



Decentralisation and the People: Using Engagement to Deliver Results

GPG's Guide to Decentralisation series explores the practicalities of designing, implementing and managing the process of decentralisation. The Guides explore key areas affecting the planning and delivery of an effective decentralised system, drawing on international experience and best practice. In this Guide we consider how public engagement can be used to deliver results, and seek to answer the following questions:

- What are the potential benefits of engagement for decentralisation?
- Who should be encouraged to engage and when?
- How can engagement be best undertaken?

Introduction

The opportunity of decentralisation is that it brings decision making and administration closer to the people being governed and who pay for and use the services provided. This can ensure that decisions more fully reflect the needs and priorities of local people; services can reflect local circumstances and as a result the citizen will have more trust in the democratic and governance process.

However this opportunity can only be fully recognised if there is a planned and comprehensive approach to engaging the public in the process of decentralised government. There needs to be clarity about why engagement is being carried out; what issues are involved; who is being engaged with; how marginalised groups can be involved; and a range of methods to ensure that the most effective practices in different circumstances are used. Furthermore, the process of engagement needs to be properly

planned and adequately resourced. There needs to be feedback to the public about how engagement has actually influenced priorities and decisions.

In this paper, we will consider how to ensure that engagement achieves the potential benefits. In particular, we will consider:

- The potential benefits of engagement for the success of decentralisation and particularly for the council or governorate
- The timing of engagement activities
- The respective roles of national and local politicians and of the decentralised administration in ensuring successful engagement
- The importance of planning and resourcing successful engagement
- The importance of recognising and engaging 'hard to reach' groups
- What to engage about
- The range of methods for engagement along a 'spectrum of engagement'

There are a range of different models for decentralisation. In this paper, we are largely considering decentralisation to a sub-national level. In different countries, these are known by different names. In this paper, we will refer to them as 'authorities'.

The benefits of engagement with citizens, neighbourhoods and communities

Increasing the engagement and participation of citizens and communities in local government planning and decision making can produce benefits for all concerned. The following table outlines these benefits.

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Authority	Community	Citizens
Can help to ensure better linkage between the Authority's vision and what happens in practice	Ensures better accountability of the council to those who elect and fund them	Engenders a sense of belonging, involvement and participation
Good decision making needs evidence and representative views – engagement can ensure that these are discovered and outlined. It can also help to avoid disproportionate influence going to particularly powerful or 'noisy' pressure groups or single issue campaigns	Can help to identify and legitimise community leaders and to build capacity in community organisations and community competence	Enables marginalised and under-represented voices to be heard
In particular, the views and priorities of under-represented groups e.g. young people, vulnerable groups e.g. disabled and women can be solicited and included	Can support local community partners and civil society organisations to develop and to gain influence. They may be able to be partners with the local council/governorate	Can provide opportunities for citizen control of services building skills of individual citizens.
Policies which reflect local priorities and circumstances should be more effective and better value for money.	Can provide a voice and influence for marginalised groups	Citizens should benefit from more effective services which are better value for money
Can generate new ideas for authority consideration and ensure that there is evidence for particular policies and priorities	Should ensure that services are more appropriate for the particular social, economic and environmental circumstances of the neighbourhood and community	Better understanding of how local government works which can encourage individuals to put themselves forward for elected office
Can improve the reputation and legitimacy of elected members and officials as local leaders		

Timing of engagement

There are four key periods when engagement is particularly important and potentially fruitful.

1. In designing and delivering a policy of decentralisation
2. During the period of elections to the decentralised bodies
3. After the election as the council develops its programmes, priorities and budget
4. Business as usual

1. Policy design and delivery

In order for decentralisation to gain public support and understanding, national policy makers need to ensure engagement during the development and design of the policy. They need to be able to spell out clearly what the benefits of decentralisation will be at a local and a national level and the details of how it will be implemented. This should

include details about the powers to be devolved; the structures to be developed at the local level; the extent to which there will be local democratic involvement and, most importantly, how finance will be devolved and/or raised locally to deliver the services devolved to the local level.

