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Department of Economic and  
Social Affairs  
Division for Public Administration  
and Development Management

Economic And Social Commission for  
Western Asia

# **Formal/Informal Institutions for Citizen Engagement for Implementing the Post 2015 Development Agenda**

## **Report of the Expert Group Meeting**

*Expert Group Meeting on Formal/Informal Institutions for Citizen Engagement for implementing the  
Post 2015 Development Agenda*

*20 – 21 October 2014*

*Paris – France*



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## **Abbreviations**

CSO Civil Society Organization

CEPA Committee of Experts on Public Administration

EGM Expert Group Meeting

ICT Information Communication Technology

ICSO International Civil Society Organizations

INGO International Non-Governmental Organization

MDGs Millennium Development Goals

MENA Middle East and North Africa

NGO Non-Governmental Organization

OECD Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

SDGs Sustainable Development Goals

UN United Nations

UNDESA United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNESCWA Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

## Executive Summary

In July of 2014, the Open Working Group (OWG) on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed 17 goals that will inform intergovernmental negotiations on a 15-year agenda, beginning in 2015.<sup>1</sup>

If these are to be achieved, the process to engage communities must be transparent, responsive, inclusive and accountable. Unfortunately, lack of trust in public institutions can be a serious barrier to such engagement.

Too often tensions exist between the “formal” rules that define these institutions, say, through constitutions and laws, and the “informal” rules that also shape them, in the form of sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct. Citizen engagement is seen by many as a way of rebuilding this relationship by creating coherence within the formal system.

The *Expert Group Meeting on Formal/Informal Institutions for Citizen Engagement for implementing the Post 2015 Development Agenda* was convened to consider the potential of citizen engagement to achieve this kind of transformation; and to mobilize communities behind efforts to realize the SDGs.

## The Formal/Informal Distinction

Experts had a number of important views on the tensions between formal/informal institutions the highlights of which can be summarized in four basic views:

- **The Pragmatist View:** Governments should be cautious about trying to reform formal institutions through citizen-led initiatives. Sometimes the better approach will be to leverage the power of entrenched groups, which is more likely to result in change that is sustainable.
- **The People-Power View:** Citizen engagement is a way to transform, awareness, information, dialogue and action into “people-power,” which is a formidable force to uproot entrenched elites and end corrupt practices.
- **The Proxy View:** Organizations that operate wholly or partly outside formal state structures sometimes take on various governance-related functions, thus making them surrogates or proxies for government.
- **The Continuum View:** Formal institutions and informal organizations are like two poles of a continuum. As time passes, there are more and more hybrid relationships, rules and organizations that lie somewhere between these extremes.

If there is a key lesson from these discussions, it may be that the distinction between formal and informal is of greater concern in countries where the boundaries between state and non-state organizations are either sharply drawn or where the state is particularly vulnerable to outside forces. In such circumstances, the impact of citizen engagement may be less predictable than elsewhere, so that the line between benefits and risks is harder to draw. Context is everything.

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<sup>1</sup> Outcome Document - Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals; <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html>

## Citizen Engagement and the Proposed SDGs

**Proposed SDGs 16 and 17:** There was strong support for the proposed SDGs 16 and 17, which underline the importance of effective, accountable and inclusive institutions and strengthened means of implementation to achieve these goals.

**Collaboration:** Experts agreed that the scope of the proposed SDGs raises issues that extend into all parts of a community. An adequate response therefore must involve the community-as-a-whole and will include tasks that must be carried out by community members and organizations, not just through government programmes and policies. This, in turn, raised some far-reaching questions about the traditional roles played by “informal” organizations in the development of public policy and the delivery of public services.

## Getting Political Buy-In and Leadership

For the most part, experts agreed that citizen engagement should not be seen as an alternative to representative democracy, but rather as an innovation to allow governments to tackle big issues in an increasingly complex environment. However, elected officials treat engagement with trepidation. It was noted that there are few programmes to inform and train practitioners on citizen engagement. “Public sector –present and future (entry and mid-career level)-leaders need to know whom to engage, when and for what specific purpose this should be done. They also need to be aware of which tools are most appropriate in each specific context.” Finally, they need to understand the challenges and opportunities offered by formal or informal engagement mechanisms. Experts also agreed that capacity building should not be limited to the public sector but should focus on leadership from across the policy community.

## States in Conflict: Confronting the Spill Overs

A group of experts from the Arab Region made several presentations to the EGM which raised issues that have applicability worldwide. These include high incidence of conflict, weapons spending and spill-over effects of conflict, such as the flow of refugees from a country putting a huge strain on other countries in the region. Together, these factors underscore the difficulties of attaining reforms of formal institutions, or real development within civil society, in the absence of peace and dialogue between state and non-state actors.

## Tools, Processes and Engagement Organizations

**APOPs:** At the EGM, a new term was introduced into the citizen engagement lexicon that, despite its awkwardness, received a warm response from a number of the experts. “Autonomous participatory organizations dedicated to participation” (APOPs) are public institutions that have been designed specifically to increase citizen engagement in the decision-making process. It was agreed that the model was highly promising for the future, provided considerable room to experiment with different designs and might provide the basis for a strong institutional basis for public engagement.

**Online vs. Face to Face Engagement:** Experts heard about how the engagement community should put more effort into developing processes that combine both online and face-to-face approaches. By so-doing, they felt that online tools can be used to “scale-up” engagement processes in at least two important ways. First, online tools have the capacity to involve large numbers of people in a single process, and across vast distances. Second, engaging large numbers of people does

not have to result in watering down the discussion. Experts heard about ground-breaking work on “assemblies.” These are complex processes that reach well beyond the usual interlocutors and combine a diverse range of views and interests.

**Process Design:** All engagement processes require design choices and such choices can make a big difference to the outcome. Designing participatory processes should be seen as a process of trading off some goods against others. The overall lesson is simply that no process is perfect and, certainly, there is no one-size-fits-all model. This does not mean there are no important principles, best practices or lessons learned to inform or guide process design. Perhaps a clearing house could be established to publish databases of best practices for citizen engagement processes.

**Monitoring, Accountability, Service Delivery:** Citizen engagement is too often focused on policymaking or, to a lesser extent, service delivery. Participatory institutions can also make a very important contribution to other roles, including scrutiny, oversight and monitoring. Experts agreed that these have been neglected and deserve more attention in future.

**Open Data:** Open Data is a new movement whereby governments around the world are making their vast data holdings available to the public to use in the development of new knowledge products, to support more evidence-based decision-making, and to make government more transparent. A variety of experts talked about the importance of open data for the SDGs and made the case for strong policies to support it, including at least one who pointed to the need to build the data revolution from the bottom-up to achieve development.



## Part One: Introduction

In July of 2014, the OWG on SDGs proposed 17 SDGs to build on the work began with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) over a 15-year agenda, beginning in 2015.<sup>2</sup> The shift in title is instructive. The new focus on “sustainability” clearly signals that development should be viewed as an iterative process.

Consider, for example, proposed Goal 1 of the SDGs, which is to “Eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere.” It takes little reflection to see that such a goal will not be achieved by governments alone, nor will it be likely to happen in the life of a single government or even a generation. Poverty is a complex condition whose causes often have deep roots in a community, from historical injustices to family relationships to conditions in the workplace.

A sustainable solution to poverty thus will require effort and action from across the community, including governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses and individuals. And it will unfold in stages and across generations. Such an effort will be sustainable only if community members trust the process, and for that the process must be transparent, responsive, inclusive and accountable.

