

# LESSONS LEARNED

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## LESSONS FROM PUBLIC OFFICIALS AND GOVERNMENTS

Public Agenda’s Healthier Democracies case studies have shown that governments around the world are developing participatory spaces in response to the demands of citizens to be heard, but also to requests from political actors and public officials eager to seek out citizen input. Political will, capacity and readiness to engage citizens in policymaking and governance are essential to the creation of democratic engagement structures capable of remaining effective over time, but they alone aren’t enough. To achieve healthier, more sustainable and inclusive governance systems, governments need to move toward developing the following:



**Engagement Structures** that establish multiple institutions to allow for different forms of participation. In the most developed case studies, multiple channels form interconnected parts of a larger engagement system.



**Opportunities for Engagement** that create and support a variety of designs for engagement within institutions, both formal and informal, that can creditably impact government decisions. Multiple

opportunities for engagement can help ensure broader and deeper outreach to a population and a higher quality of participation.



**Commitment to Engagement** that ensures the implementation of appropriate means to design, communicate, evaluate and embed participatory and deliberative processes for governance.



**Community Building** through efforts to ensure government spaces for engagement do not replace social and political organization, but rather allow communities to connect and access resources.

*In the Healthier Democracies case studies, these icons call attention to great examples of Structures, Opportunities, Commitments, and Community Building. For more information, see the [PGI User Guide](#) (page 21).*

## Engagement Structures



Engagement structures offer citizens alternative forms and degrees of engagement that can adapt to different goals and needs—allowing citizen input at various stages of the decision-making process and the pursuit of different goals.

Successful cases of government-led engagement structures generally include:

### INFRASTRUCTURE FOR COLLABORATION

Exemplary engagement structures include many different forms for participation (for instance, councils, committees, digital platforms, site visits, etc.)<sup>1</sup> that allow governments and communities to collaboratively process information, deliberate with one another and reach decisions. Some channels may be created to gather resident input on many topics, while others may be customized to respond to different or specific needs. Their coexistence and overlap make up a healthy system of participation that offers communities multiple chances to engage with the government.

In [Seoul](#), South Korea, city residents can communicate with the metropolitan government via multiple digital platforms such as websites, apps and via comments on social media. Other opportunities for engagement prioritize in-person participation, such as Seoul's participatory budgeting, the Cheong-Chek Forum and the Mayoral Mobile Office. Multiple channels for communication increase the ability of the local government to engage with people.

In [Berlin](#), Germany, communities can directly participate in the local administration through neighborhood management councils and citizens' juries. They can also give feedback on urban development projects across the city on the online platform [meinBerlin](#), attend public hearings, or join open workshops for projects led by public-private partnerships.

### CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Exemplary engagement structures further engage the public, social and private sectors. They host and facilitate opportunities so that groups can connect and collaborate with one another and the local administration and its relevant departments or subdivisions in charge of tackling specific policy issues. Governments that take advantage of existing interest groups and mobilized sectors are more likely to implement successful projects, as those groups can offer expertise and access to networks beyond the reach of the government.

In [Glasgow](#), Scotland, policies submitted to communities for consultation by multiple government departments are gathered in an online Consultation Hub, together with citizen petitions and participation requests. At the same time, the Community Choices Fund partners local authorities with community organizations working on specific issues to support local activities and services in those areas.

In [Auckland](#), New Zealand, the Auckland Council, the local boards and the Independent Māori Statutory Board (IMSB) collaborate with multiple government departments and tribal leaders to ensure collaborative and informed public decision-making with the region's 19 Māori tribes.

These are examples of centralized hubs that connect interested parties and stakeholders to collaborate through engagement.

### USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

Exemplary engagement structures provide a range of technological options (like websites, apps and videos, but also hotlines and/or SMS messaging) to facilitate the public's participation in making decisions even if residents are not available to attend in-person processes and consultations. While the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) are not sufficient alone to ensure broad participation, they have proven helpful in engaging specific sectors of the population and do not necessarily compete with in-person participation.

<sup>1</sup> Please refer to the [Glossary](#) (page 32) for definitions of different forms, channels and structures for engagement.

In the Brazilian state of [Rio Grande do Sul](#), the digital participatory budget process appealed to different participants and voters, including residents who had not previously taken part in assemblies for the in-person participatory budgeting process.

Tech-based participation can be highly effective due to the relatively low-cost of mass digital engagement. Yet, it does require a high digital accessibility rate across the population, and its implementation needs to account for those on the other side of the digital divide. In [Seoul](#), the high internet penetration rate and elevated smartphone ownership led the government to focus its efforts in developing multiple digital tools for participation; still, the government also implemented “analog” forms of communication, such as a community attention hotline, and gathered input from residents through the local government’s social media channels.



