consultations, neither citizens nor their agents (the NGOs/CSOs) were involved in the actual government decision-making process nor did these initiatives include the parliamentary process. PRSP accrued only mixed benefits.

In some parts of the world, for example in the South Asian region, a network of the South Asian CSOs, called South Asian Centre for Policy Studies (SACEPS), took upon itself (with some assistance from UN-DESA), the task of citizen consultations to produce policy documents referred to as citizens perspectives on macro-economic policy, trade policy and the “South Asian Citizen Social Charter”. These documents serve as a dialoguing tool for pro-poor policies. However, the response of the South Asian Governments to these documents have been mixed. Among the South Asian countries, the Sri Lankan government is actively considering the SACEPS reports while Pakistan held its first meeting on “Citizen Social Charter” in 2004.

See below a synthesis of various engaging initiatives described above.

Table 1: Synthesis of Engagement Initiatives

Model	Level	Initiator	Institutional Form	Engaging Entities	Issue/s	Method	Outcome
Ireland's NESC	National	Central Govt	Normative	CSO/Business/Govt	Macro-economic Policy/Social Devt.	Consultations within Council members	Positive on macro-economic
Mauritius' NESC	National	Central Govt.	Normative	CSO/Business/Trade Unions Govt	Public policies/programmes /budget	Open and broad-based consultations	Positive on Social Development
USA: Direct Democracy	Sub-national Govts.	Sub-national	Normative	Citizens	Policies/Budget/Ethics/ Removal of public officials	Voting on Statute/Referendum on/ Proposals/recall	Positive
Queensland's(Australia) Community Engagement	Sub-national govt.	Sub-national	Directive	Communities	Pro-citizen development/natural resource management/regional development	Community consultations/regional parliament, Cabinets etc.	Positive/ Increased community support to govet. Progs.
Porto-Alegre's(Brazil) 'People Budget'	Local govt	Local govt.	Directive	Citizen groups/executive Branch of Local Govt.	Social Devt.	Direct consultation between executives and activist CSO	Positive on social Devt
West Bengal's(India) community empowerment at village level	Local govt	Sub-national	Normative	Community groups	Rural development	Cooption of poor, women etc. into decision-making	Positive pro-poor impact
World Bank's PRSP	National	Donor Agency	Directive	NGOs/CSOs	Pro-poo policy/programme development	Citizen consultation through NGOs/CSOs	Mixed
SACEPS' Citizen Charter	National	CSO	Self initiated	Community	Pro poor policy	Community consultation	Negligible

In summary the experiences of the various forms of engagement described above indicate mixed outcomes. However, what becomes clear from these initiatives is that whenever engagement is undertaken within the framework of a pro-poor political agenda and given normative value, it has achieved better results. In addition to a pro-poor political agenda, pro-poor political leadership (an obvious corollary to the former) also played an important part. Furthermore, many of the successful models of engagement seem to have included local governments in budget exercises. Though this report cites only one example, it would appear that engagement initiated by NGO-only, without prior commitment of the government to the process, yields limited results.

In backdrop of the above, it is argued that for partnership building to become a meaningful governance mechanism, particularly if it is to ensure people's participation or, at least, safeguard the broader public interest, and build public trust in the governance of a state, it must be underpinned by normative values. This paper argues that those values relate to social justice, equity and inclusiveness. Many current arrangements of opportunistic or ad hoc partnerships (including the World Bank's PRSP), have proved neither sustainable nor intrinsic, perhaps because of a lack of normative underpinning. What is needed, therefore, is a normative framework for a system of governance that can engage citizens more directly, more inclusively and more permanently into the decision-making processes of a state with the goals of achieving, at the least, socially just and equitable public service provision. This calls for a paradigm shift in the existing conceptions of governance, both at legislative as well as at executive levels.

Search for a New Governance Paradigm

In general, governance as a concept refers to a set of rules, norms, procedures and practices that determines how power is exercised, for what purpose, and how it is shared and weighed during decision-making. In other words, governance is about decision-making. The processes used for decision-making have implications for the impacts of those decisions. Usually, descriptions of "good governance" include attributes of "responsiveness, inclusiveness, participation, integrity, accountability and fairness" (Graham, et al, 2003)⁹.