***Process thus is as important as substance, and when such conditions are in place,*** citizen engagement can be an effective way of mobilizing individuals and organizations behind such a task. Done well, engagement establishes a process that helps them articulate common goals and work together to achieve them. Such a process may be led by government or by organizations outside government, such as food banks, community support organizations or volunteer agencies.

When government leads the process, however, lack of trust in public institutions can sometimes be a barrier to engagement. Tensions may exist between the “formal” rules that define these institutions, (constitutions and laws) and the “informal” rules that also shape them, in the form of sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct [intended as accepted practices].<sup>3</sup>

If these informal rules support corruption, patronage or other unacceptable practices, as they sometimes do, the illicit practices will be carried out in a concealed way, which, in turn, will conflict and compete with the formal commitments to transparency, responsiveness, accountability and inclusiveness. Indeed, in some cases, informal practices like these can become so entrenched that they effectively form a separate system within the public system. As a result, from the citizens’ viewpoint, the formal system may be rife with conflict and inconsistency, perhaps to the point where they lose confidence in the institutions.

In these circumstances, citizen engagement is seen by many as a way of rebuilding this relationship by creating coherence within the formal system. Advocates say it can bring the public into a closer working relationship with government. If the process also gives citizens the authority to challenge the inconsistencies and oversee change, citizen engagement may be able to resolve some of the tensions between the formal and informal systems.

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<sup>2</sup> Outcome Document - Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals;  
<http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html>

<sup>3</sup> See Douglass C. North, Institutions, Journal of Economic Perspectives - Volume 5, Number 1. 1991-Pages 97-112.

The *Expert Group Meeting on Formal/Informal Institutions for Citizen Engagement for implementing the Post 2015 Development Agenda* was convened to consider the potential of citizen engagement to achieve this kind of transformation; and to mobilize communities behind efforts to realize the proposed SDGs.

## Objectives of the Meeting

The EGM was held in Paris, France, on 20-21 October 2014 and was organized by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), through its Division for Public Administration and Development Management (DPADM), and in cooperation with the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). As stated in the Aide Memoire (see Annex I), the objectives of the Expert Group Meeting were to:

- Examine ways in which governments can address increasingly complex issues through more effective collaboration with non-State actors
- Examine how formal and informal institutions interact in the context of citizen engagement to identify the implications, challenges and opportunities this poses for development management
- Analyse the pressures and mitigation measures on formal and informal systems resulting from conflict and its spill over effects
- Provide recommendations on ways to achieve greater coherence between formal and informal citizen engagement in development management.

## Work Programme

The Work Programme (see Annex II) for the EGM was designed to allow experts to propose and exchange views on the subject area; and to work toward shared conclusions that could provide the basis for the recommendations at the end of this report. The EGM consisted of an opening and a closing ceremony and a total of six plenary sessions, which:

- Examined ways that governments can address development challenges post-2015 through more effective collaboration with non-State actors.
- Analysed engagement practices in the context of conflict and its spill-over effects.
- Looked at how information and communication technology (ICT) and social media are transforming citizen engagement.
- Examined how formal and informal institutions interact in the context of citizen engagement to identify the implications, challenges and opportunities this poses for development management.

The experts considered a variety of aspects around formal and informal institutions, examined how citizen engagement processes fit into different situations, and discussed how they could be used to achieve the SDGs. New digital tools played a prominent role in the discussions. Experts heard about how they are transforming citizen engagement and how they can be combined with face-to-face

engagement to create innovative new participation process for the future. These discussions were supported by a series of presentations and papers from the experts on a range of topics.<sup>4</sup> Review of the discussions and written materials provide the basis for the recommendations for Member States, as well as areas for possible future support by international and regional organizations including UNDESA/DPADM, UNESCO, UNESCWA and OECD.

## Attendance

The meeting brought together twenty-six international leading experts, including practitioners and researchers, government officials, officials from international, regional and civil society organizations, and academia (see the complete list of participants in Annex III).

## EGM Opening and Proceedings

At the beginning of Day One, the meeting opened with comments from Mr. Indrajit Banerjee, Director, UNESCO/CI/KSD; Ms. Valentina Resta, Senior Governance and Public Administration Officer, UNDESA/DPADM; and Mr. Edwin Lau, Head, Reform of the Public Sector division, OECD. This session was followed by a presentation of the background paper by Mr. Don Lenihan, Senior Associate, Public Policy Forum, Canada. Session 1 on *Options for participatory decision-making for the post-2015* was chaired by Mr. Bhanu Neupane, Programme Specialist UNESCO/CI/KSD. Mr. Graham Smith, Professor, University of Westminster, United Kingdom provided a presentation.

Session 2, titled *Engaging non-State actors through formal and informal means – experiences from around the world* was chaired by Mr. Don Lenihan, Senior Associate, Canada's Public Policy Forum. Presentation were provided on: *Responsive and Accountable Governance for the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, from Mr. Mushtaq Khan, Professor, SOAS, University of London, Bangladesh and Member of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA); and *Institutional Developments in Transition Countries: How to Recognize Informalities?* By Ms. Snezana Mišić Mihajlović, Researcher, Centre for Management, Development and Planning, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Session 3 was on *Formal and informal institutions for citizen engagement – synergy or dichotomy?* It was chaired by Mr. Tarik Alami, Director, Emerging and Conflict-Related Issues Division, UNESCWA. The session included five presentations: *Trends and Impacts in the Arab Region*, Mr. Youssef Chaitani, Chief, Section on Conflict, Occupation and Development, UNESCWA; *Spillover Effects and National Development Goals in Jordan: The Challenges of a Neighbourhood in Protracted Crises*, Mr. Khalid W. Al. Wazani, Chief Economist/Strategist- Partner, Issnaad Consulting, Jordan; *Syrian Informal Interventions in Crisis: Evolution and Challenges*, Mr. Zedoun Al Zoubi, Union of Syrian Medical Relief Organizations & Technical University in Berlin, Syria; *Formal and Informal Institutions for Citizen Engagement under Occupation*, by Mr. Yousef Daoud, Dean, College of Business and Economics, Birzeit University, Palestine; and *Institutions of Citizen-Engagement in Post-Conflict Situations: The Case of Lebanon*, by Mr. Karam Karam, Head of Research and Senior Researcher, Common Space Initiative, Lebanon.

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<sup>4</sup> The various papers, presentations and other supporting documents for the EGM are available on the UNPAN website at: <http://www.unpan.org/ceforpost2015>

Day 2 and Session 4 began with *Formal and informal citizen engagement - ICT, social media and open government*. It was chaired by Mr. Edwin Lau, Head, Reform of the Public Sector division, OECD. The first presentation was *Publics Close, Middle and Distant*, by Mr. Anthony Zacharzewski, Founder and Head of Demsoc, United Kingdom. The second presentation was titled *Ushahidi*, by Mr. Henry Addo, software engineer, Ghana.

Session 5 was on *Leadership and public sector change to enhance citizen engagement for better service delivery and accountability*, chaired by Ms. Valentina Resta, Senior Governance and Public Administration Officer, UNDESA/DPADM. This included presentations on Leadership and Public Sector change to enhance citizen engagement for better service delivery and accountability, by Mr. Robby Muhumuza, Management and Communications Consultant, Uganda; and *How can we leverage the impact of public policies to promote the well-being of people? The formal – informal virtuous cycle between civil society organizations and public servants*, by Mr. Rodolfo Córdova Alcaraz, Programme Manager, FUNDAR, Mexico.

