

RSOG Seminar :

Barriers to Effective Civic Engagement

With

Professor Dr. Rosario Laratta, Meiji University Japan

When : 14 November 2013
Where : Razak School of Government
Speakers : Professor Dr. Rosario Laratta

About The Seminar

In the present day, effective Civic Engagement is an integral part of a government. Effective Civic Engagement requires good communication, trust and respect. Dialoguing and communicating with the various stakeholders especially the public, is important to the government. Opinions and feedback received from stakeholder engagement is a vital aspect for policy making and program implementation. At the end of this seminar, the participant is expected to be able to understand; amongst others (i) to identify and understand barriers to effective Civic Engagement in particularly in the developing countries (ii) to be able to distinguish, if any, the differences between the barriers to effective Civic Engagement in developed and developing countries (iii) to be able to identify possible ways to manage if not eliminate barriers to effective Civic Engagement in developing countries.

Summary

The speaker started the seminar by giving a brief background of the different approaches to public engagement. The traditional forms of engagement is voting and paying taxes. He added that it is important to have effective engagement not only to understand a problem but also to find solutions and provide quality service to the people, who are more educated and aware of their rights, hence demand a higher quality of service. However, government resources are limited. In this regard, effective civic engagement serves as an instrument to gauge the opinions and feedback for effective decision making, program development and service delivery.

The speaker introduced the concept of Rethinking Civic Engagement from 2 important perspectives which is Legitimacy and Efficiency. The 3 A's of Legitimacy include **Authenticity** (Ability to understand what language people use in their daily lives/interpreting their complaints; **Authority** (Ability to drive the language of the community into public programs/plans), and **Accountability** (Ability to be answerable to people and held responsible for decisions taken). The 5 Es of Efficiency include **Experience** (to improve a service, it is important to get the opinion of people who use a service and front-line staff who provide the service); **Explore** (generate ideas with stakeholders:- from insights to prioritizing); **Experiment** (testing new ideas-from concept to piloting); **Evaluate** (review findings with stakeholders:- co-evaluation); and **Evolve** (work with leadership to make the case for change-implementation and marketing/ publicity).

One of the main challenges faced by the local administration is budget cuts which hinders the continuity of the services provided to the people. The most straightforward ways to address this is to reduce services or increase local taxes. However, such decisions will not be well received. The solution is to let the people decide which provision to cut and which cuts would least affect their life. It involves consultation and brainstorming with stakeholders especially the local community. This approach is termed as participatory budgeting.

Participatory budgeting is important to the government because of factors such as lack of resources, lack of legitimacy and the lack of responsibility. The purpose of participatory budgeting is to gain consensus, rebuild social trust and educate the public on initiatives undertaken by the government. Participatory budgetary is a platform for people to give their inputs and ideas on how to spend public money, and hence, is a form of empowerment. At the same time, it closes the gap between representatives (the administrators) and the represented (the citizens). It can help reduce conflict and rebuild social trust.

One of the important aspects of participatory budgeting is to ensure transparency. However, there are challenges to implement participatory budgeting. On the individual perspective, it is important to choose a delegate that represents the voice of the community. From the organizational aspect, the challenge is to ensure that the people understand the government's budget. The process of involving citizens in public budget decisions requires at least 2 preconditions which is **informing** (strengthening the capacity of citizens to understand what the local administrators are doing); and **consulting** (strengthening the capacity of citizens to exercise their voice).

The speaker concluded the seminar by discussing the **6-Step Guide** to ensure the success of participatory budgeting. The source of the guide is derived from lessons learned from case studies of participatory budgeting around the world and discussion with academics who have worked as consultants for participatory budgeting implementation around the world. The 6- Step Guide is as follows:

Step 1

Creation of a coordinating board consisting of public officers, external experts, local moderators and politicians. The purpose is to promote the idea of participatory budgeting, coordinating the process and implementing the research.

Step 2

Implementing some form of research in the community. The data collection is either through a survey or face to face interviews.

Step 3

Organizing focus groups by contacting people from the survey who were willing to participate or sending invitations to a well-representative group of people within the community.

Step 4

Networking with other organizations through informative workshops, consultative workshops and budgetary workshops.

Step 5

Defining the agenda using the ideas from focus group sessions with stakeholders.

Step 6

Linking participatory budgeting to other existing instruments such as materplans, legal instruments and international financial support.

Key Lessons Imparted:

- 1) There are 2 important aspects of Rethinking Civic Engagement which is **Legitimacy** and **Efficiency**.
- 2) Participatory budgeting is important to the public service administration due to various external factors such as lack of resources, legitimacy and responsibility.
- 3) Public Budget decisions involves at least 2 pre-conditions which is **informing** and **consulting**.
- 4) There are clear steps that help ensure the success of participatory budgeting.

About The Speaker

Professor Laratta, PhD is a faculty member at the Graduate School of Governance Studies, Meiji University, Japan. Before his current appointment, he held a post as Visiting Scholar and Japan Society for the Promotion of Science Fellow at the University of Tokyo and a lectureship position at the International Christian University (Japan). He earned an MA and a PhD in Sociology from Warwick University

(UK). He is the author of four books and more than forty peer-reviewed papers on leading international journals. He is a member of a number of academic associations on social welfare in Italy, UK and Japan.

Photo Gallery

Contact

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