Huq (2001) introduced the concept of "Humane Governance" to argue that there are three components to governance, namely "economic governance" that relates to economic decision-making supporting growth and development; "political governance" that refers to the political system, that is, how governments get formed and how they govern; and "civic governance" that relates to civic rights such as the freedom of speech and assembly, access to fair and independent judiciary, and voting rights. Huq further argues that these three elements are equally important for achieving "humane governance" and that weaknesses in one will risk weakening the others or in other words, over emphasis on any particular element, say prioritisation of economic governance at the neglect or

⁹ See "Principles for Good Governance in the 21st Century", John Graham, Bruce Amos and Tim Plumptre, Policy Brief 15, Institute on Governance, August, 2003.

inadequate regard to political and/or civic governance, will yield only unequal gains and that these gains will also be unsustainable in the long-run¹⁰.

Viewing it from the human rights perspective, The Millennium Declaration, 2000, stipulates the following as key the attributes of good governance:

- Full protection and promotion of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for all.
- Practices of democracy and respect for human rights, including minority rights.
- Inclusive political processes, allowing genuine participation by all citizens in all our countries.
- Freedom of the media to perform their essential role and the right of the public to have access to information.

While there is a general overlap here with elements of Huq’s concept of “humane governance”, the important addition is the greater detail with respect to the nature of political and civic governance, for example, “inclusive political processes” and “right of the public to have access to information”.

Perhaps one of the least discussed aspects of governance is that of its substantive goals as distinct from process goals. While Huq’s system hints at growth and development, Sen (1998) sees “development” as a means to achieve “freedom” and economic development as but a means to an end with the objectives of all development predicated upon the enlargement of individual freedoms¹¹. According to Sen, what he terms as, “unfreedom” (lack of ability to have choices) is the root cause of all sorts of deprivations – economic, political and social. Quite clearly, in this hypothesis, releasing people from their state of “unfreedom” by mainstreaming them and their concerns into the decision-making apparatus of a state offers the most formidable institutional means to achieve both development as well as freedom and to achieve just development. Sen talks about five components or instruments of freedom, namely ‘*political freedom*’ (meaning full and inclusive political participation), ‘*economic facilities*’ (access to credit by the poor etc.), ‘*social opportunities*’ (access to education etc.), ‘*transparency guarantees*’ (openness in public transactions), and ‘*protective security*’ (access to emergency food etc.) (DFID, 2005). Indeed these components are interdependent and interconnected and central to these is the component relating to ‘political freedom’.

¹⁰ By giving empirical evidences from South Asia, Huq demonstrated how problems with political and civic governance ultimately jeopardized short term economic gains made by some of the South Asian countries through sound economic governance.

¹¹ Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations in his report, *In larger Freedom: towards development, security and human rights for all*, equally highlights the interdependence between development and freedom including security and suggests that “ we must aim to perfect the triangle of development, freedom and peace”. (United Nations, Report of the Secretary General to the General Assembly, 2005. A/59/2005

Many of the sources of so-called “unfreedom” stem from either the structure of political and civic governance (the issue of political inclusion or exclusion) or the way different groups of citizens relate to each other (the issue of social or cultural inclusion or exclusion). However, more often than not it is the characteristic of a government that determines a citizen’s state of freedom (or “unfreedom”) in a society. From the rights perspectives, Wolf (1988) groups countries in the following six categories:

1. Countries where all elements of individual rights are specified by law and presently these are available to all inhabitants without restriction.
2. Countries where all elements of individual rights are specified by law, but are not extended uniformly to some minorities, often due to racial prejudices.
3. Countries where most of the elements of individual rights are specified by law, but where access to one or more rights by many inhabitants are inhibited by custom or arbitrary authority.
4. Countries where most of elements of individual rights are restricted by law, custom or arbitrary authority but where at least one such element is available to all citizens.
5. Countries where some of the elements of individual rights are available by law, custom or arbitrary authority, but where effective political organization provides economic and social stability.
6. Countries where the status of most inhabitants with respect to all individual rights is insecure even where specified by law, but due to capricious exercise of absolute monarchy or a near absence of civil organization resulting from disruptive political, economic and social conditions.