Session 6 was on *Achieving greater coherence between formal and informal citizen engagement for post-2015 development management* and was chaired by Ms. Snezana Mišić Mihajlović, Researcher, Centre for Management, Development and Planning, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The presentation, *The Role of Informal and Formal Institutions in Citizen Engagement*, was provided by Ms. Angelita Gregorio-Medel; Under-Secretary for Institutional Development; Department of Social Welfare and Development, Philippines and Member of CEPA.

The EGM concluded with a session to discuss possible recommendations for the report, led by Mr. Don Lenihan.

## Part Two: Summary of Discussions

### Formal vs. Informal Institutions and Citizen Engagement

This EGM in Paris was held to explore how citizen engagement could contribute to the realization of the proposed SDGs; and, more specifically, how the relationship between “formal” and “informal” institutions might affect these efforts. Experts had a number of important views on this, the main lines of which are summarized below.

First, however, an important point on terminology should be inserted. In the next section, the distinction between “formal and informal institutions” refers to the *rules* made and enforced by the state, as opposed to those made and enforced by other bodies, such as religious groups or trade unions. As we shall see in subsequent sections, however, some experts used this distinction to refer to *organizations* that are dependent of the state, such as courts and police, as opposed to those that are not, such as trade unions and churches. A third use focused on the difference between organizations that are *legally*—i.e. “formally”—constituted, such as a trade union, vs. those that are not, such as a rally or a network. These differences in how the formal/informal distinction was used were not always clear in the EGM and caused some confusion. It is important to keep them in mind throughout this report.

## The Pragmatist View

It was emphasized that formal institutions are the rules made and enforced by the state. The informal is then defined as the “residual,” that is, all other types of rules and processes, such as those made and enforced by tribal councils, trade associations or village elders.<sup>5</sup>

According to this view, even though a state may be enforcing certain rules, say, on property rights, some officials and/or citizens may fail to obey them. The key question is how to correct such behaviour and promote the rule of law. The answer can change with the context.

In particular, a country’s stage of economic development can make a difference: “The enforcement of formal institutions is only likely when there is a broad productive economy with many productive organizations in the formal sector that pay significant taxes and require the enforcement of formal rules for sustaining their own productivity and competitiveness.”<sup>6</sup>

Where this level of development is absent, an attempt to end corruption, say, by creating citizen panels to monitor the delivery of the services, may well fail, even though it succeeds elsewhere. In a country where the economy has only developed one or two sectors, such a panel will have almost no influential networks to support it.

As a result, it will be very weak by comparison with other entrenched power groups, such as political factions, tribal councils or religious groups. If these latter feel their interests are challenged by such a panel, they may use their networks and influence to undermine its efforts—likely in concealed ways—and it will find it has little capacity to resist.

In this view, efforts to create respect for the rule of law should seek out powerful bodies that would be willing to support the measures in question. By enlisting their support, the government can leverage their influence and use it to legitimize the measures, thereby creating an effective “counterweight” to powerful groups who resist the measures and putting pressure on them to respect the rules.

We can call this the “pragmatist view.” It is cautious about trying to reform governments through citizen-led initiatives. The context needs to be considered. Sometimes the better approach will be to leverage the power of entrenched groups, which is more likely to result in change that is sustainable. This does not mean that governments should pander to the powerful. Rather, it is as a way of “putting the politics back in policymaking.”

Still, questions could be raised over how a government could publicly justify courting a powerful organization in order to legitimize its policies or programmes; or whether such courtship could turn into dependency or even collusion.

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Responsive and Accountable Governance for the Post-2015 Development Agenda,’ by Mushtaq H. Khan 2014, available at: <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN93598.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. Page 4.

## The People-Power View

If there was a direct challenge to the pragmatist view, it came on day two, when one of the experts told a gripping story of how citizen engagement overturned a deep and well-established system of patronage through the use of “people-power.”<sup>7</sup> When the scandal was exposed by a whistle blower, millions of citizens turned to social media to share information, digest its significance, and mobilize. They used social media exchanges and massive rallies—both of which are informal in the sense that they do not depend on state involvement—to challenge the political power behind the patronage programme. Citizens’ groups then filed a petition with the Supreme Court, which is a formal institution. The Court eventually declared the patronage scheme unconstitutional.

The story can be seen as a powerful counterpoint to the pragmatist view. It shows that awareness, information, dialogue and action can combine to turn people-power into a formidable force to uproot entrenched elites and end corrupt practices. The author spoke eloquently of how citizens found themselves confronted with this “incoherence” at the heart of their society and how they were outraged by it.

In contrast to the pragmatist view, it was argued that: “Government needs to create spaces for citizen activism to be fully expressed non-violently and for citizen engagement to be maximized towards identifying, deliberating, and raising awareness about possible inadequacies, internal inconsistencies, contradictions and possibilities for improving governance in both the informal and formal institutions. This is one way by which political stability could be improved.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, notwithstanding the differences between the pragmatist view and this one, they share an important concern over how political economy shapes the informal forces and can create a dynamic that works against the public interest by suppressing efforts to promote transparency, inclusiveness and accountability within public institutions. This is often a key “contextual” factor when considering whether citizen engagement is likely to achieve institutional reform.

## The Proxy View

Another presentation on the formal/informal distinction highlighted a very different dynamic around citizen engagement. A recent study by Mohmand and Mihajlovic notes that organizations “that operate wholly or partly outside formal state structures [sometimes] take on various governance-related functions.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in many countries citizens’ influence on the state comes more through their participation in informal organizations than formal institutions:

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<sup>7</sup> ‘The Role of Informal and Formal Institutions in Citizen Engagement,’ by Angelita Gregorio-Medel, DSWD, Philippines, which is available at: [http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/Formal-Informal%20Institutions\\_Citizen%20Engagement\\_AGregorioMedel.docx.pdf](http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/Formal-Informal%20Institutions_Citizen%20Engagement_AGregorioMedel.docx.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Pages 7 – 8.

<sup>9</sup> Shandana Khan Mohmand and Snezana Mistic Mihajlovic . ‘Connecting Citizens to the State: Informal Local Governance Institutions in the Western Balkans.’ Work in Progress Paper. Institute of Development Studies, Egypt, April 2013, Page 8.

“...informal institutions perform a range of functions: they organise vote banks within communities for parties, candidates and municipal governments; they mediate disputes and dispense justice as substitutes to formal legal mechanisms; they regulate citizen’s access to services and regulate participation in community projects, and they mediate interactions with local governments, thereby affecting access to information and participation in deliberative forums.<sup>10</sup>

These informal influences on governance may be positive, negative or benign, depending on how they align with the values and goals of the state; and the state’s effectiveness as an institution:

“Where the state functions effectively, informal institutions may ‘complement’ the working of state institutions if they have convergent outcomes, or they may ‘accommodate’ one another where they have divergent outcomes. On the other hand, where formal state institutions are ineffective, informal institutions actively ‘substitute’ for the state in cases where their goals are convergent, and actively ‘compete’ with the state in cases where their goals diverge.”<sup>11</sup>

So in this view, non-state organizations sometimes act like surrogates or proxies for government and, in the process, they engage citizens in various ways. This, in turn, helps legitimize their activities and may increase their influence over the state. The EGM heard about one such case where an organization that began as a formal institution eventually became an informal one as a result of changing social circumstances. This non-state organization then went on to assume responsibility for managing the rural water supply, mainly because the government was either unable or unwilling to do so.<sup>12</sup>

Although experts were not opposed to an organization taking on such tasks or engaging citizens, there were concerns that it might find itself in competition with the government or, alternatively, that the government might become beholden to it. States that are extremely weak, or emerging from conflict, would be especially vulnerable to such developments. This, in turn, raised the question how the benefits of informal organizations could be tapped, while ensuring that appropriate controls are in place and the rule of law is respected. In part, the answer appears to lie in better monitoring and data collection, which will be discussed further below.

