



## CIVICUS PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE PROGRAMME 2006-2008 CONCEPT NOTE

*June 2006*  
*Carmen Malena*  
*Program Director*

### **PROGRAMME SUMMARY**

*For several years, the CIVICUS Participatory Governance programme has worked to promote the democratization of key multilateral development institutions and to strengthen the voice of civil society in global policy-making and decision-making processes. **The objective of this new phase of the CIVICUS Participatory Governance programme is to enhance the capacity of southern civil society and government actors to promote and practice participatory governance at the national and local levels.** The three-year programme phase is global in scope (global South). It draws on CIVICUS' strategic ability to: (i) network globally with a large number of diverse southern-based civil society organizations (CSOs); (ii) build bridges between civil society and other sectors (especially government, but also international academia and development partners); (iii) coordinate participatory "action-research"; (iv) serve as global information clearinghouse and catalyst for international reflection and debate, and; (v) explore and support linkages between local, national and international development processes. The proposed programme phase aims to: (i) generate and share **knowledge and learning** about the theory and practice of participatory governance by creating a space for southern practitioners to reflect on critical issues and engage with cutting edge scholars and researchers (bridging the current gap between academic research and on-the-ground practice); (ii) help southern practitioners (CSOs and government actors) acquire the practical **skills and tools** they need to promote effective citizen participation in governance processes; (iii) **build bridges** between civil society and government actors and an active "community of practice" among participatory governance practitioners; and (iv) promote **innovation** in participatory governance practices by identifying, analysing and documenting strategically selected joint civil society-government initiatives.*

### **I. BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION**

1. Despite the recent wave of democratisation around the world, traditional systems of representative democracy seem to be in crisis. (Gaventa, 2002, Paul 2002). Citizens in both the North and the South express growing disillusionment with their governments – citing problems of lack of transparency, responsiveness and accountability, especially vis-à-vis disadvantaged social groups. (Commonwealth Foundation 1999, Narayan et. al. 2000). Human and citizen rights are not fully acknowledged nor respected and, as a result, ordinary citizens (and especially women, poor people and other marginalized groups) are largely excluded from governance processes and the making of decisions that directly affect their lives. Around the world, citizens suffer from a lack of adequate information, lack of awareness and acknowledgement of human and citizen rights and inadequate opportunities for meaningful dialogue and negotiation with public actors.

2. The impacts of non-responsive and unaccountable government are most harshly felt by disadvantaged citizens of the global South, where corruption and governance failures are increasingly acknowledged as a principal obstacle to the achievement of critical human development goals (such as the Millennium Development Goals). “Democracy deficits” at the local and national (and international) levels result not only in corruption and the wanton waste of precious development resources. They also seriously compromise the quality and effectiveness of public policy-making, planning and the provision of services to meet basic needs. They deny citizens their inherent right to participate in decisions that directly affect their lives and to hold government officials accountable for the public resources with which they are entrusted.

3. There is now growing consensus that good governance is participatory governance. Both governments and citizens/civil society have a crucial role to play in promoting good governance and ensuring public transparency, responsiveness and accountability. Around the world, CSOs have responded to this challenge by affirming citizen rights and demanding more space and greater scope to participate in development and governance processes. Many courageous and dedicated government actors (at local and national levels) have also initiated efforts to create space and mechanisms for citizen participation in governance processes. Across the globe, a growing number of governments and CSOs are currently developing and experimenting with a multitude of “participatory governance” practices to: enhance citizen access to essential public information; strengthen citizen voice (especially that of disadvantaged and marginalized groups); promote citizen participation in policy-making processes and at all stages of public expenditure management cycle, and; empower citizens to hold the state accountable and negotiate real change. These strategies and practical actions include, to name just a few: rights awareness and public education campaigns, pro-transparency initiatives, independent budget analysis, participatory policy-making, community-level development planning, participatory expenditure tracking, citizen monitoring of public services and legal reforms aimed at institutionalizing citizen participation. As participatory governance practices expand and evolve, there is growing evidence of the important and concrete benefits they can bring in terms of: better governance, development and citizen empowerment.