It is apparent from the above that from the perspectives of rights, many of the current governance arrangements, especially those that are evidenced in the developing countries (and many argue, except for a few, that many developed countries are no exception) suffer from one or the other or both of the following two kinds of constraints: *barrier constraints* (constraints created by law) or *access constraints* (constraints created by institutional, economic and/or social conditions). Hence, the pursuit of ‘good governance’ or “humane governance” or unfurling of “unfreedom” would require, in addition to the values and rights outlined above, actions that ensured (i) removal of constraints (especially, the barrier constraints) and (ii) the non-recurrence of these constraints (particularly access constraints) through the sustained engagement of citizens in all aspects of governance as outlined by Huq, namely political, economic and social

The functioning of all societies can be viewed through three (very interdependent) lenses – political, economic and social - and the operational arrangements of each of these areas of functioning impact directly on the quality of lives of the citizens, in a number of ways. The political arrangements provide the overarching framework for citizen rights and their representation. Everything else should, in principle, flow from this framework. Whether

or not a society will suffer from barrier or access constraints will very much depend on the quality of its political arrangements and integrity with which they are pursued.

The foregoing sections of this report have argued that so-called functioning democracies and existing political arrangements all around the world are increasingly becoming inadequate platforms for broad-based citizen representation and achieving equitable and socially just outcomes, warranting a paradigm shift in political governance. The challenge here is not whether democracy is important, but how can democracy be deepened to make it work for everyone in the society, especially the poor. In this exercise, one may need to go beyond the realm of the existing operating frameworks of democracy and search for an option that is “democracy plus”. This “plus” is a tool or an operational arrangement that is expected to complement the existing framework of democracy with the elements of egalitarianism, inclusiveness, participation and transparency.

At the economic level, necessary measures to mainstream the poor into the socio-economic decision-making processes of the state, especially those that can help in removing “access barriers” and which include pro-poor institutional reforms, are expected to be the cornerstone of pro-poor development. At the social level, the constraints are mainly those that inhibit inclusion and social cohesion. Some of these constraints are related to the absence of suitable legal provisions, for example absence of an anti-discrimination law, but many are related to customs, prejudices and cultural practices that inhibit cohesion among different groups of citizens. The removal of barriers at the social level would require actions at two levels: (i) actions that are of legal nature; and (ii) actions that are educational relating to value and attitude change. For the latter, while provisions for citizen-to-citizen engagement – a social compact, may help yielding positive results in the long run, in the short run legal and other administrative provisions prohibiting discrimination of citizens by colour, class, caste or creed are a *sin qua non* to achieve inter-group social cohesion. .

In all of these a clear need for more direct and on-going citizen engagement is underscored. Some argue that instituting good governance, which includes government-citizen engagement throughout the development management cycle, requires a values base and an institutional framework that address leadership, administrative/managerial capacity and civil society capacity at the ‘normative’, ‘regulative’(ie, procedural) and ‘regenerative’ or capacity building levels (Guthrie, 2003)¹².

‘Engaged Governance’: Sustaining government-citizen engagement for equitable outcomes

‘Engaged Governance’ is defined as an institutional arrangement that links citizens more directly into the decision-making processes of a State so as to enable them to influence the public policies and programmes in a manner that impacts more positively on their social and economic lives. As a governance norm, the concept of ‘engaged governance’ is yet to be fully realized within the existing political culture of most countries. Some

¹² Further details on Guthrie model of ‘engaged governance’ will be presented in later sections.

argue that government-citizen engagement is fundamentally a political activity and therefore, introduction of an ‘engaged governance’ approach in a society needs a strong normative element as a starting point that includes, at its core, the democratic ideals of political equality and the public good (Guthrie,2003). This approach affords citizens equal participation in a representative democracy and provides opportunities to shape the public interest. As an approach, engaged governance is expected to enable the expression and co-ordination of political, administrative and civic interests for the achievement of policy coherence, social justice, equity and sustainable development¹³.