Creating multiple engagement structures helps involve residents in **different moments in the policymaking cycle**. Community input has distinct benefits at different stages. Engaging residents in problem definition improves responsiveness and helps adjust public policy to community needs. Participation in decision-making (via referendum or citizens’ councils) increases the political legitimacy of those decisions. Engaging residents in the implementation of public processes (via citizen representatives in public tenders or citizens’ juries) increases trust in those processes and in the government. Finally, participation through monitoring increases transparency and accountability (via evaluation committees that follow the execution of public works).

In [Melbourne](#), Australia, two 10-year plans for the city have been developed with multiple stages of community participation. For the 2008 Future Melbourne strategic plan, citizens could determine values and visions for the city, deliberate options on how to achieve them, vote on a strategy and consult with the local government on how to implement that strategy. For the 2016 Future Melbourne plan, residents were able to submit their ideas through online and in-person survey sessions and they could later comment on the drafted plan based on those ideas; finally, a citizens’ jury decided on the final plan.

The civic participation model of [Tampere](#), Finland, offers three engagement channels through which citizens can provide input: the online platform *Valma*, where public officials upload local policy proposals that citizens can comment on; local neighborhood workgroups that meet regularly throughout the year to discuss issues that affect specific areas; and Residents’ Night, a citywide open forum to informally and freely share concerns and ideas with the mayor, public servants and City Council representatives. This tripartite structure allows communities to influence different forms and stages of public decision-making.

Engagement structures also increase the government’s capacity to **direct and adapt its responses to different goals and contexts**: for instance, some forms of participation engage specific groups, such as residents of one neighborhood, while others open discussions to larger issues that may affect all the residents of a city or state.

In [Madrid](#), Spain, the online platform [Decide Madrid](#) allowed any resident to discuss broader issues of interest to all residents, such as a sustainability plan or the redesign of the city’s central square, while collaborative workshops and participatory arts, organized through experimental formats in cultural centers like Intermediae and Medialab Prado, targeted integration for less-privileged groups.

In [Bologna](#), Italy, Neighborhood Labs were organized in each district based on the feedback and demands of residents, as well as in response to Fragility Maps that marked areas with potential demographic, social and economic vulnerabilities. This allowed the local government to tackle and co-create tailored solutions with community members.

## Opportunities for Engagement



### OPPORTUNITIES

by, governments and policy.

To achieve healthier, more sustainable and inclusive governance systems, governments need to plan and support a variety of civic engagement opportunities and ensure that processes result in meaningful influence on, and action

### CAPACITY FOR IMPACT

The ability of residents to co-create and define their communities' futures requires mechanisms through which they can have a say in the policies that affect them. This can be achieved by opening up multiple stages of the policy process and allowing communities to make decisions that governments are openly committed to implementing—even legally mandated to comply with in some cases. For example, participatory budgeting processes allow residents to directly decide how to spend a portion of the public budget. These binding decisions are usually prioritized by popular vote.

The Citizens' Assemblies in [Gdańsk](#), Poland, brought together randomly selected residents in order to make policy decisions on highly technical issues, such as flood management, water retention infrastructure and measures to improve air quality. The government ensured that participants were demographically representative of the local population and used neutral information and expert counsel. The decisions of the assemblies were binding for the local government, which was mandated to comply with any recommendation that received the support of 80 percent or more of assembly members.

The impact of participatory processes can also increase when it allows communities to co-define the legal basis of their city or long-term strategic plans. Processes can deeply transform the relationship people have with their local institutions. For instance, the Constitution of [Mexico City](#), is the result of a multilayered, collaborative drafting of the city's first constitution by citizens and their government to co-determine the principles and rules of its local democratic system. Eleven out of 71 articles in Mexico City's Constitution were, in fact, proposed by citizens.<sup>2</sup>

### FREQUENCY AND VARIETY

Offering multiple opportunities for engagement does not only mean creating different processes, but also holding them in hybrid formats and over multiple timelines, while ensuring equitable access to participation and responsible management of resources. Participatory budgeting in Brazil's [Rio Grande do Sul](#) used diversification strategies to eliminate barriers for citizens joining local and regional assemblies. It set up different in-person and online spaces of participation catered to different policy issues, target groups and political decision-making levels—which ultimately increased levels of engagement.<sup>3</sup>

Participation can take multiple forms to meet diverse needs and communities. In [Kirklees](#), England, the Kirklees Democracy Commission deliberated recommendations to increase public participation at the local level through activities that allowed people with different needs and availability to participate. Activities ranged from open Democracy Roadshows to talks with invited expert witnesses, group discussions and surveys.