GPG Associate, Paul Silk has produced a pamphlet on the experience of devolution and decentralisation in the UK. He emphasises the role of public support and engagement at the stage of developing the proposals.

'It is often thought that political elites want devolution because it brings them power. Decentralisation is much more firmly based if it comes from citizens' demands. Political leaders, of course, have the job of shaping opinions, but popular support for devolution will be stronger if people feel that their needs are being met and that their voice has been heard.'

A lesson from the experience of Wales is that, as devolution is planned and developed, the time spent on consultation, engagement and public education is time well spent. Decentralisation should be a response to demand. It must not be seen as a way to privilege a regional set of political leaders. Public opinion polls have frequently been used to gauge public opinion, but referendums are ways in which the public can really exercise control over their political future. They are particularly important when constitutional issues like devolution are being considered. There have been three referendums on devolution in Wales and another planned. The referendums have been clear proof that the people of Wales support devolution.⁷¹

It is also important to ensure that people are fully informed about the way that decentralisation will work. In Jordan, the Ministry for Political and Parliamentary Affairs has been given specific responsibility for an awareness raising campaign about the decentralisation proposals. They are engaging in universities, in neighbourhoods, with CSOs and across government as part of the decentralisation implementation process.

2. Before and during the election period

There is a range of engagement that will be necessary in the run up to the first set of elections for newly decentralised councils and governorates.

- People need to be told about the timing and scope of the local elections. This will also need to include information about the voting system, numbers to be elected and eligibility to vote. This can be part of a wider awareness raising campaign such as in Jordan. This is also another opportunity to communicate with the public about the scope of the bodies to which they will be electing representative e.g. their roles, powers and funding
- Those responsible for the administration of the elections including independent electoral commissions and local authorities and returning officers should promote information about how to take part in the elections focussing particularly on voter registration.
- These bodies should also engage with political parties and individuals interested in standing for election to clarify the conditions, nomination provisions and timetables. It is also good to encourage

political parties to consider what they are trying to achieve and how they will campaign in the elections. This may more appropriately be facilitated by those external to the process without a political stake. For example, Global Partners Governance is working with interested candidates in Jordan and Egypt.

- Political bodies may engage with local people to develop their ideas for the election which can be turned into a policy programme and presented as a manifesto.
- Candidates will help to raise awareness and will want to engage with voters in the election campaign period to maximise the support for themselves and their programme. We will return to the particular role(s) for local politicians later.
- There is often a role for CSOs representing particularly marginalised groups to promote voter registration and to encourage a diverse range of candidates to stand for election.

3. Immediately post election

The elected representatives and the authority officials will need to work together to approve the priorities and budget of the authority. There may be scope for public engagement. In addition, this is the time that the authority needs to make clear that they intend to engage and to allocate responsibility for developing an engagement plan and programme.

This may also be a good time to consider developing a neighbourhood plan. GPG Associate, Andrew Feinstein outlines the South African experience.

'In South Africa each large municipal area was required to develop an Integrated Development Plan in consultation with local communities. In the province in which the author operated this was taken further; all economic stakeholders were invited to participate in a Provincial Economic & Development Forum in which strategies for the government to implement were discussed. Sub-structures, such as a provincial Tourism Council, were also created.

All provincial legislation required formal public participation and input before it could be passed. To facilitate this process, especially amongst historically disadvantaged and poor communities, local government liaison offices were established. Citizens could utilise these centres to comment on any aspect of

pending legislation or provincial government activity. Officials were employed at the centres to assist people who were either illiterate or had no experience of analysing and commenting on these issues. This ensures regular feedback and engagement with the recipients of services.

