



Public Participation in Decision-making Processes: Concepts and Tools

¹Onuma Suphattanakul

¹ Faculty of Commerce and Management, Prince of Songkla University, Trang Campus, Thailand
onuma.su@psu.ac.th

ARTICLE DETAILS

History

Revised format: Nov 2018

Available Online: Dec 2018

Keywords

Public participation, decision-making processes, public participation tools

JEL Classification:

D70,

ABSTRACT

Public participation is the tool of the government to gather citizens or customers' information in order to increase performance and respond their needs and expectations. Public participation in decision-making processes enhances citizen's income, security, and self-esteem. This paper identifies the concepts and levels of public participation in decision-making processes. In addition, this paper presents participation tools used by government to facilitate citizen involvement. Thus, increasing public participation in government decision-making has become a large component for government administration especially in early stage before major decisions are made.

© 2018 The authors, under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0

Corresponding author's email address: onuma.su@psu.ac.th

Recommended citation: Suphattanakul, O. (2018). Public Participation in Decision-making Processes: the Concepts and Tools. *Journal of Business and Social Review in Emerging Economies*, 4(2) 221-230

DOI: 10.26710/jbsee.v4i2.213

1. Introduction

In many developing countries, including Thailand, the public organization has been confronted by many external factors, for example, changes in the economic, social and political systems, and also changes in information and communication technology. The government has focused on a basic theme about governance which emphasizes the roles and responsibilities of the public service to respond to citizens or customers' needs. According to Paarlberg (2007), organizational achievement depends on its capacities to constantly gather data of customers' needs and requirements in order to increase organizational performance and establish better value for citizens. Thus, public organizations are moving toward a more public involved management approach to cope with current and future challenges and changes. The role of the citizen has become a very high importance in the involvement of decision-making. The tool of the government to gather citizens or customers' needs and expectations is through public participation.

Public participation is the key to lead organizations to be successful. Public participation, and more recently, citizen engagement in policy improvement, has been featured importantly in public sector reform (Bourgon, 2008). Nelson and Wright (1995) emphasize the participation process as a transformative tool for social changes. Bishop and Davis (2002) noted that public participation consist

of a measurement of public participation in decisions, a responsibility to searching the view of citizens who are affected by a decision, and transferring some authorities from government to citizens. Public participation is a component to create stakeholders' networking and good relationships with the government. There are large benefits to be gained from increasing public participation. An important outcome of public participation is to involve people in decision-making processes and gather that information in order to improve public performance. Halvorsen (2003) noted that quality participations are positively associated with expectations about the agency's responsiveness and performance. Thus, good public participation in the decision-making processes can help government obtain more accountability, responsibility, and good performance.

Concepts of Public Participation in Decision-Making Processes

Public involvement or public participation is based on the concept that people who are affected by a decision have a right to participate in the decision-making processes (IAP2, 2007). Public participation is a political principle. The form of public participation may be applied with the concept of stakeholder engagement, and also be accepted as a right to participate. Generally, public participation in decision-making searches and supports the involvement of people affected by or interested in a decision. If citizens participate actively in decision-making processes, the government that occurs from this method will become more democracy and more effectiveness. OECD (2001) presented forms of public participation in decision-making which are noted as follows:

1. Information and transaction mean the government informs information to the public;

In many developing countries, including Thailand, the public organization has been confronted by many external factors, for example, changes in the economic, social and political systems, and also changes in information and communication technology. The government has focused on a basic theme about governance which emphasizes the roles and responsibilities of the public service to respond to citizens or customers' needs. According to Paarlberg (2007), organizational achievement depends on its capacities to constantly gather data of customers' needs and requirements in order to increase organizational performance and establish better value for citizens. Thus, public organizations are moving toward a more public involved management approach to cope with current and future challenges and changes. The role of the citizen has become a very high importance in the involvement of decision-making. The tool of the government to gather citizens or customers' needs and expectations is through public participation.

Public participation is the key to lead organizations to be successful. Public participation, and more recently, citizen engagement in policy improvement, has been featured importantly in public sector reform (Bourgon, 2008). Nelson and Wright (1995) emphasize the participation process as a transformative tool for social changes. Bishop and Davis (2002) noted that public participation consist of a measurement of public participation in decisions, a responsibility to searching the view of citizens who are affected by a decision, and transferring some authorities from government to citizens. Public participation is a component to create stakeholders' networking and good relationships with the government. There are large benefits to be gained from increasing public participation. An important outcome of public participation is to involve people in decision-making processes and gather that information in order to improve public performance. Halvorsen (2003) noted that quality participations are positively associated with expectations about the agency's responsiveness and performance. Thus, good public participation in the decision-making processes can help government obtain more accountability, responsibility, and good performance.

