

## **Engaging Citizens in Effective Collective Action: How and Why?**

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**Abstract** – Empowering civic groups may lead to better outcomes than a centralized decision-making in a society where the social power is concentrated in the hands of a few. But effective collective action is almost always conditioned by the collaboration with functional state institutions which are forced to cede a certain amount of authority, power and finance in favour of communities they no longer totally control. The question emerges: how can we understand and nurture citizen engagement projects for successful public services in a current political society? The present paper explores the public participation typology with the final scope of developing a new citizen engagement model.

**Keywords:** authority delegation, citizen engagement, government communication mode, proactive citizens

### I. INTRODUCTION

Citizen engagement in public services is considered a way to improve the responsiveness of these services [1], to innovate them for greater community satisfaction [2] and a principle directing towards welfare-state reform [3]. Participatory literature argues that groups of people, from village communities, urban neighborhood associations to water user groups or schools' councils, will always operate towards a common interest. Therefore, the state is often seen as a barrier to social development and many neoliberal development strategists argue that community participation in local projects is the key for effective public services.

Mohan and Stokke [4] advocate caution in focusing so heavily and exclusively on 'the local' and Mansuri and Rao [5] describe the possible problems that may occur when organizing groups of people for effective collective action. Almost every citizen engagement effort is conditioned by an infrastructure consisting of functional state institutions. These government agents are forced to act against their self-interest by devolving power to communities they do no longer control, which is not a process we can easily

manage. Mansuri and Rao [5] also state the fact that citizen participation in its early stages is not very useful, and changing this dynamic requires openness, a sustained commitment from the government sphere.

There are several hurdles for effective collective action, some coming from the part of the citizen and others from the government side. First, scholars discuss co-production, public participation and participatory governance as interchangeable concepts not being aware of their ambiguous interpretations [1]. Secondly, participatory processes are complex due to various rationales for engagement, different organizational cultures or varied strategy requirements for each participation project [3]. The reluctance of public sector actors to cede power to citizens together with certain mistrust in citizen data [6] or citizen decision making effectiveness represents a major drawback as well.

Current participation models like Arnstein [7] (1999)'s ladder of citizens' participation, Gramberger [8]'s citizen and authority cooperation level, Izvercian, Seran and Branea [9]'s policy development participation levels, and Nabatchi [10]'s participation spectrum have mainly discussed separately the citizen and the government point of view or have joined the two perspectives but focused only on one when delineating their strategic output. Potra, Branea and Izvercian [11] approached participation taking into consideration four specific citizen engagement variables and a general government openness level, resulting into an interesting open government model but insufficiently developed on the government side.

The present article aims to study the variables of each of the two actors involved and reunite the two perspectives into one new citizen engagement model. In this way, we can better understand the participation dimensions and the possible barriers when trying to cross into a superior engagement sphere. The how and why of the final engagement spheres will be furthermore explored.

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## II. CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT LEVELS

Potra, Branea and Izvercian [11] propose four variables that affect citizen engagement level in public participation projects, based on Haven [12]'s engagement metric components (involvement, interaction, intimacy and influence) and Izvercianu and Branea [13]'s citizen participation levels in government initiatives. The new perspective thus formed included four citizen engagement states: a passivity, low feedback engagement, active engagement and fully creative engagement.

El-Haddadeh et al. [14] examine citizens' perceived value of internet of things technologies and propose a new engagement model which takes into consideration an interesting variable, namely, the citizen value envisaged by engagement: a perceived individual value and a collective societal value. Based on those two citizen engagement models, we delineate the citizen engagement level structured on five variables: involvement, intimacy, interaction, influence and desired value (Fig. 1).

The citizen can be engaged to a certain level if we provide enough incentives for the five variables detailed. The novelty of this engagement spheres resides in the fifth variable, the desired value. Citizens taking part in participation projects can be individually oriented and react or provide feedback for their personal gain or socially oriented, wishing to create community value. This single variable can make a considerable difference depending on the envisioned collective action plan.

## III. GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT LEVELS

Croft et al. [15] argues that the organizational context shapes the resultant position of citizens vis-à-vis decision making processes. Thereby, the organizational setting with its hierarchical or rather egalitarian culture affects public participation, becoming the first variable in government openness level.