A wide range of media is used to make people aware of these initiatives. They include television, radio in rural areas, and even informal community meetings in less formal settlements. All elected members of the Provincial Legislature are required to hold consulting surgeries in their constituency at least weekly.¹²

4. Business as usual

When the decentralised body is established and the elected members are in place, public engagement should become an integral part of the day to day business of the decentralised authority. We will consider this in more detail in a later section.

The role of local politicians

Local politicians can bring particular strengths and knowledge to the authority.

- An understanding of their own electoral district in particular, the demographics, the key issues which concern local people and the way that services are actually being delivered on the ground.
- A channel of communication between the communities they represent and the authority. They may be better able to represent the views of those who would not normally engage with official bodies and speak up for the 'hard to reach' citizens. In the UK, elected representatives often hold 'advice surgeries' in neighbourhood centres or spend time out and about visiting neighbourhood organisations or going door to door. This provides particularly strong local intelligence of how local people are feeling about the authority and the services it provides.
- The opportunity to assess whether there is general satisfaction with services and whether local people believe they are getting value for money from what is being spent
- Knowledge of local organisations who may be able to work in partnership with the authority to respond to particular issues or to provide locally responsive services. This may also include promoting self help amongst citizens and supporting them to develop their capacity to run or develop

local services.

- In order to be elected, it is likely that local politicians will have good communicating and influencing skills. This can be used to communicate the views of local people in the authority when decisions are being made and also to report back to local people the issues that the authority is dealing with. They may be effective at using local media to publicise issues of importance to local people and the authority.
- Particularly when local politicians represent a political party, they may be able to use relationships with politicians from their party at a national level to enable communication and to assist in dealing with conflicts which can emerge between local and national levels of government

Whilst local politicians will potentially bring skills and knowledge, they will also benefit from training in how to engage with local citizens and communities. For example, in the UK, the representative body for local authorities, the Local Government Association produces a guide for elected representatives on how to contribute to public engagement.³

Resourcing and organising public engagement

High quality public engagement will not happen by accident. It needs to be properly planned and resourced. Some of the issues which the authority should consider are:

- **Who is responsible** – there needs to be a senior director in the authority who has engagement as part of their responsibilities. There also needs to be appropriate staffing for the activities to be carried out.
- **How will engagement inform the whole authority** – the senior director will have a role to play in highlighting the importance of carrying out engagement and acting on the results to the whole authority. It should be clear where it fits within the strategic planning of the authority and each of the service areas.
- **Planning for engagement** – there needs to be a plan for engagement. This should be clear about the strategic objectives for engagement; when it will be used; what methods will be used; how success and impact will be measured.
- **What resources are necessary** – there needs to be specific budget provision for engagement work. This will be needed to employ appropriate staff, but also for printing, technology e.g. computers,

provision of neighbourhood offices or hiring of venues for consultation etc.

What to engage about

As part of the planning for engagement, there needs to be clarity about the range of issues to engage on. It is likely to include some or all of the following:

- **Design of decentralisation** – we have already considered above the importance of engaging and gaining support for the decentralisation proposals and structures themselves
- In considering the authority’s **programme, priorities and policies**, there is benefit in involving local people, for example, through a planning process such as that outlined above.
- When planning the use of resources through the **authority budget**, it is important to engage publicly. There may also be opportunities to engage citizens more actively in making decisions about spending through participatory budgeting – we will consider this in more detail later.
- Engagement can provide important information and evidence about the **quality and appropriateness of the services** being provided by the authority

- If the authority is considering **new services or needs to cut or change services**, it is important to consult with the users
- **Local developments and issues** – the authority has an important role to play as an advocate and voice for the area. Public engagement will enable the authority to speak with evidence and credibility when responding to issues or developments e.g. where national government policies are having an impact; where infrastructure developments are planned; or where there are local emergencies or problems such as natural disasters or major incidents.

Methods of engagement

The authority will need to adopt a range of engagement methods and practices to match the parts of the community they are trying to engage with and the issues they are engaging about. Engagement practices vary in terms of the amount of power they give to citizens and the extent of participation they provide. Because of this, people often refer to a spectrum of engagement.