4. Participatory governance is both crucially important and highly challenging. Participatory governance requires building trust between civil society and the state and establishing working relationships with (various levels of) government actors. In circumstances where civil society-state relations are strained or “political will” is lacking, this represents a major challenge, requiring creative and courageous solutions. Many promoters of participatory governance (from both civil society *and* government) struggle with information, capacity, skills and resource constraints in their efforts to advocate for participation rights and to translate these rights into practical interventions at the local and national levels. Engaging in governance issues has also challenged civil society actors to come to terms with “democracy deficits” *within* civil society and to acknowledge the need to enhance their own *internal* mechanisms of transparency, participation, power-sharing and accountability. At a time when notions of citizens’ rights and responsibilities are evolving and expanding, and international scholarship on issues of participatory governance is particularly rich, most practitioners struggling with these issues “on the ground” are excluded from circles of international reflection and debate, limiting their effectiveness as advocates of participatory governance. Despite the impressive number of innovations occurring across the globe, many practitioners remain unaware of the experiences, strategies, methods and tools tried and tested by other organizations, limiting their effectiveness. Finally, given that in many country contexts participatory governance practices are a recent development, (national, regional and global) linkages and networks are not yet well developed, depriving practitioners of much needed opportunities for peer support and opportunity for information-sharing, cross-learning, partnering collective advocacy and joint action.

## II. CONCEPTUAL AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

5. Participatory governance is a broad and complex concept that means different things to different people and can be approached and interpreted in different ways. This section briefly outlines

our conceptual and analytical understanding of participatory governance and some key principles that will underpin the programme’s approach.

Key Features of Participatory Governance

6. *Citizen participation in different aspects and levels of governance* - Participatory governance is about empowering citizens to participate in processes of public decision-making that affect their lives. The potential for participatory governance is greatest at the local level, where citizens can directly engage with local authorities on issues of direct relevance to their daily lives (such as the provision of essential services, the development of the community, the management of shared resources and the resolution of conflicts). Much exploration and experimentation of participatory governance practices has occurred at this level. However, given that power, resources and crucial decision-making are often concentrated at the central level, efforts to expand and deepen citizen participation in national level governance processes are also extremely important. In our view, there are important opportunities for citizen participation in diverse aspects of governance and at different stages throughout the public agenda-setting, policy-making, planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation cycle. We therefore use the term participatory governance practices to refer to the wide range of strategies and mechanisms that can be used to enhance citizen participation in various aspects and at different stages of governance processes at both the local and national levels. While far from comprehensive, Table 1 provides some concrete examples of participatory governance practices.

**Figure 1 – Some examples of participatory governance practices at the local and national levels**

	<b>National level</b>	<b>Local level</b>
<b>Agenda-setting and policy-making</b>	Deliberative polling, citizens’ juries, participatory policy-making	Participatory development planning
<b>Revenues</b>	Public revenue reporting	Participatory tax collection
<b>Budget formulation</b>	Independent budget analysis, alternative budgets	Participatory budgeting
<b>Public expenditures</b>	Participatory expenditure tracking surveys	Public posting and reporting of local expenditures
<b>Public services</b>	Citizen evaluation of public services (e.g. citizen report cards)	Participatory M&E of services (e.g. community scorecards)
<b>Public oversight</b>	Civil society-ombudsman intermediation	Citizen oversight committees

7. *Different types and levels of participation* – The term “participation” is used to describe an extremely wide range of actions and behaviours. The “level“ of participation can be assessed both according to breadth (the extent to which it is inclusive or exclusive) and according to depth (the extent to which it is superficial or more intensive). Many practitioners acknowledge a “ladder of participation” that starts out with information-sharing and evolves towards, consultation, deliberation, collaboration, empowerment, joint decision-making (and, in some cases, self-government). The appropriate breadth and depth of participation depends on specific context and circumstance. In many cases, participatory governance practices evolve and deepen over time, for example, beginning with improved information-sharing between citizens and the state and, as trust and relations are strengthened, gradually adopting more meaningful and intensive forms of participation. In terms of breadth, the goal of participatory governance is not to have every citizen participate in every decision but rather to ensure an equitable representation of different interests and societal groups (especially of disadvantaged or marginalized groups) in those decisions and processes that most directly affect peoples’ lives.