There is also growing support for permanent spaces for community engagement that can be used on a regular basis. The discrepancy between the short decision-making timelines given to residents and much longer governmental schedules for project implementation points to the need to pursue larger administrative changes alongside new engagement formats. In [Bologna](#), only two out of the 36 projects deliberated during the

<sup>2</sup> Ernesto Cruz Ruiz, "Underrepresented Groups and Constitution-Making: The Mexico City Case," *Political Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (May 2021): 164–170, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929920944825>.

<sup>3</sup> Sveinung Legard and Benjamin Goldfrank, "The systemic turn and participatory budgeting: The case of Rio Grande do Sul," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 53.1 (2021): 161–187.

city's participatory budgeting processes have been completed. Despite this delay, Bologna's Neighborhood Labs have tried to keep residents engaged by pairing frequent and permanent spaces of engagement (such as the yearly participatory budgeting process) with one-off processes. The city prioritized a strategy of frequent proximity to communities over quick implementation.



Offering multiple, varied and frequent opportunities for engagement creates a comparative advantage for governments to **reach diverse groups**. Multiple forms, stages and timelines for engagement are more likely to attract larger groups of participants, while targeted channels for engagement are likely to attract more diverse groups. Participation opportunities that take place regularly and on a predictable schedule can be better communicated to the public, increasing the chances of attracting participants; in turn, engagement opportunities that take place one time have been shown to have better reach when linked to pressing issues or ongoing societal debates.

Engaging with nongovernmental actors and using familiar gathering places when creating participation processes was key to developing the Māori plan in [Auckland](#). While dedicated in-person and digital spaces of engagement were created by the Te Kotahi Research Institute (appointed by the IMSB), communities also deliberated at pre-existing tribal meetings (*hui*).

Ensuring that multiple spaces are open to a broad spectrum of participants creates a resonance box able to increasingly **represent more segments of society**. Relying on new forms of associationalism has also helped government-led initiatives to more effectively adapt to the needs of historically oppressed communities. In [Kerala](#), India, decentralization and multilayered participation have significantly supported efforts to include and equip women from traditional households in gaining financial and political independence. Neighborhood self-help groups, organized through the Kudumbashree Mission, federate neighborhood women to collectivize both their

financial and political power to tackle local issues in their areas and voice opinions at their village meetings called *gram sabhas*.

Securing broad and diverse participation is essential to overcoming the problem of the "usual suspects"—that is, when certain individuals who have the time or resources to take part in participatory processes get the chance to be heard over others.<sup>4</sup> This includes factors like the time or place of meetings and events or the information channels used to share opportunities for engagement.

To avoid this problem, [Berlin's](#) Citizens' Juries, one of the city's multiple participatory mechanisms, have adopted informal measures to ensure that women, youth and foreigners are given equal representation in overseeing the local implementation of urban projects. For instance, outreach to priority demographic groups are more targeted and intense in order to ensure groups are better represented in the final sample of participants. A similar strategy was adopted for Citizens' Assemblies in the Berlin borough of Schöneberg, where oversampling and sending a greater number of invitations to women, young people and other minoritized communities were used to increase their chances of participation.

<sup>4</sup> John May, "The Triangle of Engagement: An Unusual Way of Looking at the Usual Suspects," *Public Money & Management* 27, no. 1 (2007) 69–75; Madeleine Pape and Chaeyoon Lim, "Beyond the 'Usual Suspects'? Reimagining Democracy With Participatory Budgeting in Chicago," *Sociological Forum* 34, no. 4 (December 2019): 861–882, <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12550>.

## Commitment to Engagement



### COMMITMENTS

Political will, capacity and readiness to engage communities in policymaking and governance are essential to creating engagement structures that will be effective and sustainable over time.

But in order to achieve meaningful and impactful participation, governments also need to adopt concrete measures to communicate, embed, design and evaluate structures of engagement.

### COMMUNICATION AND MESSAGING

Governments need to effectively communicate to the public that structures of engagement are in place. Public-facing information campaigns in accessible language (and in multiple languages, if required by the local demographic) are needed to inform residents about when and how they can participate, and about the purpose and value of their contributions. In [Madrid](#), for instance, a campaign with signs stating “Vote Yes” and “Vote No” on the city’s central street, Gran Vía, was designed to capture the attention of pedestrians and drivers and inform them of their chance to weigh in on the restructuring of that street by taking part in a referendum vote. In addition, the online platform Decide Madrid hosted #YouAsk to allow residents to pose questions directly to the mayor and public officials, who later answered the questions with the most votes in a video posted on the site.