The Reform Agenda of ‘Engaged Governance’

Looking at the concept from the impact perspectives, that is how governance will impact on the economic, political and social life of citizens, an ‘engaged governance’ practice envisages changes at three levels or aspects of governance: – (i) *political inclusiveness* level that relates to equal and unhindered political participation of the citizens into the political processes of a state and protection of civic rights; (ii) the *development management* level that relates to the institutional arrangements for planning, budgeting, monitoring and implementation of public policies/programmes (similar to Huq’s economic governance) and (iii) *social cohesion* level that relates to inter-community integration including multi-culturalism.

The aspect of *political inclusiveness* is vital for achieving self-sustaining political and civic rights; the ‘*development management*’ level is important for economic growth and distribution of economic benefits; and the third level, *social cohesion*, is important for social equality and assimilation. While Huq would argue that each of these levels of governance are equally important, Sen (1998) puts more emphasis on the second level and argues that political inclusiveness is crucial in achieving long term sustainable economic growth and not the other way around.

Currently, both in the areas of development management as well as in political inclusiveness the aspect of direct citizen participation is either completely missing or is only partially or opportunistically incorporated. At the social level, although some progress has been made in achieving social integration, the frequent incidence of inter-ethnic conflicts and marginalization of ethnic and indigenous groups, either from or through state-induced activities, indicate on-going problems with social integration and assimilation. These gaps underscore the need for a more robust engagement process to ensure political, economic and social inclusiveness in the affairs of the state.

The foregoing section describes three key aspects of governance that require an engaging value to pursue deeper and sustained citizen engagements in the governance of a state. The next section describes the principles and methods of implementing an ‘engaged governance’ system.

¹³ The Section V of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, 2000 stresses the cogent link that exists between human rights, good governance and democracy and points out how each one of these attributes ought to nurture the other to achieve MDGs.

Implementing an 'Engaged Governance' System: Some Preliminary Thoughts

While many now agree that moves towards 'responsible' government, 'citizen/government partnership' and 'a more engaging government' are crucial to achieving responsive, transparent and accountable governments, very few offer any tangible solution as to how to bring this to a reality, especially at the structural levels of a society. Implementation of an 'engaged governance' system is likely to involve consideration of the following broad, interdependent, issues:

1. Basic Principles
2. Structural Adjustments
3. The operating arrangements including capacity building

Basic Principles

The basic principles for an engaged governance approach are envisaged as those that constitute universally recognised principles of good governance. Graham, Amos and Plumptre (2003) identified five broad sets of governance principles, which relate to balancing the exercise of power and the results of power. These principles have relevance to setting up an operational framework of engaged governance. A summary of these principles is presented below:

- Legitimacy and voice
 - Recognition of a person's right to participate in decision-making whether directly or through intermediaries that represent their intention,
 - Consensus orientation that mediates differing interests in the group's best interest and on policies and procedures;
- Direction
 - Leaders and the public share a broad and long-term perspective on good governance and human development, along with a sense of what is needed for such development, and understand the historical, cultural and social contexts for such development;
- Performance
 - Responsive institutions and processes that serve the needs of all stakeholders,
 - Effective and efficient institutions and processes that produce results, which meets needs while making the best use of resources;

- Accountability
 - Government, private sector and civil society decision-makers have some form of accountability to the public as well as to institutional stakeholders,
 - Transparency through institutions, processes and information being directly accessible to those concerned, and enough information is provided to understand and monitor them;
- Fairness
 - Equity of opportunities for all persons to improve or maintain their well being,
 - Rule of law that is fair and enforced impartially (Graham et al, 2003).

As is evident from above, most of these principles are largely normative in nature, warranting the creation of a normative basis for engagement, either constitutionally (as in Ireland¹⁴, Thailand and the Philippines¹⁵, though in case of Thailand¹⁶ and also Philippines the progress of implementation of these principles is slower than expected), or through policy or executive directives (as in Queensland, Australia¹⁷) helped initiating a process of engagement.

Many of these initiatives, though not all achieved the same results, have been predicated upon the notion of achieving social justice and equity with citizen engagements. While the Irish NESC model created through constitutional mandate attaches normative value to engagement and therefore, offers a more sustainable model of ‘engaged governance’, that of the Australia’s Queensland Government model is more strategic in nature and is bureaucratically driven and therefore, risks long-term sustainability.

