

## Citizen Voice and Action

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No democratic government can afford not to listen to the voices of its citizens. Why? It is a matter of common sense; involving people in discussions about how to tackle a problem that affects their lives is much more likely to generate successful ways to address the issue. Further, if opportunities are made to formulate and test out new ideas with those who are to benefit from them, time and money can be saved in the long run. It is a matter of governance; better to involve people in a conversation about change and hear their views than to deal with protest or face the consequences at the ballot box. It is also a matter of principle; democratic governments ought to be accountable to their citizens, and citizens have a right to be informed, consulted and involved in decisions that have implications for their lives.

However, governments – and institutions of various sizes and scales – find citizen engagement difficult and sometimes threatening. This is because participation is ultimately about power. Shifting from an expert-led, top-down mode of decision-making to one that enlists a diversity of publics in deliberation and is open to alternatives involves challenging and changing deep-seated cultures of politics and bureaucracy. This can be very difficult. Critics argue that participation is too complicated, costly and time-consuming, that there is no evidence that it improves outcomes and that is too expensive for what it delivers. Yet there are compelling examples of what can go wrong if citizens are not consulted, and a solid body of experience from around the world of what governments can gain from citizen engagement.

The literature focuses on two areas: (i) strengthening citizen voice and engagement with the state, principally through institutionalized forms of participation and (ii) more adversarial approaches to citizen voice, through the “contentious politics” of advocacy and mobilisation associated with social movements. The selection of readings in this pack seeks to capture this range of citizen voice and action. Each one also addresses dimensions of difference, the challenges of inclusion – especially of women and minorities voices – and of translating participation into influence.

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## Key readings

**Reading 1:** Cornwall, A. (2009). Unpacking participation: Models, meanings and practices. *Community Development Journal* 43 (3): 269–283  
<http://www.gsdrc.org/document-library/unpacking-participation/>

This article explores models and meanings of citizen participation, introducing a series of useful typologies that can help identify modes of participation in practice and exploring some of the dilemmas of engagement.

**Reading 2:** Goetz, A.M. and Gaventa, J. (2001). Bringing citizen voice and client focus into service delivery. *IDS Working Paper* 38. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.  
<http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/wp/wp138.pdf>

This paper draws together examples from the global south and north to explore a spectrum of possibilities for citizen voice, from opportunities made available by governments and other authorities for citizens to have a say to citizens claiming voice.

**Reading 3:** Fox, J. (2015). Social accountability: What does the evidence really say? *World Development* 72: 346–361.  
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X15000704>

Fox looks at the evidence concerning social accountability, and provides a very useful overview of its dynamics in practice.

**Reading 4:** Miraftab, F. and Will, S. (2005). Insurgency and spaces of active citizenship: The story of Western Cape anti-eviction campaign in South Africa. *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 25: 200-217.  
<http://www.gsdrc.org/document-library/insurgency-and-spaces-of-active-citizenship-the-story-of-western-cape-anti-eviction-campaign-in-south-africa/>

This article explores the interface between ‘insurgent’ forms of citizen action and the state. It provides an example of contestation and some useful conceptual hooks to make sense of citizen action beyond “invited participation”.

**Reading 5:** Tadros, M. (2014). Beyond ballotocracy: Citizens’ voices and the many faces of unruly politics. *IDS Bulletin* 45(5): 48-57.  
[http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/7337/IDSB\\_45\\_5\\_10.1111-1759-5436.12103.pdf?sequence=1](http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/123456789/7337/IDSB_45_5_10.1111-1759-5436.12103.pdf?sequence=1)

Tadros considers “unruly politics” as a mode of citizen voice and action.

## Questions to guide reading

1. What might governments gain from shifting from informing citizens to engaging them more directly in decision-making processes that affect their lives? What lessons can be learnt about citizen action when looking “beyond the ballot box”?
2. What kinds of issues might participation help governments to address – and what are the benefits and risks of engaging citizens in this way?

3. What are the challenges of inclusion, especially of women, black, ethnic and religious minorities, people with disabilities, and lesbian, gay, bi, queer and trans\* people?
4. What does the evidence tell us about “what works” to promote citizen engagement in holding the state to account?
5. What are the implications for donors of supporting processes of citizen voice and action that contest the status quo?
6. How can we understand, measure and assess changes brought about by a) citizen voice; and b) impacts of interventions to support greater citizen voice?