Governments must pay special attention to clear and transparent communication with their constituents, particularly in regards to establishing realistic expectations for the participatory process. Participants may have high expectations in terms of project completion and visible outcomes within timelines that do not always match governmental capacity. Participants also need to have access to concrete and easily understandable information about the scope of their participation and the reach of their influence on decision-making. In [Glasgow](#), the City Council translates policy decisions reached through consultations into accessible language to ensure anyone can understand the decisions. In [Gdańsk](#), the final sortition of citizens who will take part in Citizens’ Assemblies is conducted on livestream by rolling a dice to ensure maximum transparency and generate trust in the process.

## FORMALIZATION

Commitment to engagement also means that participation is fostered beyond a single process and that structures are meant to last beyond the mandate of one specific government. This is achieved by embedding them in the public administration, for instance, through legislation and regulation. In [Rio Grande do Sul](#), regional participatory budgeting was regulated by executive decrees. While in place, the government was required by law to incorporate the outcomes of its statewide referendum, the Popular Consultation. Even when the participatory budgeting process was overturned by opposing political forces, the Popular Consultation continued in place thanks to it being formalized and embedded as an institution of the government.

In addition, a dedicated budget is needed to conduct impactful engagement. Participatory processes usually have high costs and cannot easily be incorporated into pre-existing budgets. In one borough of [Berlin](#), this challenge was solved by submitting its discretionary funds to popular decision (Lichtenberg’s participatory budgeting). Across Berlin’s boroughs, small funds (*Quartiersfonds*) are available for neighborhood projects that require minimal bureaucratic intervention, while larger project sums can be acquired through public tenders so that borough administrations can conduct model projects through Citizens’ Offices, or in the case of Tempelhof-Schöneberg, Citizens’ Assemblies.

A final component in formalizing engagement is the creation of a separate citizen participation office or department within the local or state administration, and the commissioning of dedicated and trained staff tasked with planning and implementing engagement processes. Such a department can be of permanent nature, with public servants as dedicated staffers, as was the case in [Cali](#) in Colombia. There, an interdisciplinary team was engaged to design the city’s Roundtables for Civic Peace, which included social workers, social psychologists and sociologists who directly collaborated with public servants and local residents to organize and implement neighborhood projects. Their expertise helped form a multidimensional understanding of the needs of underserved communities and the potential projects to tackle those needs.

A participation office can also be created for a specific task or period of time and include citizen representatives who collaborate with staffers, as is the case in [Kirklees](#). There, the local council created the Kirklees Democracy Commission to listen to citizens' experiences and ideas and to produce recommendations for the local government on how to improve its democratic institutions.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING AND EVALUATION

Commitment to engagement is most effectively developed when it is embedded in short, medium and/or long-term government planning. Participation can be incorporated in distinct government areas. In [Gdańsk](#), residents were invited to Citizens' Assemblies to reach decisions and recommendations in predetermined policy issues, such as flood management, air quality and the promotion of civic life. Participation can also be incorporated as a transversal principle that applies to any public plan or government decision. In [Melbourne](#), input from citizens was gathered in two 10-year "Future Melbourne" plans to inform general governance and local development strategies.

Exemplary practices of government-led participatory processes include collaboratively defining challenges, goals, measures and expected outcomes that can be monitored during and after a government's mandate.



Careful planning and designing of the right engagement structures for the concrete challenges that local communities face can help ensure that citizens' input will be **effective and impactful**. Formalization, a dedicated budget and the professionalization of public officials and staffers help ensure that processes respond to the needs of governments and citizens, and that they are conducted properly and support the legitimacy of any decisions reached. In [Auckland](#), the Auckland Council and IMSB structures ensure that local government is in dialogue with Māori tribes and offer training for non-Māori public servants on accountability and to provide opportunities to learn more about the minoritized and underrepresented people in their communities.

Good communication, in turn, can create meaningful and lasting relationships between communities and government. The [Kirklees](#) Democracy Commission placed an emphasis on connecting public servants and council

members with residents and communicating the role of government officials to citizens. Co-creation workshops led to the development of the shared strategy "Shaped by the People," a framework that was adopted by the Kirklees Council to guide its future actions in supporting active citizenship.

A government's commitment to engagement should be based on mapping and understanding each community's **needs, challenges, opportunities and resources**.

Residents are experts on their own communities, neighborhoods and needs. They are interlocutors whose voices are key to governments looking to understand what's happening on the ground. Formalized, accessible and well-prepared systems of engagement enable governments to receive strategic input that can help determine where and how to allocate resources, adapt intervention strategies, prioritize and even redesign policies.