## The Continuum View

In sum, engagement is a complex idea that can pose risks as well as bring benefits. The golden rule seemed to be that **context matters**—greatly. What counts as the best approach will vary with the situation. Sometimes, a more realist approach may be appropriate. At others, citizens might be counted on to rise to exceptional heights. And sometimes organizations may be called upon to act as

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Page 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Page 9 quoting Helmke and Levitsky (2006).

<sup>12</sup> ‘Institutional Developments in Transition Countries: How to Recognize Informalities?’ Snežana Mišić Mihajlović. The paper was presented at the EGM and is available at: <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN93496.pdf>

a proxy for a government that is too weak or unable to provide key services to its people because of financial, geographical or other limitations.

Moreover, it would be a mistake to think that these three views are not also at play in developed or more politically stable countries. Governments in such countries often ally themselves with powerful groups in order to legitimize policies. Citizens sometimes take to the streets to assert their will. And large NGOs provide services, engage citizens and often have considerable influence with their governments.

Perhaps the main difference is that in established democracies opposition parties, the media and academics have strong and independent voices. As a result, informal power relationships or organizations that assume quasi-governmental responsibilities are closely scrutinized and monitored in ways that keep things in check.

In the end, if there was a prevailing view on how the relationship between formal and informal institutions should affect citizen engagement, it was not the pragmatist, people-power or proxy views, but a fourth view that was never very clearly stated, yet it seemed to underlie many of the comments. In this view, formal institutions and informal organizations are like two poles of a continuum. The more complex modern societies become, the more relationships, rules and organizations there are that lie somewhere between these extremes. Citizen engagement contributes to this trend. If the result is a blurring of the line between the formal and the informal, most of the experts did not seem very worried about it. Indeed, most were quite at ease with talk about “semi-formal” organizations, “participatory institutions” and “collaborative partnerships,” treating them as a natural part of the organizational continuum.

In the end, if there is a key lesson from these discussions, it may be that the distinction between formal and informal is of greater concern in countries where the boundaries between state and non-state organizations are either sharply drawn or where the state is particularly vulnerable to outside forces. In such circumstances, the impact of citizen engagement may be less predictable than elsewhere, so that the line between benefits and risks is harder to draw. Context is everything.

## **Citizen Engagement and the Proposed SDGs**

### **Effectiveness vs. Legitimacy**

If there were differences among the experts on how the formal/informal distinction shapes engagement, there was considerable agreement on the message that proposed SDGs 16 and 17 had for citizen engagement. They call on governments to:

16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.



For the experts, these two goals position engagement as a critical tool for the realization of the SDGs. They suggest that outcomes such as poverty reduction or a healthy population are inseparably linked to governance processes that are transparent, accountable, responsive and inclusive. As one expert notes in her paper: “Public participation is now widely accepted as a norm and a standard of good governance for sustainable development.”<sup>13</sup>

In their discussions, experts neatly articulated this point through a distinction between two different, but equally important types of argument for citizen engagement, which we can call the “legitimacy” and the “effectiveness” arguments:

- **Legitimacy:** This says that citizen engagement is desirable because it promotes democratic values, such as the right to information, transparency, responsiveness and inclusiveness. These “process” values define conditions that must be met to ensure that the process of policymaking is legitimate.
- **Effectiveness:** This says that citizen engagement is desirable because it helps ensure that the right mix of people, skills and resources will be involved in the policy process to ensure the best decisions are made in the public interest and that they will be implemented.

Tensions between legitimacy and effectiveness often exist and trade-offs may be required. Indeed, the experts at the EGM sometimes found themselves on opposite sides of this divide. Nevertheless, they mainly agreed that, over the longer term, these two sets of values are highly complementary. On the one hand, long-term effectiveness requires high degrees of legitimacy; and, on the other, the values that promote legitimacy also result in processes that make a huge contribution to effectiveness.

## A Citizen Engagement Framework

The Paris EGM builds on the work of a previous EGM, which was titled “Citizen Engagement and the Post-2015 Development Agenda.” The meeting was organized by DESA and UNESCWA in Beirut, Lebanon on 3 and 4 December 2012. The Beirut EGM began by discussing a widely accepted view of engagement, based on three stages:

- i. Inform - one in which the public is properly informed;
- ii. Consult - one in which the public is consulted on policy;
- iii. Decision-Making - one in which the public has some kind of input in decision-making policy development and execution.

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<sup>13</sup> ‘The Role of Informal and Formal Institutions in Citizen Engagement,’ by Angelita Gregorio-Medel, DSWD, Philippines, which is available at: [http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/Formal-Informal%20Institutions\\_Citizen%20Engagement\\_AGregorioMedel.docx.pdf](http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/Formal-Informal%20Institutions_Citizen%20Engagement_AGregorioMedel.docx.pdf)

In this view, engagement begins by informing the public on an issue. It then may or may not progress through the second and third stages, depending on the process and the issues. In the end, the Beirut EGM report<sup>14</sup> opted for a more complex version of this framework, which includes five stages:

- i. Raising awareness
- ii. Sharing information
- iii. Engagement in consultations
- iv. Engagement in decision-making
- v. Engagement in implementation and evaluation of policies

The discussions at the Paris EGM were relatively consistent with this framework. The experts also had some particular views on how these stages should be understood:

- **Sharing information** was extremely important and was also discussed in a separate session on open data (see below), where experts talked about the need for strong policies on open data and open information.
- **Engagement in decision-making** was discussed at length in the EGM, especially in the context of new tools such as social media and possible new institutions for public participation (see below).
- **Engagement in implementation and evaluation of policies** was also discussed at length, but was cast more broadly as “collaboration,” which was defined as a combination of stages iii, iv and v.

Given the EGM’s focus on the post-2015 development agenda, the discussions on collaboration deserve further mention. As note in the background paper, the scope of the proposed SDGs raises issues that extend into all parts of a community. An adequate response therefore must involve the community-as-a-whole and will include tasks that must be carried out by community members and organizations, not just through government programmes and policies. Families may need to support their members in new ways, businesses may need to change how they hire and pay people, and governments may need to redesign programmes. Everyone has a role to play in the achievement of the SDGs.<sup>15</sup> This, in turn, raised some far-reaching questions about the traditional roles played by “informal” organizations in the development of public policy and the delivery of public services.

Although there was considerable agreement on the different stages of this citizen engagement framework, at least three concerns were raised:

- While most governments do not rely heavily on constitutionally enabled referenda,<sup>16</sup> this kind of “direct democracy” may need to be included in a final framework.

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<sup>14</sup> The final report can be found at:

[http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/egms/docs//2013/EmpowermentPolicies/UNESCWA\\_Citizen-Engagement\\_Post-2015.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/egms/docs//2013/EmpowermentPolicies/UNESCWA_Citizen-Engagement_Post-2015.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> The issue of complexity and the need for collaboration is discussed at length in the Background Paper for the EGM, which is available at: <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/Background-paper-Rev-15-September2014.docx.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> There are notable exceptions, including Switzerland and the State of Oregon in the United States.

- Some experts felt that the uprisings in several parts of the world, including the MENA region, was an example of yet another kind of direct democracy that seemed to fall outside the categories in the framework.
- The focus on policymaking and service delivery understates the important role citizen engagement could play in oversight, scrutiny, monitoring and accountability.