In addition, scholars distinguish two very important rationales behind governments' pursuit of citizen

engagement, namely democratic reasons and instrumental motivations [2].

Marent et al. [3] express the fact that government initiatives are presented as empowering citizens and emphasizing dialogue while serving only to increase the acceptance for a specific project or to support cost containment measures [16].

Government agents can perceive citizens as strategic partners when their purpose is pursuing democratic governance or as operational volunteers, when seeking for operational volunteers. In this line of reasoning our second variable appears - the government particular purpose for citizen engagement. It can be associated with Arnstein [7]'s ladder of citizens' participation, starting with manipulation or image improvement till democratic governance.

Nabatchi [10] explores in his typology for understanding shared decision authority a communication mode variable which is for every public service actor and impacts its openness to citizen engagement. Communication modes are our third variable and can range from one-dimensional, two-dimensional to deliberative communication. Together with communication, Nabatchi [10] also focuses on authority issues, participation being evolving with a higher level of authority shared between citizens and government actors. Authority delegation is one of the most important factors for participation influence, becoming our fourth variable in government openness level.

Paskaleva and Cooper [17] describe Living Labs as new ways for citizen engagement in the quest for innovative smart city co-produced services.

These technology initiatives enable citizens to take part not only in the delivery phase of a project but in research, development and evaluation of innovative processes. Thus, the openness degree of government actors needs to take into consideration a fifth variable, the project phase citizens are engaged in. It may vary from delivery phase for most reticent government actors till all lifecycle of the project when the government openness reaches its highest level.

The five variables of the government openness level are detailed in Fig. 2.

**Citizen engagement level**

(-) (+)

Passive	Re-active	Individually proactive	Socially proactive
Involvement ↓	Involvement ↓	Involvement ↑	Involvement ↑
Intimacy ↓	Intimacy →	Intimacy →	Intimacy ↑
	Interaction ↓	Interaction ↑	Interaction ↑
	Influence ↓	Influence →	Influence ↑
	Desired value: personal value	Desired value: personal value	Desired value: community value

Fig. 1. Citizen engagement level based on five variables

**Government openness level**

(-) (+)

Reticence	Openness to feedback	Operational openness	Devolved power
Highly hierarchical culture	Hierarchical culture	Transition to an egalitarian culture	Egalitarian culture
Manipulation, Education/briefing	Image improvement	Cost containment	Pursuing democratic governance
One way communication	One way and two way communication	Two way communication	Two way and deliberative communication
	Authority delegation ↓	Authority delegation →	Authority delegation ↑
Project phase: delivery	Project phase: delivery and evaluation	Project phase: operations, delivery and evaluation	Project phase: all lifecycle

Fig. 2. Government openness level based on five variables

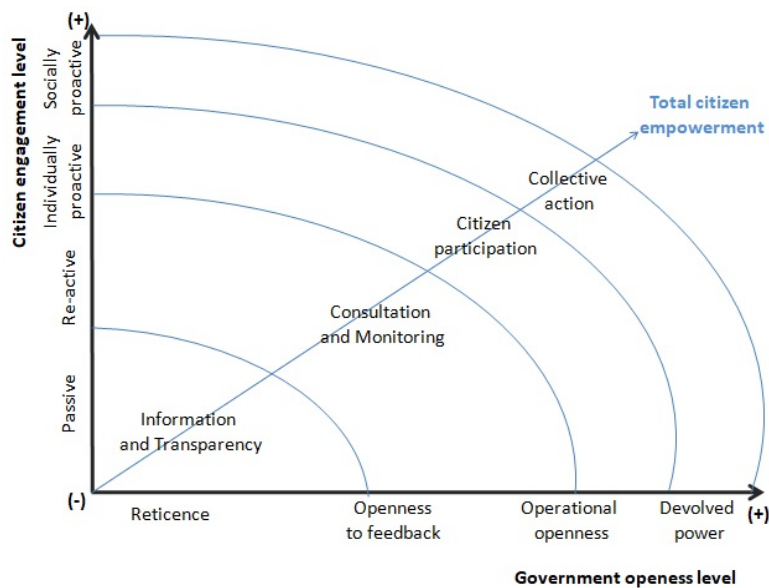


Fig. 3. A new engagement model based on citizen engagement level and government openness level

A public service provider which has a hierarchical organizational culture is unlikely to be able to engage or support citizens in collaborative projects. The more it opens and adopts an egalitarian culture, the more it will reach and positively affect its community. On the other hand, if the purpose of the government actor is to manipulate or improve its image, its actions and message will not engage citizens, solely determine a reaction from their side. The communication mode a government institution adopts relates with the other variables and scopes. A dialogue appears only when authority is delegated to a certain extent. And finally, the project phase is equally relevant. Reluctant government actions do not engage citizens in research and development phases of a project. However, if they manage to extend the project phases in which citizens have a saying, their open approach will determine positive results.