In [Cali](#), the local government first conducted a survey with 30,000 citizens to understand the values and problems present in residents' everyday life. Citizens identified feeling unsafe and violence as their main challenges and underserved neighborhoods as the most urgent sites in need of intervention. The data prepared the ground for interventions such as Cali's Civic Culture Roundtables and youth rehabilitation programs. Moreover, the survey helped the government to identify low-cost, high-impact interventions that could be implemented quickly by community members.

## Community Building



To strengthen the relationship between the government, communities and civil society organizations, two areas of community building must be targeted and strengthened:

### EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment strategies, such as civic education and capacity-building programs, connect and strengthen autonomous and community-led forms of participation and favor social and political organization. These strategies facilitate access to resources that allow citizens to organize, protect their interests and tackle challenges independent of government actions. Embedding empowerment strategies in participatory institutions helps make them less vulnerable to disruption by changing political sensitivities or party mandates. Safeguarding processes in this way helps foster sustainability and civic participation within government-led processes of engagement.<sup>5</sup>

There is little evidence on the impacts of empowerment strategies on deliberative and participatory decision-making initiatives. However, in our research, we have found anecdotal case evidence that suggests how empowerment strategies could impact participatory processes. [Cali's](#) Roundtables of Citizen Culture for Peace, for instance, were created between 2016 and 2020 to discuss issues of security and violence and generate strategies to reclaim public spaces, while strengthening local identities and solidarity networks within communities. Even though the Roundtables program was dismantled after a change in government leadership, 16 out of 24 roundtables continued their activities as self-organized committees.

In [Kerala](#), participatory institutions such as the gram sabha (a permanent body of residents who gather to discuss the mechanisms of implementation and the outputs of local development projects) tended to be dominated by male participants. To address this challenge, the government launched the Kudumbashree Mission, which created an autonomous network of neighborhood groups

for women that aims to alleviate poverty and address local concerns through the creation of women-led decision-making spaces and entrepreneurialism. As of 2002, nearly 60 percent of families in Kerala were participating in Kudumbashree groups.

### HUBS AND CONNECTIONS

Government administrative, technical and financial support is needed to implement sustainable community engagement. Support can come from innovative government hiring schemes that connect civil servants to actors outside the public sector; incentives for political elites and administrative staff to include new participatory practices and nongovernmental actors in their praxis; financial, digital and physical structures built for different processes and policy issues; dedicated training and exchange opportunities between different stakeholders; and other services that allow communities to meet and interact among one another and their government.

For instance, hiring processes that bring together different forms of expertise and communities of practice from within (and outside) the government have exemplified some of the most creative processes of participatory experimentation, while accounting for political sensitivities and existing bureaucratic processes. [Mexico City's](#) Laboratory for the City brought together a multidisciplinary team made up of young artists, activists, historians, data analysts, architects, international experts, designers and political scientists to implement its objectives. The Lab was the driving force behind the citizen-led creation of Mexico City's Constitution, as well as co-creative processes to design public spaces with children. The team also created *sobremesas*, small informal meals where diverse actors from across communities, the government, various experts and nongovernmental organizations came to the table to eat together and hold after-meal discussions about issues that were important to them as an initiative to build trust and break "symbols of power."

Other cases have relied on collaborations between practitioners (facilitators, designers, etc.), activists and academics to generate numerous "in-between" participatory spaces. Incorporating process-expertise,

<sup>5</sup> Taina Meriluoto, "Struggles over Expertise: Practices of Politicization and Depoliticization in Participatory Democracy," *Democratic Theory* 8, no. 1 (June 2021): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2021.080102>.

or the “design of collaboration in collaboration,” in an institutional space can also help governments improve the design, implementation and assessment of its participatory and deliberative endeavors.<sup>6</sup>

Creating hubs and connections with the citizenry ought to protect (not dismantle) radical forms of community-led participatory experimentation. In [Bologna](#), government-led strategies for collaborative governance occurred in parallel to the violent eviction of squatted buildings that hosted social centers, informal social housing projects and migrant and refugee coalitions.<sup>7</sup> Many activists, intellectuals and academics see this as an example of how government-led processes can seemingly address the effects of policies with citizens without giving them any true power to impact those policies or effect real and meaningful change.<sup>8</sup>



Government efforts that support existing and new community-building initiatives can grant **stability, continuity and sustainability** to participatory institutions and processes. Effective participatory institutions can help processes weather changing political tides and continue beyond the mandates of those who first implemented them.

Continuity, however, depends on the goals and the degree of penetration that participatory processes have had in local communities and the extent to which citizens have responded to and appropriated engagement structures. The Informal Settlement Support Programme (ISSP) in [Western Cape](#), South Africa, convenes participatory spaces in partnership with NGOs to organize community committees on the ground as part of an ongoing process planned until 2030. It aims for communities to develop autonomous forms of organization capable of sustaining participatory processes and collaboration with the local and regional governments into the future.