Structural Adjustments

It has been stated earlier that the poor and the disadvantaged get locked into their conditions because of two structural disconnects, namely (i) inability to have their needs represented at the apex of decision-making of a state, that is, the parliament(the challenge of ‘political inclusion’); and (ii) inability to participate in and influence socio-economic decision-making at the administrative level of the state(the challenge of

¹⁴ As a measure to cope with the post structural adjustment shocks that contributed, as a transitional crisis, to serious social and economic losses, Ireland introduced, through a constitutional mandate a cross-sectional advisory body, the National Economic and Social Council, as a permanent advisory body to provide inputs to the policy making processes of the state. Mauritius also pursues a similar model of engagement in national budgeting.

¹⁵ After people power movement, Government of Philippines amended the constitution to make participation, a permanent feature in its decentralization programme

¹⁶ The Thai draft constitution which was formulated after a two year long citizen consultation is seen as revolutionary in the annals of citizen rights. However, the draft constitution is yet to be ratified by the Parliament.

¹⁷ State Government of Queensland, Australia introduced a ‘community engagement’ initiative to its public programmes since early 90s.

accessing ‘development management’). In other words, in terms of state structures, the dis-engaging elements that surround the poor and the disadvantaged are seen at two levels – the political or legislative level and secondly, at the ‘development management’ level. The reform agenda of citizen engagement, therefore, concerns adjustments at two levels – the political level and the development management level.

Adjustments at the Political Level

It has been described earlier that the current operating arrangements of democracies are deficient in incorporating the voices of the poor and the disadvantaged into either the legislature or the policy making entities of the government and that a viable model to address this lacunae is yet to emerge fully. Ireland’s National Economic and Social Council, a policy advisory body made up of civil society organizations, business groups, academics, government etc. that acts as a parallel but not as a competing entity mainstreams concerns of the cross-section of the citizens into the parliamentary policy making processes of the state. However, more research is needed to understand the working of this model and more importantly, to see to what extent this model is applicable to developing country contexts. Existing evidence suggests that many developing countries do have similar multi-sectoral and cross-sectional advisory councils, but their effectiveness is questioned due on the one hand, to the poor political clout with which these councils or committees are endowed and on the other, the non-representational character of the members that make up these councils. Many of these developing country councils are made up of urban-based technocrats or advocacy groups who possess little or no understanding of the grass-root issues. However, in some countries such as LAO PDR statutory ‘mass organizations’(institutions representing various interest groups such as peasant group, youth group, women group etc.) have been created to provide group specific policy inputs to both the legislative as well as the executive, to ensure mainstreaming of group concerns into the governance of the state¹⁸

In summary, the reform of political governance is a crucial, but less researched, if not a less attended to, subject. The Irish model indicates that structural innovations at the political level is a real possibility, but several issues require a much closer examination. For example, what is the council’s relationship to the parliament, how does it ensure broad-based citizen representation into its memberships and, most importantly, how does it maintain balance among different interest groups in its debates and decisions. Finally, another crucial issue – how does it manage (assuming that it does so) to sustain the trust of the citizens, whose interests the council represents.

¹⁸ The author came across this model in LAO PDR. LAO PDR as a socialist country does not have a multi-party democratic system and the government is elected by the party, but to ensure cross-sectional participation in the decision-making processes, the mass organizations are institutionally linked to enable mainstreaming of issues of interest group. One would, surmise however, in the absence of multi-party democracy peoples’ choices of policy alternatives get severely stymied. At the same time, one could explore the option of combining the representative democracy with the concept of mass organizations. Further research in this area may be worthwhile.

Development Management

Development Management relates to the entire decision-making project cycle including planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring of public sector policies and programmes. More often than not these decisions are bureaucratically driven, typically through inter-ministerial and/or inter-departmental discussions and participations. Sometime, a central agency such as the Ministry of Planning or the Ministry of Finance plays a coordinating role. In these arrangements citizens (as distinct from well-resourced vested interests) tend to play only minor role.