Concepts of Public Participation in Decision-Making Processes

Public involvement or public participation is based on the concept that people who are affected by a decision have a right to participate in the decision-making processes (IAP2, 2007). Public participation is a political principle. The form of public participation may be applied with the concept of stakeholder

engagement, and also be accepted as a right to participate. Generally, public participation in decision-making searches and supports the involvement of people affected by or interested in a decision. If citizens participate actively in decision-making processes, the government that occurs from this method will become more democracy and more effectiveness. OECD (2001) presented forms of public participation in decision-making which are noted as follows:

1. Information and transaction mean the government informs information to the public;
2. Consultation means the government needs some information from the public;
3. Deliberative involvement means the government encourages citizens in the consultation process;
4. Government-led active participation means the government initiates consultation and keeps decision-making powers; and-
5. Citizen-led active participation means that citizens are enthusiastically involved in decision-making processes. Citizens' decisions become compulsory and sharing possession and responsibility for outcomes.

Sanoff (2000) concluded that participation may be seen as a direct public involvement in decision-making processes. Citizens share in decisions that determine the way of quality of their lives. He also noted that there are five principles of participation: 1) There is no better solution to a design problem; 2) experts' decisions are not essentially better than "laymen" decisions; 3) a planning task can be made transparent; 4) all individuals and interest groups should come together in an open debate; and 5) the process is continuous and ever changing. Thus, public participation is a process for involving the citizens in decision-making and public problem-solving. Public involvement includes a shared problem-solving by creating two-way communication in order to get the achievements and more acceptable decisions. In addition, it includes the process of the discussion between public organizations and the interest groups, affected people or organizations, and government agencies before formulating programs and policies. Cohen and Uphoff (1980) also identified participation as people's involvement in four basic stages of development in: 1) the decision-making process; 2) implementing process; 3) sharing the benefits of development; and 4) evaluating such program. They concluded that the importance of public participation is constituted by four types of involvement which were discussed at each stage as;

1. The importance of citizen involvement in decision-making is underlined in the World Bank's (1996) definition. It is described as a process through which stakeholders influence and allocate control over development policy and resources that affect them;
2. The importance of community participation in the implementation stage is to increase the sense of ownership of the plans and policies. It can reduce costs and provide training and employment;
3. The importance of community participation in the benefits is a motivation for people to participate. There are three types of benefits; material, social, and personal; and-
4. The importance of community participation in evaluation has been recognized but it is difficult to be analyzed and measured. In radical situations, evaluation may appear as the form of violence or protest. The public should be involved in the early stage before major decisions are made. This creates trust among participants and government and also increases citizen ownership. Wang and Wart (2007) found that participation in the first step of decision-making processes as "identifying agency and program goals and objectives" is the most important, while participation in other steps as strategy determination, monitoring and evaluation are less than 30%. The lowest participation occurred in the budgeting process. Cohen and Uphoff (1980) also identified that public participation in the evaluation has been recognized, but it is difficult to analyze and measure. Sanoff (2000) concluded that public participation occurs when the public is involved in the administrative decision-making and citizens become the owners of government, and the co-producers of public goods and services, then, it is called genuine participation.

The benefits of public participation [may](#) increase government credibility with the public by taking the public opinions into the decision-making process and encourage citizen-focused service delivery. Thus, improvement of public service delivery through public participation truly met public needs (OPDC, 2009). The efficient participation can bring public demands to the decision-making process and enhance effectiveness and efficiency in providing service quality to the public. Public involvement assists governments to certify that they are accountable for their actions and responsive to public interests.

The Levels of Participation

Scholars have divided the several levels of citizen participation. The ladder of citizen participation described by Arnstein (1969) shows the level of the involvement and the difference between actual optimal participation and something that might appear to be public participation. The levels of participation consist of: 1) Manipulation, 2) Therapy, 3) Informing, 4) Consultation, 5) Placation, 6) Partnership, 7) Delegated power, and 8) Citizen control. Pretty (1995) presented the ladder of participation framework which is one of [the](#) aspects of the theory of participation. It classified the different ways of participation from low intensity of participation to the high intensity of participation into seven levels of participation. The ladder of participation consists of: 1) manipulative participation, 2) passive participation, 3) consultation, 4) participation for material incentives, 5) functional participation, 6) interactive participation, and 7) self-mobilization. ~~Betuw (2004) analyzed the participation of two case studies in the Arsenic Drinking Water Problem in Rural Bangladesh project with the Pretty's (1995) concept, the ladder of participation framework. The research focused on the concept of participation and compared with the practical use of the concept of participation.~~

The opportunity for public participation can be operated in many ways. It depends on the basic needs of the people of each country and the allowance of their government for public participation. The International Association for Public Participation or IAP2 (2007), presented the five levels of public participation as;

Level 1: To inform: It is defined as to provide information and news of governments' activities to the public. It is the lowest level of participation in the participatory process. The government can use public participation mechanisms to inform the citizens such as fact sheets, website, and open houses.