Embedding community-building elements in participatory processes can also deeply **transform the way citizens understand their role in democratic governance** and avoid tendencies of paternalism and knowledge extractivism in participatory processes.<sup>9</sup> For instance, [Seoul’s](#) community Share Hubs made 800 spaces and resources available to the city’s residents. These included working and meeting rooms previously accessible only to civil servants. At the same time, Seoul’s Sharing City strategy created spaces and opportunities for residents to connect and exchange their time, resources and expertise on a range of issues, from housing to the job market.

Finally, informal spaces for engagement are key to collective transformations. For instance, [Tampere’s](#) regularly hosted open forum Residents’ Night allows residents, political parties and representatives to talk with the mayor and local deputies without a delimited agenda. In [Bologna](#) and [Mexico City](#), participatory institutions engaged different communities by incorporating food culture into political and administrative processes (e.g., aperitifs in Bologna and sobremesas in Mexico City).

<sup>6</sup> Giulia Molinengo, Dorota Stasiak, and Rebecca Freeth, “Process expertise in policy advice: Designing collaboration in collaboration,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8 (December 2021): 310, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00990-9>.

<sup>7</sup> Iolanda Bianchi, “The Post-Political Meaning of the Concept of Commons: The Regulation of the Urban Commons in Bologna,” *Space and Polity* 22, no. 3 (2018): 287–306.

<sup>8</sup> Wu Ming, “Difendere XM24, per tornare a respirare. Una valanga di firme a Bologna,” *Giap* (May 2, 2017), <https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/2017/05/difendere-xm24/>.

<sup>9</sup> Azucena Morán and Melisa Ross, “Can Deliberation Overcome Its Extractivist Tendencies?” *Journal of Deliberative Democracy and Deliberative Democracy Digest* (September 2021), <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/can-deliberation-overcome-its-extractivist-tendencies/>.

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# LESSONS FROM ENGAGED COMMUNITIES AND PRACTITIONERS

## International Partnerships and Resources

Around the world, governments are increasingly experimenting with new forms of consultation with communities, giving them power to decide on public matters beyond traditional channels (such as protests, parties or elections). One of the central advantages in the diffusion and popularity of engagement as a policymaking tool is that governments and practitioners can now access knowledge, contacts, ideas and practical know-how from similar experiences around the world.

Multiple **databases and data reservoirs** allow the general public to access this knowledge.

At the international level, [Participedia](#) offers a crowd-sourced encyclopedia of participation around the world, with over 1,900 cases and hundreds of methods and organizations engaging citizens across 137 countries. [LAT-INNO](#), in turn, has collected data on over 3,400 cases of citizen participation in 18 countries in Latin America. A recent study by the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\)](#) has further collected around 570 cases of representative deliberative processes and institutions in 30 countries and in the European Union. [ParticipationCaseScout](#) visualizes over 300 cases of participatory environmental governance in Europe, North America and Australia. Finally, the [International Observatory on Participatory Democracy \(IOPD\)](#) collects best practice studies from across the world to learn from local experiences with participatory democracy.

**International networks and alliances** have been created to enable productive exchanges and collaboration across the world. International networks can support the professionalization of staffers and public officials, enable contact with practitioners and pioneers who can support governments in the adoption of participatory formats, and make cross-sector collaboration with other governments and civil society possible.

Some examples include professional networks, such as the [OECD's Innovative Citizen Participation Network](#),

which gathers 80 personalities and representatives from civil society, practitioners, universities, think tanks and the private sector; public servant networks, such as the [European Network for Citizen Participation](#), established to share good practices in citizen participation and direct democracy with a focus on cross-border and multilevel issues; sister and partner cities networks, such as the [Eurocities Citizens Engagement](#) network, which links and supports local governments in their exchange and learnings about the ongoing evolution of citizen engagement practices; and international alliances, such as the [International Association for Public Participation \(IA2P\)](#), dedicated to advancing public engagement through professional development, certification, standards of practice, advocacy and key initiatives with strategic partners around the world. Additionally, international partnerships and coalitions create opportunities to collaborate, research and learn about ongoing developments in the field of public participation, and offer support and expertise on the implementation of engagement models. Some of these networks include [Democracy R&D](#), the [Deliberative Democracy Consortium](#) and the [newDemocracy Foundation](#).

**International prizes for participation and innovation in the public sector** can grant visibility and recognition to governments implementing new forms of engagement and experimenting with participation. They acknowledge both effort and success in government-led innovation and bring together public officials from across the globe to exchange and learn.