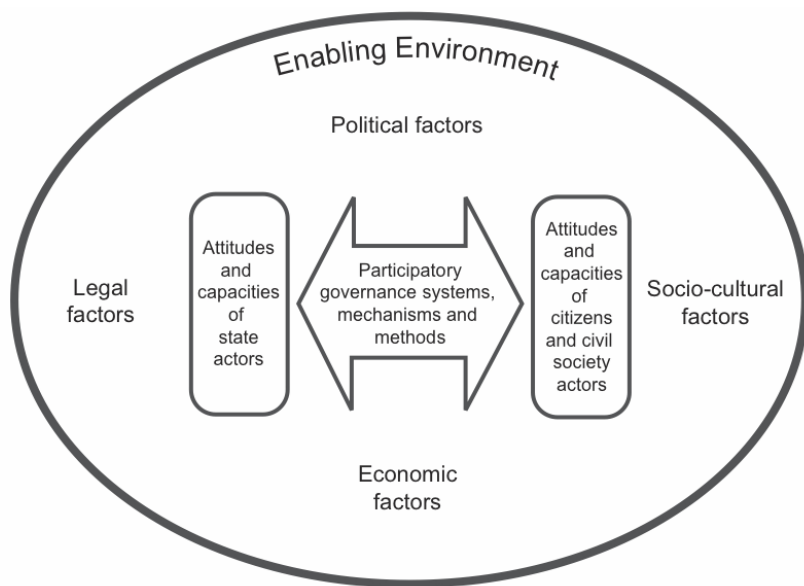
8. *Key actors and stakeholders* – Participatory governance practices involve a wide range of actors and stakeholders, each with different rights and responsibilities. We often refer broadly to

“government” and “civil society” stakeholders, but it is important to unpack these terms and to acknowledge that each of these spheres is inhabited by a highly heterogeneous mix of actors and interests. Key government actors include mayors and local councillors, members of parliament, executive officials, bureaucrats, public service providers as well as “independent” government institutions such as the judiciary, the ombudsman and anti-corruption agencies. Key civil society actors include: ordinary citizens, community-based membership organizations, community leaders and activists, independent media, advocacy organizations, social movements, professional associations, trade unions, academics, think tanks and NGOs. Actors that are sometimes perceived as inhabiting the “border” between government and civil society are traditional authorities and political parties. The programme aims to engage and build bridges (as feasible and strategic) between representatives of these different stakeholder groups.<sup>1</sup>

9. *Principal benefits and risks* – As discussed above, numerous important advantages are associated with participatory governance. Some of the key benefits include: more responsive and accountable government, improved public policies and services; more effective and sustainable development results, and; citizen empowerment. Governments that have supported participatory initiatives are often perceived as more effective and legitimate by citizens and, as a result, have seen their popularity (and, in some cases, tax revenues) increase. Potential risks of participatory governance approaches that need to be managed include: lack of genuine political will, elite capture of participatory processes, exclusion of critical or marginalized groups, the cooptation of civil society actors, the raising of unreasonable or unrealistic expectation and the potential for bringing underlying tensions and conflict to the surface.

10. *Key influencing factors* – Participatory governance approaches are enabled or disabled by a range of different (social, political, institutional, legal, economic, etc.) factors. The following diagram outlines some of the key factors or conditions that influence the success of participatory governance initiatives. The programme seeks to promote participatory governance mainly by enhancing (i) the capacity of civil society and (ii) government actors and promoting the development of (iii) effective and innovative systems, mechanisms and tools. The “knowledge” component of the programme will also aim to enhance our collective understanding of (iv) some of the deeper (i.e. political, legal and socio-cultural) barriers to participatory governance and potential strategies for overcoming these.

**Figure 2 – Key factors influencing participatory governance**



<sup>1</sup> Private sector actors are also sometimes involved in participatory governance experiments (particularly in the context of public-private partnerships). Future phases of the programme may further explore these roles and relationships.

## Guiding Principles

11. *Participatory governance as a right* - The proposed programme adopts a rights-based approach to development and governance. It seeks to promote basic human rights (including freedoms of association, information and expression), the right to essential services (such as water and education) and citizens' rights, including the right of all women and men to participate in decisions that affect their lives and the right to expect and ensure that government acts in the best interests of the people.. The programme places special emphasis on the rights and participation of women, children, people with disabilities and other traditionally marginalized groups.

12. *Emphasis on social inclusion* – A key objective of participatory governance is to ensure that women, poor people, rural populations, children, people with disabilities and other marginalized or disadvantaged groups are equitably represented and able to participate in governance processes. The program will therefore place special emphasis on reaching out to and empowering representatives from these groups and promoting participatory governance practices that are specifically designed to ensure equitable social inclusion.

13. *Power dynamics* – Participatory governance is ultimately about achieving more equitable power-sharing in processes of governance. The programme will therefore pay particular attention to understanding power relations between different stakeholder groups and exploring incentives, strategies and mechanisms that empower weaker and more vulnerable stakeholder groups, prevent the abuse of political and social power and promote equitable terms of engagement between stakeholder groups.

