The 12th session of the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development

Item 5 of the Provisional Agenda
Implementation of the Mandate and Programme of Work –
Focused Thematic Discussions and Interactive Dialogues
Palais des Nations, Room XVI, Geneva

Public participation: a tool for development

Tuesday 28 October 2025, 10:00 – 11:30

Transcript of statement by Mr. Anthony Zacharzewski,
The Democratic Society

Please check against delivery

Thank you, Chair, and thank you participants for joining.

I think the conversation up till now on this panel has focused on the government angle. I'm going to bring a slightly different angle because I run an organization that works with governments but also runs these processes in a very practical sense. So, the starting point for us is always why, why are we seeking participation? Why are we asking people to give up their time, to give up opportunities? They would have to do other things that could be more interesting perhaps than talking about development to come into these spaces.

And one of the things that you notice, if you've been working in the field, my organization Democratic Society is going to have been doing this for 20 years now, is that we are still a very rapidly developing area of work. The work that happens in participation has started from a very experimental base in the 70s, 80s, and 90s and is now becoming something that's much more mainstream or integrated into the way in which decisions are being taken. Now, I absolutely celebrate that, but it brings its own stresses and it brings its own strains. And so, I want to talk a little bit about some of the practical answers to the challenges that are raised in the concept note, particularly around the role of inclusion and the role that governments have in this.

So first, I think it's worth saying that everyone has to design a process on a piece of paper at some point. So it's very easy to start by designing a process that comes across as technocratic. We all have to switch to French for a moment … I was a civil servant for 14 years, and now I run an NGO, and both of those give you different perspectives on the world. But in particular, if you're designing a process in a room, you don't necessarily know what the situation is going to be like in the places where it's going to be implemented.

So, my first point is that a technocratic or a top-down solution is not going to work. It's not going to fail in the same way everywhere, but it will fail in different places depending on what the local conditions are. And I don't criticize others for this without criticizing my own organization. In our early days, we were very much thinking about the machinery of participation process and didn't often think about the human, about the relationships that needed to be evolved on the ground and the organizations that maybe had already been working in those places for 10 or 20 years who saw us as unwelcome newcomers. And so, I think those kinds of considerations at the start are important when you're designing and I really acknowledge the remark that was made by the first speaker on the importance of these being created bottom up as well as top down. And my second point is that if you're creating things that are bottom up and top down, you need to have an effective middle space. You need to create spaces for encounter where those people who are involved in the process can come together with people from government on even footing.

I think it's very easy to treat participation as a resource that you can turn on and off, as a dial, that you can turn from down from 6 to 5, or up from 5 to 11. And this, I think, is a fundamental mistake because it creates an impression of instrumentalization. It creates the idea in participants that they are there to be minded for their opinions, but then to be forgotten. And so, continuing the involvement afterwards is one of the most important pieces of work that needs to be done.

Giving people feedback on what happened is absolutely basic but also creating democratic infrastructure rather than just creating democratic processes. And I think that in the context of participation, the infrastructure for continued involvement, the infrastructure for continued conversation is an essential part of what government has to do. So, I want to be very clear that when we talk about participation and participation infrastructure, this is not something that is only to be used for a particular event or for a particular process. Everything that you do as part of a participatory process ought to strengthen the participatory capacity of the people in the place where you're working.

But it also needs to strengthen the participatory capacity of the people inside the institution. Because one of the challenges that was in the concept note is that we need to make sure that the results are brought back to the people and that the results are reflected in what governments do. And that sounds like a relatively simple thing. You, those people who work in government are very used to taking all sorts of different responses from, you know, a lobby group or a researcher, all sorts of things and pulling them together into a policy position or into a decision that reflects as best as possible the political mandate that they have, but also the best evidence that exists. I would encourage you to think of citizen voice and public participation not as any other piece of evidence, but as something that needs careful handling and careful treatment, and specific acknowledgement in the decisions that you take. Because if that doesn't happen, then the people who were involved, we feel that their voices didn't count for much. And you may need to over communicate, communicate more than you think you need to, how you take those decisions into account, because it's very easy for people to turn off and to go back to their normal lives. And it's very easy for these processes to get lost in a swirl of news and a swirl of media to over communicate your results, but particularly over communicate how your results were influenced by what people said.