The UK Local Government Association provides a useful table to distinguish between the different approaches at different places on this spectrum.⁴

	What do we mean?	Examples
Doing to	Giving information to people for the purpose of communicating or to enable them to make better informed decisions People are passive recipients of services	Factsheets Websites Open houses
Doing for	Engaging and supporting people – asking for their views	Consultations Workshops
Doing with	Working together in equal and reciprocal partnerships People design and deliver services alongside professionals	Co-production Participatory budgeting Resident managed projects

In considering the possible methods and practices of engagement, we will start with those which are least participative and move through to those which require a considerable shift of power to citizens and communities.

Newsletters, website – these provide information about the services provided by the authority, the structure of the authority including responsibility for particular services and the elected members. There will usually be methods for making contact with the authority to provide general feedback or to make specific complaints.

Public access to meetings and information – there should be a culture of openness within the authority which assumes that information and formal meetings particularly those involving elected representatives will be open to the public wherever possible.

Surveys – surveying citizens enables the authority to get direct information about how services are being received and where citizen's priorities lie. Because they are relatively quick and easy to complete, they also enable a wider level of involvement than meetings.

Neighbourhood offices – authorities often ensure that there is a physical presence in different neighbourhoods. This enables citizens to make direct contact with council staff, to report issues or to provide feedback.

Open house/meeting – this method can be used to inform citizens about specific developments. They may be organised by elected representatives or be more formal authority led events. They will also usually provide an opportunity for the public to provide direct comment and feedback.

Elected representatives advice surgeries – elected representatives will have a range of methods of engaging directly with voters including offering the opportunity to come and talk to them in 'surgeries' or directly visiting neighbourhoods.

Media – the authority should consider carefully how to use local media including newspapers, TV and radio to communicate with citizens. This will often be the most cost effective way to transmit news, although it will not be possible for the authority to control the detail of the message and local media may also be critical and challenging of the authority.

Social media – social media enables the authority to provide up to date or 'real

time' information about developments. In 2013, the city of Brisbane in Australia was hit by flooding. The Brisbane City Council used social media to provide information to residents and to facilitate communication with community organisations and other sources of support. Further information is in the case study.⁵

Social media is also very cost effective for small or poorly resourced authorities to disseminate information quickly. A small authority in Wales, Torfaen started by using social media to provide information when there was very bad weather. They then developed this to use it for engaging citizens more actively. For example, they organised a street cleaning project through social media. The Twitter hashtag #torfaenspringclean reached 40,000 people and, more importantly, the campaign got 300 people involved in local clean-ups of litter over three weeks and around 300 bags of rubbish were cleared from local communities.⁶

Outreach to under-represented groups – the authority should give particular consideration to how to reach under-represented groups. People with childcare responsibilities (usually women) are unlikely to be able to come to an evening consultation meeting. Going to the school gate or nursery may be a more effective way to engage.

Disabled or older people will have particular needs for authority services, but may not be able to access traditional meetings. It is important for the authority to consider how to reach out, for example, by attending groups or services which may be attended by these people. Alternatively it is useful to use civil society groups as a conduit to hear the views of those they represent or campaign for.

Schools, universities and youth centres are better places to find and talk to young people than meetings.

Networking with civil society organisations – as well as facilitating contact with hard to reach groups, CSOs will often have specific knowledge about local issues and needs. Some will focus on environmental issues for example. Trade unions and business organisations will have strong views on job promotion, economic development and skills. As part of the planning for engagement, it is important to develop a stakeholder map which collates all the CSOs and other representative groups in the authority area and plans how to engage with them.

Consultation – when planning new policies or changes to services, it is right to consult with the public. This can take many forms, but will only be effective if there is clarity about what the public can influence. If all the decisions have already been taken, this is not consultation, but just information. The authority needs to be clear about where they are really willing to respond to citizens' views by allowing those views to influence or determine which options to pursue. There are a variety of methods which can be used for consultation including meetings, surveys or technology.