Examples include the [IA2P's Core Values Award](#), which celebrates innovation that aligns with the values leading citizen participation and acts upon those values; the [IOPD's Best Practices in Citizen Participation](#), which acknowledges project design and implementation beyond strict definitions of participation, including forms of community collaboration and alternative solutions to public service delivery; and the [United Nations Public Service Innovation Hub](#), which recognizes creative solutions that improve the efficiency and responsiveness of public administration with its annual [UNPSA Awards](#). Bloomberg

and Johns Hopkins University's nonprofit [Cities of Service](#), in turn, aims to support local governments across the world through the [Engaged Cities Award](#), which highlights effective solutions to local challenges developed through creative approaches to public service.

## Local Partnerships and Resources

Governments are not alone when it comes to advancing engagement and fostering co-governance to tackle local problems. Civil society organizations and practitioners across the world at the local, regional, national and international levels have been active in the field of engagement for several decades, developing numerous forms of collaboration and innovation that rely on active citizenship. Governments can profit greatly from their expertise, knowledge and networks. Civil society organizations and practitioners can also profit from collaborating with the government to obtain funds and infrastructure support to carry out or scale up their projects.

Public Agenda's Healthier Democracies case studies provide ample evidence of the **diversity of formats** in which collaborations can take shape.

### PUBLIC ENTERPRISES

In [Madrid](#), spaces such as the [Medialab Prado](#) and [Intermediae](#), while created and funded by the city government, were managed by a public enterprise named [Madrid Destino](#). Public Enterprises are a legal form, created by a Madrid Municipal Act (*Ordenanza*), that are granted the power to execute public budgets and government plans in areas where the local government doesn't have the ability to implement them itself. This form gives Public Enterprises a certain degree of autonomy to execute their allocated budgets, as well as greater flexibility to start new projects, hire staff, conduct tenders and execute projects more quickly than regular public administration offices.

Conversely, enterprises also have more flexibility to terminate programs and dismantle institutions—this is precisely what happened to Medialab, which has been pared down from its original form and integrated into the cultural center [Matadero Madrid](#).

### THINK TANKS AND FOUNDATIONS

In [Seoul](#), the participation think tank [Hope Institute](#) was set up by human rights activist, lawyer and mayor of Seoul Park Won-Soon to promote public participation in the development of responses to the challenges facing Korean society. The institute leads the Social Innovation Center, as well as research, education and consulting projects. It also conducts open surveys and contests for ideas for social change, which are selected by a panel of judges and later elaborated in cooperation with professionals, experts and policymakers to develop policy proposals. Prior to Park's mayorship, the institute conducted campaigns and research to help promote policy proposals, including "Subway Handles for Everyone," a project to install lower handles on public transportation so that children could travel safely, and the "Campaign for Pregnant Women" that distributed badges for women to use priority seating on public transportation even when their pregnancy isn't visible.

Similarly, the Seoul Innovation Bureau was established as a foundation with public funding under the mayor's direct authority, but with special authority to directly hire technical experts outside of the rigorous and highly competitive civil-service exam system. These flexible institutional structures were key to supporting experimentation in Seoul's public sector.

### CONTRACTORS

In [Western Cape](#), the Informal Settlement Support Programme (ISSP) relied on private contractors on two fronts: on the one hand to engage civil society organizations and NGOs in work on the ground with the communities in local settlements across the region; on the other hand, to execute the infrastructure required to improve informal settlements and ensure residents' access to basic goods and services such as water and sanitation.

Through private contractors, the regional government sought to supplement the limitations of local administrations to upgrade and develop informal settlements and also involve civil society organizations and local communities in overseeing investment and upgrading plans. The involvement of NGOs supported local communities by creating a space for grassroots organization and autonomous dialogue before advancing proposals and issues to government representatives.

## PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

In [Berlin](#), many projects are initiated, co-led or carried out by so-called “public carriers” (*Träger*), comparable to the figure of a contractor and usually engaged through public tender to design, implement and/or evaluate engagement projects on behalf of the Berlin government. However, both for-profit and nonprofit organizations, NGOs and civil society organizations can become public carriers. This system has helped Berlin reduce the elevated workload of its limited administrative staff and led to a flourishing ecosystem of engagement professionals in the city that includes experts and practitioners to foundations and for-profit companies.

## ACADEMIA AND EXPERTS

Experts, such as professionals and researchers, can assist governments on issues that demand technical expertise or state-of-the-art knowledge. For example, in [Gdańsk](#), experts engaged with Citizens’ Assemblies not only during the educational phase to present participants with information about the issues under deliberation, but also throughout the design process. Some scholars also helped in the process to determine the exact number of participants and the distribution of representatives for each district. Others followed the assembly as observers to ensure impartiality and assess the quality of deliberations and recommendations.