The last two bullets will be taken up below. Finally, it should be mentioned that some concerns were raised over the word “collaboration,” which has a negative connotation in some historical contexts.

## Getting Political Buy-In and Leadership

An important theme in the EGM revolved around an apparent or perceived threat that citizen engagement might pose to the traditional roles of legislatures and/or cabinets in representative democracy. Many elected officials treat engagement with trepidation. They fear it may be a way of transferring their power to citizens and/or stakeholder groups, while leaving elected officials accountable for the decisions citizens or stakeholders make.

For the most part, experts agreed that citizen engagement should not be seen as an alternative to institutionalized political participation, but rather as an innovation to allow governments to tackle big issues in an increasingly complex environment. Often this point is not well appreciated.

Over the last few decades, the policy environment has been transformed by a variety of new social and economic forces, including ICT, globalization, environmental change, population growth and mobility, and higher levels of education. These forces have combined to make virtually all societies more fast-moving, interdependent and diverse. As a result, the policy environment has become exponentially more complex.

The macro effects on policymaking can be summed up in two major implications: issues are far less self-contained and more interconnected than only a few decades ago; and solutions to issues often require the participation of a variety of players, including private- and third-sector organizations and ordinary citizens.

Responding to these circumstances is a key driver behind citizen engagement, but real progress requires political leadership. As one expert noted, reform of the formal mechanisms must proceed in close collaboration with reformers or champions inside the government.<sup>17</sup> That includes parliamentarians. Indeed, if elected officials are misinformed or concerned about reform, this could seriously impede progress. As another expert argued, “political will from leaders is necessary for inclusive approaches to be successful.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> ‘How can we leverage the impact of public policies to promote the well-being of people?’ by Rodolfo Córdova Alcaraz. The presentation is available at: <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/RCordova%20EMG-%20Session%205.ppt.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> ‘On Formal /Informal institutions for citizen engagement for implementing Post 2015 Development Agenda,’ by Robby Muhumuza, page 6. The paper is available at: <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN93765.pdf>

However, it was also noted that, if there are few programmes to inform and train practitioners on citizen engagement, there are even fewer for parliamentarians. This gap needs to be filled: “Public sector leaders need to know whom to engage, when and for what specific purpose this should be done (...). They also need to be aware of which tools are most appropriate in each specific context”<sup>19</sup> and they need to be clear on the challenges and opportunities associated with different formal and informal engagement mechanisms. There was also some discussion of whether parliamentarians might serve as leaders for some kinds of engagement processes. Opportunities for this should be further explored and tested.

Finally, experts noted that in many countries public trust in government—and in elected officials, in particular—has been falling. Questions were raised about how far this lack of trust was also a major driver of citizen engagement and whether engagement was the best way to rebuild public trust.

In the end, experts agreed that capacity-building is an acute need for the future and that it should focus on leadership from across the policy community. If effort should be focused “on leadership capacity development of future and present leaders in the public sector (entry and mid-career levels), as UNDESA/DPADM recalled,<sup>20</sup> neither should it ignore elected officials.

Building a better working relationship with parliamentarians, among public sector leaders, will take time and effort, but it is necessary and should be a high priority. For their part, elected officials need to be open to the discussion, but practitioners must also do their part to ensure that, where appropriate, these officials are engaged in the experiments and discussions, not just observers of them. Citizen engagement should be seen as a journey that all sides of the policy community are making together.

## States in Conflict: Confronting the Spill Overs

A group of experts from the Arab Region made several presentations to the EGM. The following key points from these presentations and the discussion have applicability worldwide:

- **Rates of Conflict:** In some regions, there is a very high incidence of conflict (e.g. 41% of all Arab countries suffered at least one conflict during the five-year period from 2009 to 2013). Further, conflicts lead to population displacement (e.g. over 5 per cent of the Arab population—nearly 20 million people—are now displaced, which is the highest rate in the world). The analysis also showed how, from the viewpoint of democracy, a decrease in perceived or real threats can initiate a positive chain of events: the military loses influence;

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<sup>19</sup> United Nations, Formal/Informal Institutions for Citizen Engagement for implementing the Post 2015 Development Agenda, Session 5 on “Leadership and public sector change to enhance citizen engagement for public service delivery and accountability” available at: <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN93767.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA), Report on the second session, 7-11 April 2003 available at: <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan010750.pdf>

political power and decision making become decentralized; individual rights and freedoms become a priority; and democratic development begins.<sup>21</sup>

- **Weapons Spending:** In some regions, there is a very high incidence of weapons spending (e.g. at 4.1 per cent of GDP, the Arab region is the highest purchaser of weapons in the world as a percentage of GDP—more than twice the average for developing countries). As a result, much needed resources are being directed away from development goals. Conflict further weakens resources. On average, internal conflicts reduce the growth of GDP per capita by more than 2 per cent for each year that the fighting lasts. On average, it takes 5 – 15 years for countries afflicted by conflict to catch up to their pre-conflict growth projections.
- **The “Neighbourhood Effect”:** In certain regions, including the Arab world, the political dynamics in one country invariably affect the others. A number of reasons determine this “neighbourhood effect” including conflict, challenges with democracy, foreign occupation, etc. As a result, these regions are prone to political and economic instability.
- **Significance of the SDGs:** Experts pointed out that the outcome document of the OWG on SDGs showed that good governance and respect for the rule of law—at the national and international levels—are essential conditions for sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth, sustainable development and the eradication of poverty and hunger. Significantly, the document also affirms the high importance of freedom, peace and security and respect for human rights. The presenters noted that proposed Goal 16, in particular, was important for regions undergoing political transition (including the Arab region). It calls on Member States to: “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.” Without peaceful and inclusive societies, the EGM was told, citizen engagement, formal or otherwise, would be gravely compromised, as would national or local efforts to achieve development objectives.
- **The Spill-Over Effects of Conflict:** In some countries, including in the Arab region, economic challenges have been made much worse by the massive influx of refugees. This has had a huge impact on job creation, budget deficits, the balance of payments, poverty alleviation and public debt. Citizen engagement initiatives by both formal and informal organizations to respond to the refugee crisis have been focused mainly on gaining financial support and in-kind assistance. Some of the efforts by informal organizations were found to be disorganized, lack proper coordination, and even unnecessary. The presenters underlined the urgent need for better planning and coordination to deal with the crisis.
- **Capacity-Building in CSOs:** One intervention discussed the role played by international NGOs (INGOs) in helping CSOs build capacity to achieve important goals. While there were certainly benefits from these relationships, there were often also costs. A key concern was

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<sup>21</sup> See UN ESCWA, “Beyond Governance and Conflict: Measuring the Impact of the Neighbourhood Effect on the Arab Region,” [http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/ecri\\_editor/Download.asp?table\\_name=ecri\\_documents&field\\_name=id&fileID=272](http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/ecri_editor/Download.asp?table_name=ecri_documents&field_name=id&fileID=272)

the pressures brought to bear on CSOs to conform to what INGOs regard as their “humanitarian goals.” CSOs found they had little influence on priority-setting, even though they often understood the needs of the community much better. Legal challenges were also noted, such as issues faced by CSOs that wish to register as INGOs. Barriers exist that can make this difficult or disadvantageous. The presentation also examined how conflicts such as a civil war can erode the authority and legitimacy of the state, often to the point where it can do little to support or legitimize the work many CSOs do as service providers. This, in turn, can leave them highly dependent on, and vulnerable to, priorities set by the INGOs.