Level 2: To consult: It is defined as to allow people to express their needs and opinions on administrative process. The government can use public participation mechanisms to consult with the citizens such as public comment, focus groups, surveys, and public meetings.

Level 3: To involve: It is defined as to allow the people to participate in the process of specific decisions, policy, project planning, and procedure of work. The mechanisms used to involve the public are workshops and deliberate polling.

Level 4: To collaborate: It is defined as to facilitate people to participate in the role of partnership or associate in the governments' activities. The mechanisms used to collaborate with the public are citizen advisory, committees, and consensus-building.

Level 5: To empower: This level is the highest level that the government needs to achieve by putting the final decision-making in the hands of public. It is defined as to give opportunity to people to take full roles in decision-making and administration. It supports people to be the owners for the government sector. The mechanisms used to empower the public are delegated decisions and referendums.

IAP2 has developed public participation spectrum that transcends national and cultural boundaries. The public participation spectrum is shown in Table 1.

Public participation spectrum was ranked from the lowest to the highest level. The lowest level of participation is to inform the public about the decision-making which is called a 'unidirectional form of

participation'. The next level is to consult which is defined as to allow people to express their opinions on the administrative process. This level is followed by "to involve" which is defined as to work directly with the public, and the next level is "to collaborate with the public" which is defined as forming partnership with the public. Finally, the highest level is "to empower" which means putting decision making in the hands of the public.

Table 1

IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

Inform Public Participation Goal:	Consult Public Participation Goal:	Involve Public Participation Goal:	Collaborate Public Participation Goal:	Empower Public Participation Goal:
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities, and/or solutions.	To gather public feedback, ideas, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and requirements are constantly understood and considered.	To collaborate with the public in each manner of the decision including the development of alternatives and the preferred solution.	To put final decision-making in the hand of public.
Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:	Promise to the Public:
<i>Journal of Business and Social Review in Emerging Economies</i>			We will look to you for direct advices and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example Techniques to Consider:	Example Techniques to Consider:	Example Techniques to Consider:	Example Techniques to Consider:	Example Techniques to Consider:
Fact Sheets Website Open houses	Public comment Focus groups Surveys Public meetings	Workshops Deliberate polling	Citizen Advisory Committees Consensus-building Participatory decision –making	Citizen Juries Ballots Delegated decisions Referendums

Source: The IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation (International Association for Public Participation, 2007). [Website: http://www.iap2.org.au/spectrum.pdf](http://www.iap2.org.au/spectrum.pdf))- Table

Participation Tools or Participation Mechanisms

Public participation can be seen through various types. There are a variety of tools that public officials can use to engage citizens in decision-making processes. Tool to inform public that means techniques that government uses to provide members of the public with the information to understand the policies and decision-making processes. Tool to generate and gain input that means techniques that government uses to obtain public input to the decision-making processes. Tool for consensus building and agreement seeking that means techniques that government uses to bring various groups of stakeholders to engage in shared learning and decision making.

According to Creighton (1981), typically a variety of mechanisms are used as part of participation processes, for example, individual interviews, workshops, advisory committees, public hearings, and customer surveys. Verba and Nie (1987) noted that there are four modes of participation: voting, campaign activity, cooperative activity, and citizen initiated contacts.

The United Nations (1998) presented UN-HABITAT's Toolkit on Participatory Urban Decision-Making as an extensive review of mechanisms to encourage public participation in decision-making processes at the local governance. The mechanisms are summarized below:

1. Study Circles are the involvement of discussions during a sequence of stages. Participants are taken to discuss and exchange different opinions and experiences to specific topics with government administrative officials;
2. Citizen local Advisory Boards are the effective form of public participation that advisory boards created by citizens who have wide-ranging interests and expertise and want to participate in public service. The activities of an advisory board may include the study of critical subjects, taking public evidence, operating independent inquiry, and reviewing staff reports and suggestions;
3. Government Contract Committees are the administration of government contracts established by government officials and the public. It is important to institute a venue for citizen participation and oversight of the contracts;
4. Public Hearings are fundamental to public participation. Public hearing is a proceeding before making decisions by giving citizens the way to discuss with policy-makers on important local issues. It allows public officials to request comments and information from the public. The government can obtain a feel of the opposite opinions; and;
5. Public Watchdog Groups are community-based organizations or grass-roots associations. The groups monitor government issues and policies in order to assess the accountability of public officials. It is important that these groups produce visibility with public officials.