#### IV. THE NEW ENGAGEMENT MODEL

The five variables which influence citizen engagement level within a co-production project and the five variables managing government openness to public participation are now combined into a new engagement model (Fig. 3). The pattern thus formed visually represents all possible engagement outputs depending on the two actors' participation efforts. The final desideratum of all engagement efforts is total citizen empowerment. But it mainly remains a utopia. There have been some participatory spaces within decentralized systems of governance like the participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the rural governance reform in India or the village democracy in China, however they are exceptional and limited to small communities. Many community projects are embracing citizen participation or collective action strategies.

Thus, the main goal for all citizen engagement projects is to assess the level of government openness and citizen engagement for the situation considering the five variables for each of them. After understanding the starting position in the engagement model, the project team can delineate the strategy for ascending towards a superior participation position.

The first participation stage is called information and transparency because the main focus is on the data the government actors transfer towards citizens without expecting any action from their part. It is a very comfortable stage for the institution in which they have total control of every step and circulated information. The monologue is used to manipulate or educate/inform the masses about the project only for data transparency. The outcome has no real value, the public service does not profit from the creativity and possible innovative approach of the local community and the satisfaction degree usually decreases in time.

When we transition towards the second stage called consultation and monitoring, the output changes and citizen satisfaction increases. Citizens react or even

start being individually proactive due to openness to feedback from the government side. We have a small amount of authority delegation; the communication becomes two-sided and the citizen is involved in the delivery and evaluation of the project. In the upper part of this stage the government actors allow the public to become equals in the operational part of the project with the final goal to contain costs and determine volunteers to provide free labor. Some of the most known projects of this sort are citizen science crowd sourcing projects where citizens play an active role in the scientific process [6], being particularly popular within ecology, biology and environment monitoring [18].

The third citizen participation stage describes the situation when citizens are still individualistic, desiring personal value outcomes from the participation and government actors are transitioning towards an egalitarian culture, allowing the public to be proactive in many stages of the project and ceding a certain amount of power. In result, the public service becomes more attractive to the public and their satisfaction increases drastically.

The fourth collective action stage is very difficult to reach because the citizen changes his or her behavior towards a more socially proactive one desiring to provide value for others in a collective effort. The government openness reaches a high level where the authority is delegated equally to the public and the organizational culture is converted towards democratic governance.

Public services face innovative shifts and they become highly attractive for the whole community. The communication remains a dialogue and sometimes becomes even deliberative, because citizens are engaged in all project phases and are accountable for their decision-making processes.

#### V. CONCLUSIONS

The present paper explores the citizen engagement concept and proposes a new model which envisions the relevant stages a public participation project can focus upon depending on the current citizen profile and organizational culture of the government actor. The five variables for each of them provide relevant factors government managers need to think about when designing participatory strategies.

Why do we need to engage citizens in public service improvement projects? Because co-production is the future for all smart city services, Voorberg et al. [19] argues that the most under-used road to innovation is through asking citizens not just to assess how services are delivered but also to help co-produce them. Active, proactive and productive citizens seem to be the right alternative for service development and the traditional approaches in this light no longer appear suitable [17]. How can we engage citizens in public service projects? There are several ways, depending on the position of

the project in the engagement model. If the project has a collaborative and open government institution and citizens are individually proactive, the alternative is to design strategies for transforming citizens into community driven value seekers and thus ascending to a collective action plan.

If the current situation envisages reluctant and passive actors, the project managers need to assess the actual position in the model and depict the right strategies to determine an increase in openness and proactive behavior, as the case envisions.

The variables are key for the analysis and design steps of the project. Future research will focus upon case studies for the final scope of evaluating the proposed framework.

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