- **When A Country is under Occupation:** Presenters noted that when a country is under occupation, the situation can result in political, geographic, and legal fragmentation. This can make citizen engagement, formal or informal, very difficult. The multiplicity of laws and lack of transparency create a bureaucratic maze that can prevent CSOs from functioning effectively. As a result, CSOs have not been effective contributors to democratization of the political system or to other kinds of social or economic development. Occupation makes such work very difficult.
- **A Post-Conflict Country:** A presenter considered how formal and informal systems operate in a post-conflict country that is also reeling from the spill-over effects. Commenting on such a case, the expert noted that formal institutions exist and are working, such as parliament, a cabinet and other state institutions, as well as rules and regulations that manage the day to day business of the state, private sector and people. However, the informal system is deeply intertwined with the formal one in a kind of symbiotic relationship. The informal system is rooted in an older, consensus-based, communal system, which ended with the civil war. As a legacy, the current informal system is effectively a continuous bargaining process among various groups, regarding roles and priorities. Nevertheless, within this post-conflict environment, the formal and informal systems work together quite well. The system creates space for CSOs, as well as certain degrees of freedom and margin for them to remain active. In the end, however, these formal and informal systems were depicted as too interconnected and, as a result, are in fact obstructing change or meaningful reform towards a political system based on a healthy civil society.
- **Citizen Engagement:** Somewhat like the continuum view discussed in an earlier section, citizen engagement in countries in conflict exhibits what the experts called a “grey zone” between the formal and informal sectors. A look at one country revealed three different stages of engagement with very different characteristics. The first stage was described as spontaneous, driven by youth, non-partisan, with weak organizational skills, strong group dynamics and the lack of a realistic long-term strategy. This is in line with the dynamics around engagement during the 2011 uprisings. The second stage retained early structural organizations, with an increase in ideological rhetoric, and a decline of the youth as the drivers as the conflict escalated. The third phase saw the rise of civil society and local administration, which was driven by the need to provide services, which, in turn, led to the emergence of local administrative councils. It was pointed out that the main characteristic of the third phase was a stronger ideological tone and rhetoric, higher level of engagement

with INGOs, the development of broader local networks, a more organized and strategic response and the departure of youth from political to civil activism.

EGM discussions suggest that the role of CSOs as a watchdog of formal systems may not have been effective.

On the question of whether citizen engagement should be led by formal or informal sectors, the discussions suggested that countries, including in the MENA region, need more appropriate indicators and data to reliably assess the costs and benefits. Instead, the discussion on the effectiveness of formal vs. informal institutions focused on two other considerations.

The first looked at how citizen engagement contributes to democratic development; and the second on the achievement of other economic and social goals. The presentations concluded that the priority should be to achieve stability and democracy by peaceful means.

This view seemed to be confirmed by the experience following the 2011 uprisings. Events have underscored how difficult it can be to reform formal institutions, or to achieve real development within civil society, in the absence of peace and dialogue between state and non-state actors.

It was stated that real engagement on the SDGs needs strong leadership from formal systems. All countries in conflict affected regions should strive to work together toward this end. CSOs also need to be more effective in promoting changes in the formal sector.

## Tools, Processes and Engagement Organizations

### APOPs

At the EGM, a new term was introduced into the citizen engagement lexicon that, despite its awkwardness, received a warm response from a number of the experts. “Autonomous participatory organizations dedicated to participation” (APOPs) are public institutions that have been designed specifically to increase citizen engagement in the decision-making process.<sup>22</sup>

The emergence of these organisations appears to be a relatively new phenomenon. Their role is to provide citizens with an opportunity to initiate formal public debate on issues in designated areas; and to ensure that these exercises will be of high quality, led or overseen by expert authorities, and operate relatively independently of governments.

APOPs are created by legislation, but exist at arm’s length from government. The latitude they enjoy for launching and funding engagement exercises varies with their mandate. For example, the *Commission nationale du débat public* in France is empowered to review and approve requests from

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<sup>22</sup> APOPs were introduced at the EGM by Graham Smith through his paper, “Options for participatory decision-making for the post-2015 development agenda,” which is available at: <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN93599.pdf> The basic concept was first raised in ‘Autonomy for what? Comparing the role of autonomous public organizations dedicated to public participation.’ The paper, which was co-authored by Laurence Bherer, Mario Gauthier and Louis Simard, was presented to the European Consortium of Political Research Joint Sessions, Salamanca, April 10-14, 2014

citizens to organise and supervise public debate forums on the construction of large facilities, and planning and development. By contrast, the *Office de consultation publique de Montréal* in Canada not only holds public hearings on large projects, but it can also launch processes to review planning documents or general public policies in the field.

During the EGM, experts returned to this topic several times as they considered the possibilities. Some felt APOPS offered a promising new way to expand and deepen public participation. At the same time, their relative independence would allow them more freedom to experiment with the processes and improve their quality. It was agreed that the model provided considerable room to experiment with different designs and to tailor APOPs to a wide variety of purposes, which led to a discussion of whether civil society organizations could serve as APOPS, thereby further increasing their independence from government. Experts also talked about how these organizations could raise the profile of engagement, make a major contribution to strengthening the culture around it and help align informal and formal organizations that promote engagement.

### **Online vs. Face to Face Engagement**

Many in the engagement community today see themselves as essentially members of one or other of two basic camps: face-to-face or online. Experts certainly agreed that these approaches have different strengths and weakness. Typically, face-to-face produces quicker and deeper bonds of trust. On the other hand, online conversations can create the kind of anonymity that allows for greater directness and honesty.

Of course, generalizations like these must be used cautiously. The more familiar people become with online tools, the more adept they are at using them in nuanced ways. Similarly, as people participate in face-to-face dialogue processes, they become more skilled and the range of their participation can change.

Nevertheless, the experts at the EGM recognized that face-to-face and online processes and tools are often very different. They also felt that the engagement community should put more effort into developing processes that combine both. In particular, they felt that online tools can be used to “scale-up” engagement processes in at least two ways.

### **Digital Tools and the Prospects for Scaling-Up**

Perhaps the most obvious advantage of online tools is their capacity to involve large numbers of people in a single process, and across vast distances. Over the last decade, lots of processes have been devised and tested for these purposes, such as crowd-sourcing, many varieties of online debates, online petitions and online voting. Processes like these have proven useful for many purposes. A presentation at the EGM provided some impressive examples.

Ushahidi is a global open-source platform for communication and the sharing of data to crowd-source information to respond to a variety of policy issues (electoral violence, disaster response, public health). The presentation showed how citizens could easily download the appropriate apps



onto mobile phones, and then use them to input data on different types of events that they were attending. The striking result was that tens of thousands of people were sometimes transmitting data about a single event. The result of such an exercise can be a stunningly detailed or nuanced picture of how the event is unfolding. Event maps like these can provide critical information to emergency relief teams or provide policymakers with a far more nuanced picture of population health on a key issue.

The EGM also heard about a second kind of “scaling-up.” This one focused on ensuring that engaging large numbers of people didn’t result in watering down the discussion. The approach rests on ground-breaking work on “assemblages.”<sup>23</sup> An assemblage combines digital and face-to-face techniques to carry out complex discussions with large numbers of people. In effect, assemblages are ways of ensuring that a dialogue process gets well beyond the usual interlocutors and combines a diverse range of views and interests.

These are underpinned by complex processes that use a variety of engagement approaches and tools to allow different levels of discussion to occur and interact. Experts heard about such a pilot project in the United Kingdom, titled *NHS Citizen*. This National Health Services project is effectively a digital space that allows participants to identify issues, bringing together both offline and online conversations, and promoting electronic deliberation and dialogue to develop the issues and to communicate them back to government.

