

Abstract

This paper aims at analysing the current appreciation of civic engagement in Azerbaijan, discusses its benefits in terms of governance and provides recommendations to improve the situation. Civic engagement is beneficial for governance as it helps to keep the government more accountable and transparent. Citizens' ideas are a source of innovation and entrepreneurship. Therefore, civic engagement needs to be improved in Azerbaijan. It may be improved through the effective involvement of public councils and the use of collaborative technological platforms, for which the country has a potential.

Key words: *civic engagement, public councils, collaborative technological platforms, public awareness, Azerbaijan*

Introduction

Citizens play a crucial role in the decision-making process, because...

The Azerbaijani government values its citizens' opinions in the decision-making process. The recent events in the country are evidence of this. For instance, after the protests against the local authority of Ganja in August 2018, the mayor has been discharged from his position. Another protest of approximately 20,000 people in support of a human rights activist's release from prison - Mehman Huseynov – it resulted in his release on 2 March 2019. After the events, the President also signed several decrees for an increase in social assistance benefits, decrease in interest rates, and more favourable terms for borrowers. These events demonstrate that the Government cares about its citizens' views and needs. The events also show that the citizens are active and willing to participate in the decision-making process. Conversely, the protests also demonstrate the lack of conciliatory tools for civic engagement.

Thus, this paper will present and discuss the tools that enhance civic engagement conciliatory methods and tools that would avoid any aggression manifested in the decision-making process. Improvement of public councils' involvement and broadening the use of collaborative technological platforms are discussed as potential alternative solutions, for increasing public awareness and involvement in choosing among policy alternatives put forward by the Government. Each alternative is evaluated based on the criteria of legality, administrative feasibility, and political acceptability.

The paper first presents some general information about the benefits of civic engagement. It then discusses the role of public councils, and third, it elaborates on collaborative technological platforms and social media integration as an alternative to facilitate civil participation. It finishes with a discussion on the undeniable role of public awareness in the policy implementation process.

General information

Civic engagement is beneficial because...

Civic engagement in the public sector is broadly defined as collective action and participation in the governance process (Cooper, 2005; Cooper, et al., 2006; Peterson, 2014; Dawes, et al., 2015). A UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence paper (2016) describes the following benefits of civil participation in governance. Governments can

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benefit from citizens' ideas and get information about their needs and preferences for serving them better, through the utilisation of civil engagement in the policy making process. Citizens' ideas are potentially sources of innovation and may be catalytic in initiating entrepreneurial activities in the public sector. Furthermore, more public involvement in the decision-making process also means more public trust in the government, as civic engagement safeguards and defends public interest against clientelist decisions made. Moreover, civil participation in policy-making makes the government more transparent and hence, more accountable to the public and more legitimate in the eyes of citizens. Given the array of such benefits, governments should support and create conditions for civic engagement.

Policy alternatives

Public councils amplify civic engagement because...

Public councils are an internationally practiced tool for civil participation in the policy making process. For example, community councils exist in the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand, neighbourhood committees in Netherlands, and neighbourhood councils in Italy, the Nordic countries, Japan, and the United States, which effectively serve to augment citizen empowerment, democratic values, and government responsiveness to the needs of citizens (Schmid, 2001).



Meeting of Public Councils in the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population (January 2019)

According to the law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Public Participation (2013), public councils shall be established for the purposes regarding public participation indicated in the law. One candidate shall be nominated from each civil society institution. Public council members do not get any compensation, salary, or any other payment, for their activities while serving on the public councils. Their membership is for two years. However, such councils have not been established yet, and hence they are not active. Besides, only few people are aware of their enactment as a tool for civil participation in policy decision making, including myself, who despite of the fact that I am an educated member of the society, who is interested in public affairs, I only learnt about the councils, while searching about the civic engagement activities in Azerbaijan. Otherwise I would not have known that there are public councils in the country.

Thus, it seems that it is not actions, changes, or active citizenship that reflects the job of the public councils, although photographs exist that show few women and men in their suits depicting the "hard work" of the councils. The news section on the website of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population (2019) presents a meeting to discuss the activities of the council among its members. However, no report of this meeting and its activities could be found on the Ministry's website or elsewhere; hence the public has not been informed about the details of this activity, if there was any. Consequently, despite the fact that the purpose of public participation is "provision of clarity and transparency in the activities of central and local executive authorities and local self-government bodies", for

which the public councils are created, it seems that they have failed to provide transparency and clarity with respect to their own activities.

Public councils contribute to strengthening the citizen involvement in the decision-making process and public control over the activities of the government as their participants deliver their views, complaints, problems, or ideas to the governmental level (Law on Public Participation, 2013). This is a democratic process that helps to keep the government accountable to its citizens. Therefore, if the public councils work properly and realize their functions as considered in the Law on Public Participation, civic engagement and henceforth, democracy will be consolidated, the government will be more accountable, and the citizens will get more satisfied and empowered as the policy outcomes will be partially dependent on them (Diamond, 1999; Szawiel, 2009; UNDP, 2016).