On the point about inclusion, we've worked in a process for the federal government in Belgium, which is where I'm based, working on a project for those, on just transition and thinking about how do you involve the voices of those to use the terminology of the commission are most likely to be left by the side of the road in the transition to net zero. And one of the things that we did in that process, I don't think it's necessarily perfect, but it was an interesting effort was rather than to run a process that included people on a pure sortition basis, we selected a two thirds of the participants on sortation and one third by nomination from organizations that worked with people who were in precarious situations, who were perhaps unemployed or who had spells of poor health or poor mental health, and one of the challenges of designing a process that involved people in that way was that we needed to give specific support to those people who were less ready to participate for whatever reason or feel less willing to be to put themselves forward to be heard.

And so in that process-specific parallel tracks. The general audience was given the same sort of preparation that we would do for normal participatory exercise. We told them where to turn up. We told them what was going to happen. We gave them some reading materials. But the group that was nominated, we actually also gave special sessions to, not to talk about the issues, but to give them confidence and to help train them in how to speak and how to engage themselves in these processes, many of them, how we're experiencing that kind of process for the first time.

The consequences that we had, and I think this is a mark of success rather than failure. But others might disagree. We had people from the general group coming up to us to complain that they were

always hearing about people in precarious situations and it was you know, they just couldn't stop hearing about housing problems and about health problems, but for me, that showed that we had managed to create a space in which those people could be heard and a space in which they could be listened to.

Now, the challenge from that, whenever you're doing things, this goes for multilingualism as well, if you're running things in parallel tracks, it's really important that you create opportunities for people to come together. The multilingualism point that was raised by a colleague from Fiji. That is a really good example of how you need to create things that allow people to be themselves, to speak fluently, and to speak freely in their own language. And you also need to give people the opportunity to come together. And sometimes that involves interpretation, which can be a stilted process. It can slow down the flow of debate. So in designing multilingual processes, it's important to create multilingual spaces within those multilingual processes and allow people then to come back together in groups with interpretation so that they can exchange. Different languages make it harder, but they definitely don't make it impossible to have the same sort of quality of participation and the quality of engagement you get from good engagement design.

I think the last thing I would say is that we talk about transparency in the notes. I think transparency obviously is completely essential, but there's a passive and there's an active transparency. One of the challenges we have in building participation in development but building participation everywhere. It is a relatively new thing. Most people have little time to focus on politics and little time to focus on news. There's just been a major development outside my flat in Brussels, there was a big public consultation, which I didn't involve myself in because I was too busy working on public consultation. But these sorts of things happen all the time.

You need to understand first, how do you work with the groups that are on the ground to get your message out there most effectively? Because by mapping what is on the ground, you also map the networks into which your systems can plug. So, I think about it a bit like a three-level system. The top level is government. And in government, you need to understand how do you build for culture, not just in the team that's responsible for participation, but in the team that will be receiving the results because the team that is receiving the results doesn't think that participation is a useful effort. Then they ignore those results, or they won't treat them with proper respect. So, building that culture across the decision-making organizations is really essential. Working at the local level, working on the ground, understanding the networks that you can draw on for support and for communication is essential.

That's not just about building the skills to participate and giving people the sense that their participation is meaningful. It's also creating a sense that participation is just how we do things here. And as soon as it becomes, this is just how we do things here, it becomes built into the way in which children learn. People learn. Society exists in that space, and that's something which allows you then to build on a really firm foundation. It's a task of years, not months. But it's really important that you build up that participatory capacity with everything that you do.

And finally, the spaces for encounters, the middle space where decision makers and people come together, that's where you need to be careful that from building on those local networks. You won't replicate power structures that already exist in those places. Because if you're seeking equality and if you're seeking inclusion, you can't just replicate the power structures that exist in every community, in every place at local level. You have to understand how to constructively challenge them. And that can be done by good design in the spaces for encounter, but also by creating a really clear set of rules and principles, which is one of the roles for the government as regulators, but also for implementation is one of the roles for civil society organizations like mine, organization like the colleague next to me on human rights. Those the sorts of groups that need to be involved in designing the regulation and

the setup of those institutions or those structures in the middle space that will allow people to involve themselves with the government and most importantly, allow a two way flow of information, not just what people want, but also what happened with what people said, and how you can build for the longer term, a participatory and an open culture.

Thank you very much.

* * * * *