CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM: IS COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE THE ANSWER?

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Public sector reform has persisted as an enduring and recurring agenda in the study and practice of public administration.

Propositions and approaches to reform public sector institutions have ebbed and flowed, as reform movements waxed and waned, generally marked by alternating fragments of exuberance and disappointments.
Reform philosophies, prescriptions and critiques towards engendering better performance of the public sector have become staple discussion points and issues that have preoccupied the discipline and the profession.
CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

They all however convey common and spirited efforts to uphold public values of efficiency, effectiveness and economy, and belatedly, to pursue and champion such current ideals of good governance, transparency, the rule of law, and emphasis on greater democratic pluralism founded on more pronounced citizens participation and involvement.
CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

Unfortunately, active citizens’ involvement in public sector processes has not been institutionalized, and in some cases, merited only token and passing attention in the discourse of reform prescriptions.
CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

- Why is active and more pronounced citizens’ participation in the conduct of government affairs not given much attention today in the reform agenda of the public sector?
- How can active citizens’ participation be institutionalized?
- What initiatives or models can be put in place or adopted to broaden citizens’ involvement in government?
This discussion seeks to contribute to this lively and continuing discourse towards substantively incorporating citizens’ participation and involvement as part of the durable but sometimes frustrating agenda of public sector reform.
This discussion reexamines a new point of view towards operationalizing citizens’ participation in the agenda of public sector reform, suggesting mechanics and mechanisms that can govern it by which they could be institutionalized within a legal framework.

The philosophies and prescriptions of collaborative governance is employed as a framework by which citizens’ participation in public sector reform can be institutionalized.
The call for active citizens’ participation in government reform and in public sector processes is not new. 

King and Stivers maintain that many major reform initiatives in recent years have sought to “address the fact that the citizen seems to be missing in public administration” (King and Stivers, 2001: 473).
Citizens’ participation is an ideal that has percolated in Public Administration and certainly other fields of study as well.

Fox and Miller view citizens’ activism in governmental affairs as the alternative to the prevailing orthodoxy in Public Administration, where, “bureaucratic discretion is tantamount to the theft of popular sovereignty” (Fox and Miller, 1995: 18).
CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

- Citizen participation began its ascent as a serious area of concern in Public Administration in the 1960s and the 1970s.

- The literature of the discipline today “reflects a continuing sense that various relationships between bureaucrats and citizens are instrumental to the effective formation and implementation of public policy” (Stivers, 1990: 248).
Citizen activation and “citizen-administration solidarity harkens back to the direct democracy of the Athenian polis, the Swiss canton, and the New England town” (Fox and Miller, 1995: 33).
Citizen participation has been interpreted as happening in such activities as advisory committees, citizen boards and other similar arrangements in terms of community action programs (Rosenbloom and Kravchuk, 2005).
Citizens involvement are also deemed manifested supposedly in customary public hearings, township meetings and assemblies, public opinion expressed by citizens in the media, and similar citizen-government interactions.
These exchanges however tend to lapse and end in talk therapies where citizens’ views, needs, demands, complaints, suggestions, proposals and concerns are heard, noted, and consequently filed.
Direct citizen involvement in public sector reform has been acknowledged as not easy, and may unsettle or cause discomfort to bureaucrats accustomed to Weberian values of confidentiality.
In a study of citizens’ participation in the Community Employment and Development Program in a Philippine province, it was observed that “…government field personnel felt threatened because this was never done before – citizens monitoring and asking questions about their work was odd and unwelcome…” (Domingo, 2006: 25).
On the other end of the spectrum, citizens may find interactions and exchanges with bureaucracy as frustrating.

In a study done in 1991, King and Stivers point out that “…Citizens believe that the information they receive from agencies is managed, controlled, and manipulated in order to limit their capacity to participate. …” (King and Stivers, 2001: 480).
Citizens’ participation can however bring salutary benefits for government. It provides a venue for interaction where the points of views from the ground or the field can be expressed to bureaucrats and policymakers.
The lack of continuing and institutionalized citizens’ participation can bring about citizen apathy and downright alienation.

This can result in civil disobedience (non-compliance with laws or non-payment of taxes), protest actions that may result in violent confrontation between protestors and police authorities, and even the rise of vigilante groups in cases of weak action on crime.
In an era increasingly preoccupied by demands for greater democratic pluralism, reinforced by the powerful theme of good governance, active citizens’ participation in public sector processes and practices has become an important concern that need to be addressed with viable policies and approaches.
Governance has been a widely and intensely discussed subject matter in recent years.

The advocacy for governance – good governance in particular – has become the standard and rallying theme of academics, reformers, civil society organizations, international agencies, policy-makers and even politicians.
CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

- The advocacy for citizen involvement are clear, but the challenge is how this can be put into practice.

- How can authentic citizen involvement be mobilized and given meaning?

- How can its practices be made legal and legitimate?
CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

- How can we make bureaucracy accept a process that would somehow add to the layers of procedures that must be observed?

- How can discourse between citizens and public officials be institutionalized where citizen inputs are taken as contributions and not simply as commentaries, observations or complaints?
The realization of good governance can be fulfilled when policy is shaped from a consensus derived from the participation of the sectors that represent society: the government, business or the market, and civil society.

Each of these sectors can be seen as exercising powers and relate to each other.
The Good Governance Process

- STAKEHOLDERSHIP
- DISCOURSE OF THE STAKES/INTERESTS OF VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS
- CONSENSUS-BUILDING
- ENACTMENT OF POLICIES/ LAWS
- POLICY EXECUTION OR IMPLEMENTATION
Collaborative governance “brings public and private stakeholders together in collective forums with public agencies to engage in consensus-oriented decision making” (Ansell and Gash, 2008: 543).
Collaborative governance is a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets” (Ansell and Gash, 2008: 544).
The criteria for collaborative governance:

- the forum is initiated by public agencies;
- participants in the forum include nonstate actors;
- participants engage directly in decision making and are not merely “consulted” by public agencies;
CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM

- the forum is formally organized and meets collectively;

- the forum seeks to make decisions by consensus even if it may not be achieved; and,

- the focus of collaboration is on public policy or public management
Another criteria suggested is that relationships between public administrators and citizens “can be fostered by laws, regulations, policies, procedures and ongoing actions that share responsibility with citizens in [conducting] agency affairs” (Stivers, 1990: 26).
These can be done within the framework of legislated mandates so that not just bureaucrats, clients or interest groups can legitimately participate in policy making and implementation but will also include the general public.
In their study of collaborative governance practices involving some 137 cases, Ansell and Gash conclude that the process and its techniques “promises a sweet reward,” adding that “a number of the studies reviewed have pointed toward the value of collaborative strategies: bitter adversaries have sometimes learned to engage in productive discussions; public managers have developed more fruitful relationships with stakeholders…” (Ansell and Gash, 2008: 561).
Is collaborative governance a passing fad or a viable approach that will build the foundations of institutionalizing authentic citizens’ participation in the conduct of public affairs?

Whatever it maybe, the challenge remains, and must be addressed if the promise of authentic democracy is to be fulfilled.
Thank you and good day!