## Process Design

It was noted that digital applications are having a creatively destructive effect on participatory institutions by forcing practitioners to revisit basic assumptions about how dialogue and democracy work. This, in turn, shines the spotlight on process design.<sup>24</sup> All engagement processes require design choices and such choices can make a big difference to the outcome. So how do we know which choices are better or worse?

According to this view, first and foremost, designing participatory processes should be seen as a process of trading off some goods against others. Officials who design such processes are often searching for the ideal process, which they imagine should be deliberative, inclusive, authoritative, transparent, and so on, when in fact most of the hard decisions are about what trade-offs to make between various goods, so that the process works well.

Imagine a face-to-face process that is supposed to be both deliberative and inclusive. On one hand, having too many people at the table will make an effective discussion difficult. On the other hand, keeping the numbers down may mean restricting participation and thus limiting inclusiveness. The process designer will have to choose between these two goods and try to find the best balance.

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<sup>23</sup> ‘Publics Close, Middle and Distant,’ by Anthony Zacharzewski, pages 5 – 6. The paper was presented to the EGM and is available at: <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN93642.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> ‘Options for participatory decision-making for the post-2015 development agenda,’ by Graham Smith. The paper was presented to the EGM and is available at: <http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/UNPAN93599.pdf>

Where this lies will depend on circumstances. Rarely is there a single, clear answer. Choices must be made. The overall lesson is simply that no process is perfect and, certainly, there is no one-size-fits-all model.

Still this does not mean there are no important principles, best practices or lessons learned to inform or guide process design. It may not be an exact science, but it can be more or less methodical. For example, according to this view, different assemblies have “family resemblances,” that is, there are identifiable features that allow researchers to group assemblages in different ways, and then analyse how the different design-types work and what kinds of issues they are best suited to address. Much can be learned from this kind of research and the findings could be shared across the engagement community. Perhaps a clearing house could be established to publish such work or create databases of best practices that would be available to practitioners around the world.<sup>25</sup> This was also suggested as a good way to raise awareness among elected officials and other government representatives; or to help set international standards and best practices for citizen engagement processes.

### **Monitoring, Accountability, Service Delivery**

Another issue raised in this context was that citizen engagement is too often focused on policymaking or, to a lesser extent, service delivery. Participatory institutions can also make a very important contribution to other roles, including scrutiny, oversight and monitoring.<sup>26</sup> Experts agreed that these have been neglected and deserve more attention in future.

An example of how this might be done was provided through a presentation on the *baraza* in Uganda.<sup>27</sup> This used to be an informal meeting of members of a given community to discuss issues of common concern. The Government of Uganda has now formalized it and mandated the Office of the Prime Minister to hold such meetings in different districts, where the following topics are discussed with citizens:

- Planned services for the community;
- What was actually delivered;
- What was actually spent on different locations; and
- The issues and challenges that have emerged with proposals of the way forward.

Experts heard that, while the new formal institution of the *baraza* has had some problems, these could be easily overcome. Overall, it was mentioned that the *baraza* provides an excellent example of how community engagement can be used to increase the transparency and accountability of local government services.

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<sup>25</sup> A similar initiative is already underway through Participedia, an engagement site that is open to the global community of democracy researchers, practitioners and interested citizens. The site seeks to crowd-source data on democratic innovations from around the world from and then aggregate it into an open, public database that continually updates with new contributions. The site can be found at: <http://participedia.net/>

<sup>26</sup> See Graham Smith, *Ibid*, pp 4 – 5.

<sup>27</sup> Robby Muhumuza, Youth Programming Coordination Consultant, UNICEF Uganda

## Open Data

Open data is another topic that was mentioned in this context. Open Data is a new movement whereby governments around the world are making their vast data holdings available to the public to use in the development of new knowledge products, to support more evidence-based decision-making, and to make government more transparent.

A presentation at the EGM outlined some of the key principles and goals behind the open data movement.<sup>28</sup> Basically, when data is available and accessible its value increases because it can be used for a wider variety of purposes—from economic development and innovation to better, evidence-based decision making. Interesting, however, citizen engagement is not always recognized as one of the benefits. Research recently conducted by UNDESA/DPADM examined strategic documents for open data from all United Nations Member States. The research shows that citizen engagement is in fact rarely identified as one of the main purposes of open data. OECD findings of a similar research concur with this analysis.

But these are still early days for open data. Government data holdings range across every area of human interest, from health and finance to labour markets, culture and the environment. These datasets are to the knowledge economy what natural resources were to the industrial economy: they are the raw material from which wealth in the knowledge economy will be created. Recent reports have estimated that the potential global value of Open Data now stands at \$3 trillion.<sup>29</sup>

A variety of experts talked about the importance of open data for the SDGs and made the case for strong policies to support it, including at least one who pointed to the need to build the data revolution from the bottom-up to achieve development.<sup>30</sup>

By the same token, sustainable development will require a genuine commitment to evidence-based policymaking. And this, in turn, will require robust practices of data collection, management and dissemination, along the lines now being proposed by the open data movement.

## Part 3: Conclusions and Recommendations

### Proposed SDGs 16 and 17

- Proposed SDGs 16 and 17 are integral to the post-2015 agenda. Proposed SDG 16 emphasizes the important role played by institutions; and proposed SDG 17 affirms that these institutions must also be effective. The two goals are highly complementary. Their

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<sup>28</sup> Formal and Informal Citizen Engagement – ICT, Social Media and Open Government, by Edwin Lau. This presentation is available at: [http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/EGM\\_Session4-OECD-intro.pptx.pdf](http://workspace.unpan.org/sites/Internet/Documents/EGM_Session4-OECD-intro.pptx.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> “Open data: Unlocking innovation and performance with liquid information.” By J. Manyika et al, October 2013. The paper was retrieved from: [http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/business\\_technology/open\\_data\\_unlocking\\_innovation\\_and\\_performance\\_with\\_liquid\\_information](http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/business_technology/open_data_unlocking_innovation_and_performance_with_liquid_information)

<sup>30</sup> Rodolfo Córdova Alcaraz, Fundar Research and Analysis Centre.

unique status among the proposed SDGs should be highlighted by recognizing them as basic principles of good governance that are essential to the achievement of the SDGs and, perhaps, stating this in a preamble to the document.

### **The Formal/Informal Distinction**

- How citizen engagement interacts with formal and informal institutions is important for the SDGs. Nevertheless, experts did not reach agreement on a single way of summarizing their learning or even of identifying which processes, organizations and practices belonged to which category. Perhaps the one safe conclusion here is that the formal/informal distinction creates a complex and diverse “issue-space.” Once citizen engagement has been added to the mix, context becomes vital. Designing effective engagement processes to address issues or achieve goals requires close attention to how formal and informal institutions are interacting. Every situation is different and different situations call for different solutions. There is no one-size-fits-all.
- During the EGM, discussions of the formal/informal distinction contrasted constitutions and laws with culture and customs. They also contrasted organizational structures that were clearly dependent on the state (e.g. legislatures and supreme courts) with those that were independent of it (e.g. trade unions and NGOs). In addition, a wide range of other organizations were discussed that were variously described as “quasi-formal,” “semi-formal” and “collaborative.” If the distinction between formal/informal is to play a central role in future discussions of how citizen engagement can contribute to achievement of the SDGs, this conceptual framework should be expanded to include a third category—the semi-formal. The category refers to these hybrid organizations, which combine aspects of both the formal and the informal.
- Informal and semi-formal organizations often assume responsibility for community services and other tasks that might more normally be associated with governments. In such cases, some degree of collaboration between the organization and the government could lead to better or more stable arrangements. Member states should be open to the possibility of a closer working relationship with such organizations, where this is clearly in the interests of the community.
- A country’s stage of economic development can be an important factor in assessing the risks and benefits of citizen engagement. Member states should be alert to this possibility.
- Public engagement can be a powerful force for mobilizing “people-power” to root out corruption and create greater stability and coherence within a community.