5. Neighbourhood/development planning

Andrew Feinstein outlines how this works in South Africa above and in his paper for Global Partners Governance.⁷ This process allows citizens to focus on and influence the authority's priorities and plans in their particular neighbourhood. It will require a series of meetings and engagement opportunities where citizens can reflect on current provision and can provide feedback on their priorities and the issues which concern them. This information can then be translated into options and potential plans by a smaller group usually involving professional officials from the authority and some representatives of the neighbourhood including, but not exclusively the elected members. There is then some method for the neighbourhood to express preferences and provide feedback on the plans.

Participatory budgeting – this planning process can be taken a stage further by involving the neighbourhood in determining elements of the authority's spending through participatory budgeting methods.

The process was first developed in Brazil in 1989, and there are now over 1,500 participatory budgets around the world. Most of these are at the city level, for the municipal budget. Participatory Budgeting has also been used, however, for counties, states, housing authorities, schools and school systems, universities, coalitions, and other public agencies.

Though each experience is different, most follow a similar basic process: residents brainstorm spending ideas, volunteer budget delegates develop proposals based on these ideas, residents vote on proposals, and the authority implements the top projects. For example, if community members identify recreation spaces as a priority, their delegates might develop a

proposal for basketball court renovations. The residents would then vote on this and other proposals, and if they approve the basketball court, the city pays to renovate it. Further information about Participatory Budgeting is available here.⁸

Participatory democracy - Authorities can take this idea of participatory democracy further by encouraging some element of ongoing neighbourhood management or governance. For example, by setting up area committees with coopted stakeholder and local citizen representatives who consider plans and proposals for the local areas and may have delegated budgets for commissioning projects and services.

Co-production – where local partner agencies work with individuals and groups in the community to share knowledge, resources and assets in tackling community concerns. In this model, the authority often adopts a 'place-shaping' role providing support to enable community groups to solve their own problems rather than insisting on direct authority provision of services or facilities.

Resident managed services – some services may be able to be directly managed by groups of users. A good example of this would be tenant management organisations which give housing tenants more control over their homes and neighbourhoods. On a smaller scale, neighbourhood halls and centres can be transferred to committees of local residents to manage and run.

Feedback – in all forms of public engagement, it is important to feedback to the public how their input was used and what difference it made.

Conclusion

There are real potential benefits for authorities, communities and citizens from developing meaningful public engagement. Decentralised authorities have the opportunity to benefit from both **representative democracy** in which members are elected to represent their local communities and **participative democracy** in which authorities seek to engage and involve local people in the decisions that affect them most closely.

Representative and **participative** democracy are not in competition with each other. In fact, as we have seen, local elected politicians have a key role to play both in representing those who elected

them and in facilitating links more widely with citizens and communities.

Engagement will only be successful and achieve results if it viewed as one of the key processes involved in the authority's planning and decision making. It is not an additional task, but a core part of the business of decentralised authorities. It requires appropriate staffing and resources, but should also ensure that the authority's resources are better targeted in meeting community needs. The citizens served by the authority are not just the passive recipients of services, but also a key asset which deserves to be fully and appropriately involved. In doing that, authorities can be more confident that they are delivering and facilitating effective and efficient structures and services.

About the author



The Right Honourable Jacquie Smith was elected to the UK parliament in 1997 and served as a Member of Parliament for 13 years until 2010. During that time she was also a Minister in the UK government for 10 years including as the first female Home Secretary (Minister of the Interior) in the UK. Since leaving Parliament she has worked as a consultant, trainer, coach and broadcaster and has carried out consultancy work with a range of UK and international clients. She has advised and trained politicians and senior officials in Jordan, Iraq, Tanzania, Egypt and Nigeria.

Endnotes

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