However, as stated earlier, by the mid-eighties with the experiences of rising poverty, corruption and mismanagement of public resources, several initiatives including private sector solutions to public sector problems, were introduced. But these initiatives originating from the West did not do much to solve the problems of poverty. Around this time, the rising NGO movement pointed out that without representation of the poor in analyses of poverty, nothing much would change. Influenced by these experiences various donor agencies adopted, including the World Bank which took a leading role with the concept of Poverty Reduction Strategy Programme (PRSP), a participatory methodology to assess grass-root needs to determine public policies and programme, as a conditionality of aid. The PRSP initiative opened up opportunities for the poor to participate in the development process more directly (at least in the need assessment exercises) and, at the same time, highlighted the important role the NGOs and the civil society organizations played in prioritizing the agenda of the poor. However, the PRSP's lack of actual impact at the normative level, that is, lack of government recognition of the legitimacy and value of the poor's participation, coupled with failure to integrate the participatory methodology into other elements of the development management processes and sustain the role of the NGOs/CSOs, indicates its effectiveness remains fairly undetermined (Guthrie, 2003).

Around the same time, other successful examples of community engagement such as the People Budgeting (PB) of Porto Alegre in Brazil, underscored the importance of effecting internal administrative reform as a key to linking communities to the decision-making process (Guthrie, 2003), though lingering problem of absence of normative value (that poor has a right to participate) continues to put to question the sustainability of these initiatives. Furthermore, what is also emerging from these initiatives is that these have come either through the good will of certain political leadership and/or that most of these experiments have occurred at the local government level and not at the national level (except PRSP which targets national level, but suffers from the problems of sustainability too).¹⁹

In summary, whether at macro-level or at sub-national level 'engaged governance' initiatives in development management require major institutional adjustments and most importantly, must go beyond the opportunistic or ad hoc partnering initiatives to become

¹⁹ The inertia gained through the World Bank's PRSP initiatives seemed to have slowed down a bit. Notwithstanding its flaws, further continuation of the process do seem to have the potential to lead the process to its logical conclusion – a normative framework of citizen/government engagement in development management.

a permanent feature of state decision-making with respect to development. In fact there is a cogent relationship between political governance and development management and provision of participation or engagement opportunities at the latter level without a participatory environment at the political level is often difficult to achieve and sustain.

Building on the Graham, Amos and Plumptre (2003) and by drawing lessons from several practical examples, Guthrie(2003) outlines the following as institutional elements required of an ‘engaged governance’ initiative:

1. Normative: a shared political vision (*Direction*); a shared vision of political rights of sectors and actors (*Legitimacy and voice*); legitimising conditions that establish the nature of desirable engagement (*Accountability*).
2. Regulative: the organisation of institutional tasks, roles, mechanisms, processes and resources around the normative goals of engagement (*Performance and Accountability*).
3. Regenerative: capacity development of the governance system through development of the capabilities (knowledge and skills) of all partners including the government needed for participation.

The Guthrie model seems to present a very useful road map for advancing the course of ‘engaged governance’. It combines both the political as well as the development management elements of the structural issues of engaged governance.

The next section describes the operating arrangements of an engaged governance initiative.

Operating arrangements including capacity building

The next issue that needs attention is actual operating arrangements. For example, while the importance of engaged governance has been argued at length as have its implied structural requirements and guiding principles, what has not been made clear so far is the specifics of the operating arrangements of engaged governance – that is, who to engage with, for what and how?

For obvious reasons, different policy tasks and desired outcomes will dictate different engagement modalities, both in terms of methodologies as well as the relevant participants. For example, engagement for macro-economic policy formulation is expected to differ from say a community resource management activity not only in terms of methodologies employed but in the choice of actors for engagement. In terms of partners for engagement, involvement of two broad groups of people/institutions are conceived, the state institutions and citizen groups (e.g. the civil society organizations, the business groups). Capacity building for engagement in both groups will need to focus on new skills as well as new institutional values. The preceding section has dealt with in detail the institutional reform agenda of the state institutions and systems, the following

section will deal mainly with the issues relevant to the civil society organizations, as the latter are often regarded as the intermediaries between the state and the citizens – a vital conduit for engaged governance.