Public hearing is the most common tool of public involvement. The government gives an appearance on a planned decision to the public, and then the citizens give their opinions. Public hearing indicates all of public opinion or provides good information about how the people feel and think. Other forms of public participation, for example, focus groups help government to gather ideas and opinions from the target group of citizens. Community survey and questionnaire may help local government get data about citizens' attitudes, problems, and issues. While, citizens' telephone hotline and internet can help public officials get more information and feedback from citizens. And finally, community forum is a public meeting intended to gather several of community perspectives to discuss [about the issues](#).

Cohen and Uphoff (1980) noted that different participatory means and mechanisms can be used to involve citizens' opinions in the development plans and activities. However, not all techniques or tools fit exclusively into one category of the level of public participation. The mechanisms of public participation range from dissemination of information through newsletters, electronic networks, and public meetings, to participatory processes (such as citizen advisory board, public meetings, focus groups, and referendums) that encourage all citizens to be active participants in decisions made for their community. In addition, various techniques to participate relate to the degree of public participation. The techniques used in low level of public participation (to inform, to consult) are fundamental mechanisms. On the other hand, the progressive techniques are used for the high level of public participation (to involve, to collaborate, to empower).

Summary

The role of public participation in decision-making process is important for government administration. It includes enhancing the capacity of citizens to encourage a sense of commitment. It is also essential for improving public participation by making public servants and [political leaders accountable to their citizens](#). Public participation increases legitimacy, efficiency, accountability, and public services quality. Many public participation tools or mechanisms can be used to involve citizens' opinions into decision-making processes. In addition, tools relate to the level of public participation and indicate the degree of power attributed to the public. Government should enhance opportunities to participate in policy decision-making process in order to increase the sense of citizens' ownership.

References

- Arnstein, Sherry, R. (1969). "A Ladder of Citizen Participation". **Journal of the American Planning Association**, 35(4), 216-224.
- Bishop, Patrick and Davis, Glyn (2002). "Mapping public participation in policy choices". **Australian Journal of Public Administration**, 61(1), 14-29.
- Bourgon, Jocelyne. (2008). "The future of public service: A search for a new balance". **The Australian Journal of Public Administration**, 67(4), 390-404.
- Cohen, John, and Uphoff, Norton, T. (1980). **Rural development participation: Concept and measures for project design implementation and evaluation** rural development center. New York: Cornell University.
- Creighton, James. L. (1981). **The public involvement manual**. Cambridge, MA: Abt Books.
- Halvorsen, E. K. (2003). "Assessing the effects of public participation". **Public Administration Review**, 63(5), 535-542.
- International Association for Public Participation (2007). **The IAP2 public participation toolbox**. Retrieved November 15, 2007, from <http://www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/toolbox.pdf>.
- Nelson, Nici and Wright, Susan (1995). **Power and Participatory Development: Theory and Practice**. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2001). **Citizens as partners: Information, consultation and public participation in policy-making**. Paris: Author. Retrieved from http://www.ezd.si/fileadmin/doc/4_AKTIVNO_DRZAVLJANSTVO/Viri/Citizens_as_partners_oeecd.pdf.
- Office of the Public Sector Development Commission. (2009). **Handbook of public sector quality management development**. Bangkok: Author.
- Paarlberg, L.E. (2007). "The impact of customer orientation on government employee performance". **International Public Management Journal**, 10(2), 201-228.

- Pretty, Jules (1995). "Participatory learning for sustainable agriculture". **World Development**, 23(8), 1247-1263.
- Sanoff, Henry. (2000). **Community participation methods in design and planning**. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- United Nations (1998). **Tools to support participatory urban decision making**. New York: Author.
- Verba, Sidney, & Nie, Norman. H. (1987). **Participation in America: Political democracy and social equality**. University of Chicago Press.
- Wang, XiaoHu and Wart, Montgomery, W. (2007). "When public participation in administration leads to trust: An empirical assessment of managers' perceptions". **Public Administration Review**, 67(2), 265-267.

