Civic Engagement in Public Policies: The Experience of National Economic and Social Councils

JACINTO DE VERA
Chief, Policy Analysis & Coordination Unit
Socio-economic Governance & Management Branch, Division for Public Administration & Development Management, UNDESA

TRADITIONAL FORM OF CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT
-Representative Democracy

DOES REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY WORK?
- Responsiveness to changing citizens’ needs and priorities
- Timely delivery of government commitments
- Frequency of participation (electoral process)
- Disparities between policy platforms at elections & actual policy development after elections

WHY IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT NECESSARY IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT?
To ensure that government policies are responsive to the needs of society
To deliver basic needs/services of citizens at community and grassroots level
To foster citizen ownership of public policies thereby boosting their credibility

WHY IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT NECESSARY IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT?
To ensure public accountability in the formulation and implementation of policies
To improve public dissemination of government policies leading to better acceptance by the public
To promote and facilitate reforms in public governance

INNOVATIVE MODELS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT
State of Queensland Government Australia
Regional Community Forums
Tribal/Indigenous Consultations
Parliamentary Sittings
South Africa
People’s Cabinet Meetings at the provincial and national levels
E-Dialogue Portal of Denmark
National debate portal
Local e-dialogue tool

SOME WEAKNESSES:
- Lack of consistent participation of stakeholders
- Ad hoc nature
- Technological constraints
ECOMONIC AND SOCIAL COUNCILS
- consultative institutions that governments use to engage in dialogue with organized civil society on key economic and social policies

MODELS OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCILS & SIMILAR INSTITUTIONS
Naga City People’s Council
Philippines
Ireland’s National Economic and Social Council

WHAT MAKES ESCs UNIQUE INSTITUTIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT?
- consultative institutions that governments use to engage in dialogue with organized civil society on key economic and social policies
- larger representation from civil society including community-based organizations, labor & trade union groups, academic institutions, media & private sector organizations
- seeks to reduce conflict & generate national consensus on key economic objectives

WHAT MAKES ESCs UNIQUE INSTITUTIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT?
- fosters inclusive decision-making between government & civil society
- represents an institutionalized and formalized mechanism for civic engagement
- more structured membership profile

WHAT MAKES ESCs UNIQUE INSTITUTIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT?
- allows more frequent involvement & participation of civil society in policy development
- lends national governments legitimacy for their policy decisions

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
- First ESCs emerged in post-WWII in Europe
- Most ESCs were established to address economic or political crises
  - Post WWII (Western Europe)
  - Asian economic crisis (Korea & Thailand)
  - Political upheavals (South Africa)
- Traditional structures are corporatist and tripartite: trade unions, employers (businesses) & the State
- Having an ESC is a prerequisite to joining the EU
- Current number of ESCs worldwide : 54 (based on the official members of the International Association of Economic & Social Councils & Similar Institutions)
### A SNAPSHOT OF EXISTING ESCs WORLDWIDE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continent</th>
<th>Countries with Economic and Social Councils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>Algeria, Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, Gabon, Guinea, Mauritius, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Senegal, South Africa, Tunisia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>China, Indonesia, Laos, Lebanon, Macao(2), Malaysia, Republic of Korea, Qatar, Singapore, Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Austria (2), Belgium (2), Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americas &amp; The Caribbean</td>
<td>Argentina, Aruba, Brazil, Ecuador, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Martinique, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, Venezuela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### KEY QUESTIONS
- ESCs able to improve public service delivery?
- Are ESCs successful in promoting pro-poor initiatives?
- Are ESCs an effective way for civil society to influence government policy decisions, formulate the budget, or monitor expenditures?
- Are ESCs able to improve transparency and accountability?
- Are ESCs effective in building trust in governments?

### PROFILE OF INITIAL UNDESA ESC SURVEY
- Designed to capture perceptions of civil society members of ESCs
- Extent of Country Coverage:
  - Belgium
  - Italy
  - Netherlands
  - Brazil
  - Korea
  - France
  - Malta
- Available in online format
- Conducted in 4 languages
- 736 responses, 18.9% response rate
INITIAL SURVEY RESULTS
Influence policy decisions
Have been members for more than 3 years
Represent members of their organizations on the council
Communicate with stakeholders frequently
Participate in meetings most of the time

KEY FINDINGS
➢ ESCs are an effective means for civil society to participate in government policy decision making
➢ ESCs are less effective in monitoring government expenditures and ensuring government accountability
➢ Historical and political environments significantly influence the establishment of ESCs
➢ ESCs serve two vital roles:
  - civil society participation
  - conflict resolution
➢ There is no one model for an ESC to achieve effectiveness

Members agreed that:
The ESC is a useful forum for civil society to influence government policy decisions

![Bar chart showing percentage of agreement by national ESCs]

- Netherlands: 90%
- France: 47%
- Brazil: 45%
- Malta: 55%
- Korea: 50%
- Belgium: 25%
- Italy: 26%
Members showed mixed opinion that:
The ESC has increased citizen trust in government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage that Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

National ESC

Enabling Factors for Civic Engagement in Policy Development
- Existence of a legal framework that will mandate participatory governance and civic engagement to ensure sustainability of partnership
- Strong commitment and leadership of government to engage civil society groups in policy development
- Right to information of citizens and the provision of timely, relevant and accurate information on performance results and other data of interest to citizens
- Credible civil society or citizens groups
- Capacity building on both ends: government, in partnering with civil society, and civil society partnering with government

LOOKING AHEAD: FUTURE WORK OF UNDESA
- Creation of database on country profiles including a collection of legislative mandates/regulations supporting the establishment of ESCs
- Sharing and dissemination of best practices
- Provision of capacity building programmes, advisory & training services:
  - Strengthen capacities of countries with existing ESCs
  - Assist countries who are considering establishing ESCs

Presentation made by:
Mr. Jacinto De Vera
UNDESA
New York, USA
devela@un.org