Nevertheless, one of the issues is that the public council members are not paid for their activities on the council, thus, there is a lack of incentives. Another issue is that two years, as term of office, is a short time to develop robust channels of communication with citizens. Regarding these issues, Gadirov (2017) recommends that membership in a public council should be based on the self-nomination principle to ensure that the candidates are willing to serve on the councils voluntarily and without any payment. If it is not possible to instil the self-nomination principle, then compensation or some reward should be provided to the persons serving in this position. Moreover, the term of office should longer than two years for the establishment and development of proper and effective relationships to be established with citizens.

In sum, as public councils are established legally based on the law on public participation and thus politically acceptable and administratively feasible, they should be supported by ministries and local authorities, and the only remaining issue will be the endorsement by civil society and government authorities.

Collaborative tools

Collaborative technology platforms accelerate civil participation because...

Technology-based collaborative platforms are one of modern participatory mechanisms that enable citizens to get information about governmental activities and express their views and suggestions conveniently. Greitens and Joaqui (2012:4) claim that a manifestation of democracy is citizens' involvement in policy deliberation and advancement of their involvement depends on information technologies because the trust and the convenience with the government, which are the generators of accountability and participation, get facilitated by such kind of technologies. Through the use of electronic collaborative platforms, citizens can engage actively in the policy-making process from any distance, without physical interaction needed with public officials. Such platforms enable crowdsourcing, arrangements for formal e-petitions, engagement in urban planning, and examination of established budgeting programmes (e-Governance Academy, 2018).

In Azerbaijan, e-government is a technological tool that works effectively and efficiently by delivering public services electronically. In the e-Governance Conference (Tallinn, 2018), the Azerbaijani e-government model based on the Estonian experience has been suggested to the countries to modernise the delivery of their public services. However, e-government substantially builds a channel from the government to the public. Thus, there is a need for another technological platform that would create a channel "from the public to the government". Successful implementation of e-government is proof that the country has the

potential and the capacity to create other electronic tools that can utilise the collective wisdom for better policy outcomes.

Social media may also be used as a tool for the establishment of electronic communication between the government and the citizens. In this case, citizens who do not possess the knowledge using formal procedures to reach the governmental bodies, can use these informal ways of communication. Mack (2016) endorses social media integration for government-citizen communication: "Citizen engagement generally requires going where the people are rather than asking them to come to you". For instance, the communication can be sustained via the Facebook pages of a governmental organisation, the users can present their ideas and recommendations regarding public policies, and surveys can be conducted with a wide audience while policy making is in the process, as Facebook is the most widely used (36.36%) social media among Azerbaijani citizens (Statcounter, 2019).

Such collaborative tools based on modern technologies are legal because there is already an e-government system established in Azerbaijan, sections for presenting citizens' complaints and suggestions already exist in websites of governmental organisations. The existence of e-government systems in this country, also indicate that the creation of online platforms are administratively feasible. Despite the fact that the establishment of such platforms to enhance civic engagement, transparency, accountability, and thus, democracy may conflict with some special political interests, acquiring citizens' views in the policy making process and making decisions based on their preferences, and satisfying them may also be valuable politically. Hence, the establishment of technology-based participatory mechanisms may also be politically acceptable.

Role of public awareness

Role of public awareness in civic engagement is undeniable because...

The crucial part in the potential implementation of both alternatives, in order to increase civil participation in the policy making decision process is to make the citizens aware of their rights and the conditions where they can practice those rights. Therefore, campaigns to increase public awareness are crucial. Posters, brochures, workshops, and TV and radio programmes can be utilised to educate the public with respect to their rights and the existence of participatory mechanisms. Thus, when there is a vacancy on a public council or a meeting is with the public, the least that could be done is to be announced frequently through widely used communication channels, such as TV or social media. For instance, if I was aware of the existence of the public councils, I would consider them as an opportunity to engage in policy-making and participate in their meetings to deliver my opinions. Henceforth, increasing public awareness is a subcomponent of almost all public policy alternatives, as successful implementation of any public policy highly depends on the awareness of the public where the policy is implemented and who gets affected.

Conclusion

It is a conclusion because...

You have reached the end of the paper, thus...

To conclude, the recent events in Azerbaijan have proved that the Government values its citizens' opinions in the decision making process. However, there are potentially other tools to achieve citizen involvement in the policy making process rather than just protests. In this context, proper operation of public councils is one of the tools to enhance and strengthen the government-citizen relationship. Another tool is collaborative mechanisms based on modern

technologies such as e-governance, and social media. Introduction of both such alternatives would lead to more active citizens participating in the process, as well as to more transparency and accountability of the government, effectively consolidating democracy. Notwithstanding the introduction of such tools, public awareness campaigns informing citizens of their rights and the conditions through which they may practice those rights, these tools are meaningless. Therefore, public campaigns should take place while implementing any of these alternatives.

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