Partners in Engagement: The role of The Civil Society Organizations

In recent times, the role of the civil society organizations, as intermediaries of citizens between the state and the market, has been on the rise. Nonetheless, the definition as well as the concept of civil society remains fuzzy. Starting with Scottish Enlightenment thinker Adam Ferguson in 1767, the definition of civil society has undergone various changes, though many use the concept in Hegelian sense, meaning voluntary associations that are not part of the state or extended family. Each civil society organization and its members may seek to advance broad social interests, narrow group interests, or even narrower individual interests.

Table 2 provides a summary of various definitions of civil society organizations.

Table 2: Definitions of Civil Society since 18th Century

Source	Definition
Ancient Greeks and Romans, revived by Adam Ferguson in 18th century	Participation in political (civic) life, by voting, holding office, etc. Motives are altruistic, so this definition excludes ‘uncivil’ participation for personal gain.
Georg Hegel	All voluntary associations outside the state and outside the family, including business firms. Participants are motivated by collective well-being <i>or</i> personal gain.
Karl Marx	Follows Hegel, but motivation of participants is exclusively self-interest, <i>never</i> collective well-being.
Antonio Gramsci (1930s)	Associations that stand between the economic structure and the state. Excludes the economic sphere itself, but includes employers’ associations and trade unions, as well as political parties, recreational associations and non-government cultural institutions.
Alexis de Tocqueville (1835), revived by Robert Putnam (1993, 2000)	All voluntary associations and social networks that make up the ‘social capital’ of society. Includes professional associations, choral societies, bridge clubs, family picnics. Excludes activity for purely private and commercial purposes, such as business firms, but includes family activities.
World Bank (2000)	Defines civil society narrowly as “not-for-profit organizations and special interest groups, either formal or informal, working to improve the lives of their constituents”.
United Nations Development Programm-UNDP (n.d.)	Follows Gramsci by defining civil society as “non-state associations whose main aims are neither to generate profits nor to seek governing power”, adding that they operate “outside both the market and the

	state”.
United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies- UNU-IAS (2004)	All actors—organised or unorganised—who “promote the goals of sustainable development”. Groups that “often represent certain business interests” are explicitly excluded, as ‘uncivil society’.
UNDP (2004)	Voluntary associations other than political parties, the military, business firms, trade unions, churches, news media and intellectuals

Source: Citizen Participation and Pro-Poor Budgeting. Pp 4. UN-DESA 2004

As is evident from the above, defining civil society is very complex subject. *The Coincise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* (McLean and McMillan, 2003) defines ‘civil society as:

“The set of intermediate associations which are neither the state nor the (extended) family; civil society therefore includes voluntary associations and firms and other corporate bodies”.

In present times, the general view is that civil society organizations are non-profit socially conscious entities dedicated to the cause of the poor, environment and sustainable human development – the goals that proximate those of the MDGs. But some argue that this is a value-laden description of CSOs – after all, who decides whether a group or an individual is promoting the goals of sustainable development (Willmore, 2003)? According to Willmore, no one admits to obstructing sustainable human development and most people —especially owners of business firms— would argue that they promote it by providing jobs, products and services. The UNU-IAS (United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies) comes perilously close to defining as civil ‘those citizens who actively support our political agenda’ while relegating all others to the category of uncivil. Such a definition would be very subjective: a group that is labeled ‘civil’ by some might be labeled ‘uncivil’ by others, solely because of differences in political philosophy.

In an engaged governance scenario that stresses different types and levels of engagement for achieving different results, it is likely that the quality, character and locations of NGOs/CSOs will have important bearings on their participation capacity.

Engaged Governance: Summary of lessons

In summary, experiences in citizen/ government engagement in public policies and programmes are relatively new and many of these current initiatives are either ad hoc or donor driven, especially in developing countries. However, there are also several examples of bottom-up approaches. As described earlier, many countries have now successfully incorporated citizen participation at the sub-national and local government levels. Some NGOs are practising a ‘report card system’ – a citizen-based auditing of public service delivery. UNDESA is also trying to expand the concept of citizen-based auditing and gauging how such audits can be transformed into a tool for citizen empowerment and achieving greater transparency and accountability in public policies

and programmes²⁰. However, many of these examples highlight several challenges including capacity deficits and lack of legal backing.