## CITIZENS’ COUNCILS

Citizens’ councils are a long-standing form of engagement that relies on the expertise of citizens and their capacity to represent their communities in government action and inform policy decisions. Councils can be permanent, such as the [Auckland](#) Council, or they can be put in place for a period of time to fulfill a specific function, such as [Melbourne](#)’s Citizens’ Jury. In [Tampere](#), over 100 local neighborhood workgroups (*Alvari*) deliberated on local policies that directly affected their areas and the municipal budgeting process. In [Western Cape](#), Ward Committees are organized in each district or area at each of its 24 municipalities. These committees are tasked with providing input for the Integrated Development Plan and ensuring that development projects respond to the needs of communities.

## MULTILEVEL PARTICIPATION AND DECENTRALIZATION

Regions and cities usually comprise multiple administrative divisions, for instance, districts, boroughs, wards and neighborhoods. These hyperlocal units can provide the basis to organize multilevel engagement and inform citywide or statewide decisions through a bottom-up approach. [Kerala](#)’s community development system relies on a complex structure of citizen-led councils that begins with the city-level panchayats, village-level gram sabhas, and district and block gram panchayats, which provides the opportunity for residents of each neighborhood to inform community development plans. In [Rio Grande do Sul](#), the participatory budgeting process has been informed by priorities for the state investment budget set by local assemblies organized in over 400 municipalities, while the city’s Popular Consultation engages 21 citizen-led regional development councils (COREDE) active in each of the state’s sub-regions to propose and prioritize investments before submitting them to a state-wide open-voting stage.

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# LESSONS LEARNED FROM AND FOR ENGAGEMENT RESEARCHERS

Conducting transnational research in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and from the Global North presented multiple empirical, ethical and theoretical challenges. Some of the practical difficulties the Healthier Democracies Project encountered have included different response timelines, time zones and election calendars, as well as diverse communication mechanisms.

Responding to these challenges required hiring mechanisms that reflected the international character of the project; managing different means of communication that adapted to working cultures around the globe (such as the active use of social media instead of emailing); actively reaching out to different networks and communities of practice; and allocating funds for outreach and translation.

At the same time, there are ethical and theoretical challenges connected to the current trends in Western-driven participation and engagement research. This research has largely focused on the government-led design and institutionalization of participatory practices and their impact on representative democracy. With a few exceptions, little attention has been paid to international or community-led practices of participation and deliberation.<sup>10</sup> Looking for good practices of government-led participation in areas of limited statehood, in particular in the Global South, requires turning the gaze away from autonomous forms of governance emerging in absence of, or despite, the nation-state.

In response to some of these challenges, an ecological lens can illuminate not only the impact of state-led democratic **systems of engagement**, but also the relationships between multiple participatory practices,

governance structures and actors engaging with their communities in distinct political, environmental and historical conditions. Those many forms of engagement can be thought of as an **ecosystem of collective governance**, rather than a series of decision-making processes that exist only within a government system.

The Healthier Democracies Project has focused on highlighting government systems of engagement and understanding the innovative ways citizens can be brought closer to governments to influence policies and politics by expressing their opinions, managing programs, making decisions and assessing their governments' performances. Public Agenda's Healthier Democracies research, however, has shown that government-led initiatives not only interact with citizens, but often rely, and even depend, on community initiatives, local networks, resources and the invaluable expertise that only citizens can provide.

In this sense, an **ecosystem of participation** is a living home to long-term engagement institutions that exist and function in parallel to community-led participatory practices. The relationship between the two is key to the survival of both.

While not the focus of the project, these relationships are brought to the fore in the case studies the Healthier Democracies Project presents. They emerge, change, replicate and disappear in relation to human-made geographies; imperial and colonial dependencies and mechanisms of oppression; political, economical and administrative conditions; and climate change. Only by examining these ecosystems can we fully understand how participatory initiatives build on and learn from each other.

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<sup>10</sup> Gisela Zarembeg, "'We're Either Burned or Frozen Out': Society and Party Systems in Latin American Municipal Development Councils (Nicaragua, Venezuela, Mexico, and Brazil)," in *New Institutions for Participatory Democracy in Latin America: Voice and Consequence*, ed. Maxwell A. Cameron, Eric Hershberg, and Kenneth E. Sharpe (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 21–51, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137270580>; Gladys Tzul Tzul, "La Forma Comunal de la Resistencia," *Revista de la Universidad de México* 0185-1330, no. 3 (2019): 105–111, <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7081141>; Nicole Curato, *Democracy in a Time of Misery: From Spectacular Tragedies to Deliberative Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, October 2019).

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