14. *Emphasis on civil society-government interface* – The nature of relations between civil society and government actors is essential to participatory governance. Where country conditions are unfavourable or government-civil society relations are difficult (or hostile) the scope for participatory governance may be limited (or constrained, for example, to efforts to promote transparency and information-sharing or guarantee basic rights). In many cases where participatory governance initiatives are undertaken, they are initiated and “owned” by either civil society or government actors with varying levels of success in “reaching out to” or “getting buy-in from” the other side. While such initiatives are important and to be supported, this programme will place particular emphasis on identifying those cases where civil society and government have succeeded in developing “joint initiatives” or establishing PG mechanisms on the basis of a process of genuine negotiation and mutual agreement. An objective of the programme will be to explore the advantages of participatory governance approaches from the perspectives of civil society and government with a view to creating incentives and developing strategies for more effective and equitable engagement.

15. *Exploration of some outstanding questions and challenges* - While much has been written about the concept of participatory governance and considerable practical experience has been gained, some fundamental questions and challenges remain unanswered. *What is an optimal and appropriate “division of labour” between government and civil society? What “level” and “depth” of participation and power-sharing is desirable and under what circumstances? Where does government end and civil society begin (e.g. what is the status and roles of “borderline” groups like political parties, traditional authorities, “independent” government oversight bodies)? What does it mean to be a citizen (i.e. what rights and responsibilities does citizenship imply)? How can we ensure that participatory governance practices complement and reinforce, and do not undermine existing systems of representative democracy?* While the programme has no pretence of finding definitive answers to these long-standing dilemmas, it will attempt to contribute to ongoing reflection and debate by bringing the collective voices and wisdom of southern practitioners to the table.

### III. AIM, OBJECTIVES, OUTCOMES, OUTPUTS

16. The **aim** of this CIVICUS programme is to promote participatory governance, thus contributing to poverty reduction and the achievement of key human development goals (such as the Millennium Development Goals).

17. The **overall objective** of the proposed three-year program phase is to **enhance the capacity of targeted southern (civil society and government) practitioners to promote and practice participatory governance at local and national levels**. The program seeks to build capacity through: (i) knowledge generation and learning; (ii) skills-building and tools development; (iii) bridge-building and networking and; (iv) support for innovation.

18. The **specific objectives** of the programme are to:

- (i) *Enhance southern practitioners' **knowledge and learning** of participatory governance principles, rights, benefits, critical issues and strategies.* At a time when notions of citizens' rights and responsibilities are evolving and expanding, and international scholarship on issues of participatory governance is particularly rich, most southern (CSO and government) practitioners struggling with these issues "on the ground" are excluded from circles of international reflection and debate, limiting their effectiveness as advocates of participatory governance. By creating a space for practitioners to reflect, learn, and interact with leading researchers and scholars and developing a practitioner-friendly learning module, the programme will both generate valuable new knowledge and help practitioners to: better articulate their vision and views, strengthen their analytical capacity, gain confidence as advocates of participatory governance, and design and implement more informed programming and advocacy activities.
- (ii) *Assist southern practitioners to acquire the **skills and tools** they need to effectively promote participatory governance.* Despite the impressive number of innovations occurring across the globe, many practitioners remain unaware of the experiences, strategies, methods and tools tried and tested by other organizations or in other countries. The programme will create a global database of "good practice" case studies and lessons learned and a give participants (easy and searchable) access to a wealth of information about practical methods and tools. These initiatives, accompanied by regional skills-building workshops (and/or study exchanges) , targeting specific priority interests and needs, will help participants to enrich and expand their participatory governance practices.
- (iii) *Build **bridges** between civil society and government practitioners and strategic **networks** for the promotion of participatory governance.* A key objective of the programme is to build an active (multi-tiered and multi-stakeholder) "community of practice", made up of participatory governance practitioners and researchers working in different capacities and at different levels. The programme places specific emphasis on strengthening understanding and collaboration between civil society and government actors and exploring and supporting opportunities for joint, collaborative action.
- (iv) *Promote **innovation**.* By identifying, analysing and documenting a number of innovative joint initiatives by civil society and government practitioners, the programme will contribute simultaneously to "pushing the envelope" of participatory governance practices, learning from these experiences and building the capacity of the selected civil society and government practitioners to work together.