The Challenges

Among the challenges, the most immediate challenge is to establish the concept at the normative level with the required political endorsement and support. This will require consensus building among leaders and citizens within and between countries. Many countries have begun this process, either formally or informally, and it is important that the dialogue continues. However, the legality of engaged governance should by no means be seen or promoted as an alternative to the representative democracy (that includes both the legislature and the executive), especially its authority to make policies. Rather the concept should be seen as a means to complement governmental processes, including parliamentary processes, and contribute to pro-citizen initiatives.

The second issue and perhaps the most complex one, is the capacity for engagement. In engaged governance, the issue of *capacity building* for managing government-citizen engagement is of paramount importance for two reasons. Firstly, from the government perspective, capacity building for valuing and managing participation and creating frameworks or entry points of engagement are complex and difficult to determine and manage. For example, if citizens are to provide inputs to the law making process, how exactly would these inputs be obtained – through parliamentary committees or through a citizen-based council like that of Ireland’s National Economic and Social Councils? Secondly, from the civil society perspective, the skills to participate in broad based citizen consultations and reconcile/distil the outcomes of those consultations for policy dialoguing are equally difficult, if not highly technical. Many civil society organizations simply do not possess these skills and those who do tend to belong to the urban areas and are more conversant with urban-based issues. Furthermore, many of the rural-based NGOs/Civil Society Organizations that have a better grasp of rural poverty are often reluctant to work at the policy area.

The third issue relates to developing the necessary procedures and guidelines for engagement. As explained earlier, different levels of engagement will require different types of engagement and the methods will also vary. For example, engagement methods and its institutional arrangements for macro-economic policy will be different from formulation of, say environmental policy. Similarly, people participation in budgeting will employ very different methodology than, say participation for the development of rural roads. To avoid confusion and to specify various engagement modalities, it would be important to have necessary manuals, handbooks, guidebooks etc. to facilitate productive engagement processes²¹.

Equally important is the issue related to management skills in engagement. Traditionally, many of the public service organizations are not oriented to engagement skills. Very

²⁰ See, UNDESA(2005) . Auditing for Social Change. UN Workshop, Global Forum for Re-inventing Government, April 2005. Seoul, Korea

²¹ The State Government of Queensland, Australia has already developed a range of manuals, handbooks etc. for community engagements initiatives.

specialist skills are required to engage communities, distil (often competing) ideas through an engagement process, and analyze and synthesize these inputs objectively, in a manner that would contribute to policies and programmes that reflect community aspirations in a balanced way. Like their government counterparts, the NGOs and the civil society organizations also need training in policy dialoguing and to acquire skills in collaborative policy-making processes.

Listed above are some preliminary thoughts on challenges faced by the proposed engaged governance system/s. More research, especially more insights into existing best practices will greatly help in understanding and appreciating both the institutional as well as the operational requirements of engaged governance. These will be slow to develop, but the most important challenge is that, a start has to be made – all parties have to appreciate the importance of and the urgency that surround the subject.

Conclusions

All evidence now suggests that in this globalizing and marketizing world, in this very unequal world where people are divided by income, social status, ethnicity, and minority/majority compositions, groups that have more power and money and the capacity to control, manipulate and influence the public agenda continue to produce, in varying degrees, unequal development. Peoples’ confidence in democracy and the democratic institutions, especially the way these are currently functioning are on the decline. A state of helplessness, a state of desperation seems to be creeping in. It is dangerous both politically as well as economically to allow this state of seething discontent to continue. Peoples’ trust in democracy must be restored. Democracy must be made to work for the people. Citizens are already clamouring for more engagement, for a higher stake in governance. Governments around the world are also becoming increasingly aware of these rising expectations. A far greater engagement of the citizens in the affairs of the state seems to be the way of the future.

Amartya Sen once said, “In earlier times there were lengthy discussions on whether one country or another was fit for democracy. That changed only recently, with the recognition that the question itself was wrong-headed, a country does not have to be judged fit for democracy, rather it has to become fit through democracy”. The challenge now is not merely to see how countries can become “fit” through democracy, because existing models of democracies including the various decision-making processes of the state do not seem to project a promising picture, rather the challenge is what can be done to make democracy more *fitting*. Hopefully, this paper through its introduction of the concept of ‘engaged governance’ has made an attempt, though only modestly, to provide some guidance in that direction.

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