### **Supporting States in Conflict and Political Transition**

- Spill-over effects from conflict, such as the flow of refugees out of a country, are putting a huge strain on other countries situated in the same region. Efforts by local, regional and

international donors—both formal and informal—to respond to the crisis must be better coordinated and aligned.

- INGOs are often too focused on their own approaches to reform, which may not reflect the real needs of the country or the people. They should be more responsive to advice from local organizations regarding local priorities and needs.
- INGOs need to increase the transparency of their operations to ensure their resources are being used in appropriate ways.
- Steps should be taken to make it possible for local NGOs to register as INGOS in their own countries; or, if they are required to register elsewhere, provision should be made to ensure they and their staff will still be officially recognized as local organizations in their own countries.
- Because peace and dialogue between state and non-state actors are critical, steps should be taken to make clear how important the democratic message in the proposed SDG 16 is to countries and organizations.
- The prerequisite for engaging non-state organisations in the development agenda is a democratic system based on free elections and belief in civil society institutions.
- It is very important to define clearly what is meant by “informal institutions” or the “informal sector,” in developed and especially in developing countries, as this is frequently understood to mean CSOs.
- Without the full engagement of CSOs, development efforts and outcomes will fall far short of expectations and fail to deliver real, positive results.
- Raising awareness and building knowledge on the need to involve civil society in development efforts should be a high priority particularly in developing countries.
- A “civil society index” with appropriate qualifying criteria is needed so that countries, especially those undergoing political transition, will better understand the impact of the informal sector and its institutions.
- NGOs and other informal sector institutions in developing countries need “quality assurance and capacity-building programs” so that they will be able to assume the required development role.
- Institutional, legal, and legislative structures are needed to facilitate a full partnership between the formal and informal sectors in socio-economic development needs and efforts.
- Informal systems in the midst of conflict have served as a resilience mechanism. This did not necessarily lead to development. International civil society organizations (ICSOs) can help

foster the existence and operation of domestic CSOs, but to be effective, alignment of national goals need to be stressed for ICOSOs and their capacity needs to be enhanced.

## Engagement and Leadership

- Real progress on engagement requires strong, informed and committed political leadership. However, elected officials in many governments around the world are not well-informed on citizen engagement, particularly through informal channels. Member states should look for innovative ways to engage their elected officials, at both entry and mid-career levels, and to build political champions.
- Leadership is not limited to the public sector but it should span from across the policy community. A culture of collaboration between state and non-state actors needs to be nurtured to achieve SDGs.

## Building Capacity

Effective citizen engagement through formal, semi-formal and informal institutions requires expertise, skills, knowledge and tools. Capacity-building in all these areas will be crucial if the SDGs are to be achieved. To this end, Member States should:

### Build Critical Infrastructure

- “Autonomous participatory organizations dedicated to participation” (APOPS) should play a key role in capacity-building for citizen engagement. These could take the form of direct government agencies or supported third-sector organizations. Either way, they could be used to develop the expertise, skills, knowledge and tools needed for high quality processes and to help make citizen engagement a cornerstone of good governance.

### Establish Standards

- Standards should be established to ensure the quality of engagement processes, including:
  - criteria for selecting between different types of processes to address different issues;
  - basic indicators to assess the success of different types of processes; and
  - principles and guidelines to ensure processes are protected from political or other forms of interference.

### Create a Knowledge Base

- Member states should establish a citizen engagement research programme to develop the theory and practice of formal and informal citizen engagement and to identify, catalogue and disseminate best practices and lessons learned.
- Member States, International and Regional Organizations and relevant INGOs should cooperate on the establishment of an online clearing house that would pool this information

and make it available to interested practitioners around the world.<sup>31</sup> Such a resource would also be an effective way to raise awareness, build political support and encourage the scaling-up of successful approaches.

### **Experiment with Innovative Governance Arrangements**

New and innovative governance arrangements will be needed to realize the SDGs. Member states should explore and experiment with new kinds of processes, tools and organizations to:

- maximize the potential of social media as an engagement tool
- improve capacity to scale-up processes
- design and experiment with the capacity of semi-formal institutions to carry out different kinds of engagement-related tasks
- Put strategic emphasis on experimentation with APOPPs to test their potential to:
  - expand and deepen public participation
  - ensure that engagement processes are of high quality
  - raise the profile of engagement and strengthen the culture around it
  - allow design options to be tailed for a wide variety of purposes

### **Engage Citizens in Monitoring and Accountability**

- The role of citizen engagement has been too heavily focused on policymaking and service delivery. Member states should experiment with and support initiatives to increase oversight, scrutiny and monitoring. Depending on the circumstances, this kind of engagement might be led by formal institutional structures or by informal (i.e. civil society) organizations.

### **Learn by Doing**

- One of the best ways for governments to learn about new tools, methods and approaches, and to build capacity, is through the use of demonstration projects. While many governments are already experimenting with citizen engagement, often this is limited to traditional consultation-type processes, perhaps strengthened by some use of dialogue and deliberation. Member States should develop demonstration projects that require more robust experimentation with deliberation, collaboration or the scaling-up of processes.

## **Open Data**

- Digital channels are not inherently more open or transparent, but instead need to be guided by governance principles to ensure transparency, openness, inclusiveness and citizen engagement.<sup>32</sup>
- ICT-enabled participation tools should be open source, integrable (with one another and with other channels), customisable (by region, theme language etc.), part of a multichannel

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<sup>31</sup> Participedia could be the focus of such an effort. See Footnote 24.

<sup>32</sup> See for example the OECD 'Recommendation on Digital Government Strategies,' available at: <http://www.oecd.org/gov/public-innovation/recommendation-on-digital-government-strategies.htm>

approach that combines on and offline strategies, and allow individuals and organizations to assemble these tools in ways that best meet their own needs and objectives.

### Standardize Key Terms

- In complex policy areas, experts often use different terms for the same thing or the same term for different things. This can lead to misunderstanding and confusion. For example, at the EGM the terms “formal” and “informal” seemed to be used differently by different experts, which sometimes seemed to be a barrier to progress. Efforts should be made to standardize the use and meaning of key terms in the citizen engagement lexicon, to make communication easier and more productive.
- The term “citizen engagement,” as used in the title of the EGM, suggests that these processes will be focused on, or limited to, citizens. This is not the case. Discussions at the EGM moved freely between the engagement of citizens, civil society organizations, businesses and other organizational structures, such as tribal councils and religious movements, all of whom were viewed as potential subjects of engagement processes. Using “citizen” as the principle designator may confuse those who are unfamiliar with engagement processes. At the meeting, “public engagement” was discussed as a possible alternative because it may include other groups as possible participants in a process. However, there was no agreement on whether this term should be preferred to the term “citizen engagement.”

### Post-2015

Many of the recommendations and conclusions set out here have been addressed to Member States. Others are more appropriate to International Organizations. Many of these same recommendations are also excellent candidates for a regional approach to implementation or other forms of multi-lateral action:

- Regional groups should consider collaborating on many of these recommendations, especially those on capacity-building in citizen engagement that aim at establishing standards and building a knowledge base. Both would benefit greatly from a more regional approach.