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Rethinking Citizen Engagement: From Participation to Deliberation

The quality of public participation in Kenya, at both the national and county level, has become an increasingly popular topic of conversation since the start of devolution. In general, there is considerable dissatisfaction with the current practice of public participation. In order to help both citizens and policymakers achieve more of what they want from citizen engagement, we propose an alternative conceptual framework—public deliberation—for thinking about participation in decision-making, particularly around budgets, and new standards for judging it. We elaborate on this concept elsewhere (see <http://www.internationalbudget.org/publications/how-budget-deliberation-can-move-us-beyond-public-participation/>).

This pamphlet contrasts the current practice of participation with elements of our conception of public deliberation that we believe can help to improve on current practice. To make the discussion concrete, the following table looks at the differences between a ward-level budget hearing using current participation practice and one organized using what we call “deliberative practice.”

What do you think? Does deliberation offer anything useful for how to think about budget participation in your county? Send your comments to vntinyari@internationalbudget.org or call us on 0791193600.

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Step	Current Practice	Deliberative Practice	Contrast
1	An open public forum is called through newspaper adverts, radio, etc.	An open public forum is called, but attention is also paid to ensuring representativeness of the diversity of the ward through targeted invitations to specific groups.	Both forums are open to members of the public, but the deliberative forum is mindful of the fact that, when deliberating over choices about how to use resources, we should ensure that different perspectives are represented. In particular, we should reach out to those who will be affected by a decision, but also those with specific knowledge or interests related to that decision.
2	Participants are told to list all of the projects they would like to see in their ward in a plenary session.	<p>The county prepares a brief on the projects it is proposing for the ward with justifications for each project and this is shared with the participants. Ideally, it is shared in advance of the meeting.</p> <p>Participants are broken into groups to discuss these proposals and asked to give their views on the proposed projects and the justifications given for them.</p> <p>Where participants prefer different projects, they are instructed to provide justifications for their alternative proposals and these are subjected to debate during the forum.</p> <p>A technical team from the government is on hand to help participants think about the feasibility of the proposals given existing resource constraints.</p>	<p>Ultimately, participants will give their views on projects in both settings. However, current practice starts from a “blank slate,” such that the focus is on projects rather than on the reasoning behind them and justifications for and against them.</p> <p>The deliberative session starts with a proposal and reasoning for that proposal, encouraging participants to engage with the choices as well as reasons/justifications for the choices.</p> <p>The use of small groups ensures that the discussion is not overly driven by government facilitators in plenary. Smaller groups can create space and time for more deliberation and encourage wider participation.</p> <p>During the deliberation process, a technical team provides feedback on the feasibility of proposed projects, allowing for more informed deliberation. Without such technical assistance citizens would not be able to determine the feasibility of the proposals (so that they are within the overall resources available).</p>

3	The government ultimately decides which proposals to adopt. It may accept some suggestions from the public, but the reasons for accepting or rejecting public proposals are not given, either in writing or in subsequent forums.	The government ultimately decides which proposals to adopt. Subsequent official reports are made widely available that explain all of the proposals received from the public and give justifications for why some of these were accepted while others were rejected.	<p>The current practice is that the government does not account for the role played by public inputs in settling on proposals. Frequently, there is a general acknowledgement that participation happened and was factored into decisions, but no specific evidence is provided.</p> <p>In a deliberative process, the government provides feedback on how the public input has been used, what has been incorporated, what has been left out and the reasons why.</p> <p>The process of reasoning about public inputs and justifying choices can help to reduce perceptions of arbitrariness in government decisions.</p>
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Deliberative Practice in Action

The county calls for a public forum to consult the public on infrastructure projects for the coming financial year. The government also reaches out to targeted citizen groups to ensure that the meeting is representative and that those most affected by the decisions are present. Prior to the meeting, the government circulates its proposals with justifications. These are also shared on the day of the meeting.

The county government proposes to build a bridge and the justifications for the bridge are presented. Mzee Kijana agrees to the bridge, giving reasons for agreeing with the proposal and the justifications provided. Betty proposes boreholes instead and Conrad proposes cattle dips. Justifications are given by each proposer. Citizens are divided into small groups and debate the justifications given. They return to plenary and give their views. In the plenary, discussions are managed to ensure that a diversity of views from people with different perspectives are included.

A decision may be reached in the forum. If so, the decision should be comprehensive; it should explain why each justification is or is not acceptable and the preferred solution and justification. Where the decision is not reached in the forum, the county government must take into account all the proposals made and the justifications given in making the decision. When the decision is made, there must be clear evidence of how the government's decision have been influenced by the deliberative process involving the citizens.