



International Association
for Public Participation

Painting the Landscape

**A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Public-Government
Decision-Making**

Preliminary Findings Report

August 2009





The **International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)** is a membership association founded in the USA in 1990 and now attracting membership and networks on all continents. A total of 27 countries have been represented in the membership which in total in this period has attracted around 10,000 individual, group and corporate members and allies. In 1999 it developed an international certificate in public participation that has had over 6000 participants in the public, private and community sectors.

This preliminary findings report results from a research collaboration with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. The **Kettering Foundation** is an operating foundation rooted in the tradition of cooperative research. Kettering’s primary research question is “what does it take to make democracy work as it should?” Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others.

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Introduction

This is a report of the findings laying the foundation to stimulate discussion and reflection amongst government decision-makers, public participation (p2) practitioners, professional associations and civil society leaders. It presents a selection of surprising and practically relevant findings from interviews in 12 countries, which have implications for the future of the practice within countries and internationally. The final report will provide further elaboration and confirmation based on the empirical data collected in this study. Future research will also be required to investigate some of the research questions further.

In 2005 the **International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)** and **The Charles F. Kettering Foundation** began work on a joint research project exploring public-government decision-making in seven country/regions of the world: Africa, Asia, Australasia, Canada, Latin America, UK/Western Europe and the United States.

This research reflects the larger strategic missions of both IAP2 and the Kettering Foundation. For IAP2, it lays a foundation for future research initiatives on behalf of the organization's 1,400 members and networks worldwide. This project also supports the Kettering Foundation's research with professional administrators and public

officials who see that using key democratic practices to bridge the gap between the public and the formal institutions of government is essential to their work.

This project presented an opportunity for both organizations to gain a broader understanding of how the public is engaged in decision-making and deliberative practices through processes led by government in countries around the world. Moreover, IAP2 and the foundation sought through this study to provide a baseline for mapping how cultural context potentially impacts such processes. Such a comprehensive view of the data is generally absent from the scholarly and practitioner-oriented literature, except in anecdotal fashion.

Our data reflects a total of 66 interviewees across all 12 countries. Interviews were conducted in English, Portuguese, Spanish, Mandarin and French. We interviewed people within government with responsibility for participatory processes at the local, state/provincial or regional and federal/national levels who were administrators, elected or appointed officials. We also interviewed public participation practitioners and leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that were involved in public participation activities and civic engagement.

Research Questions

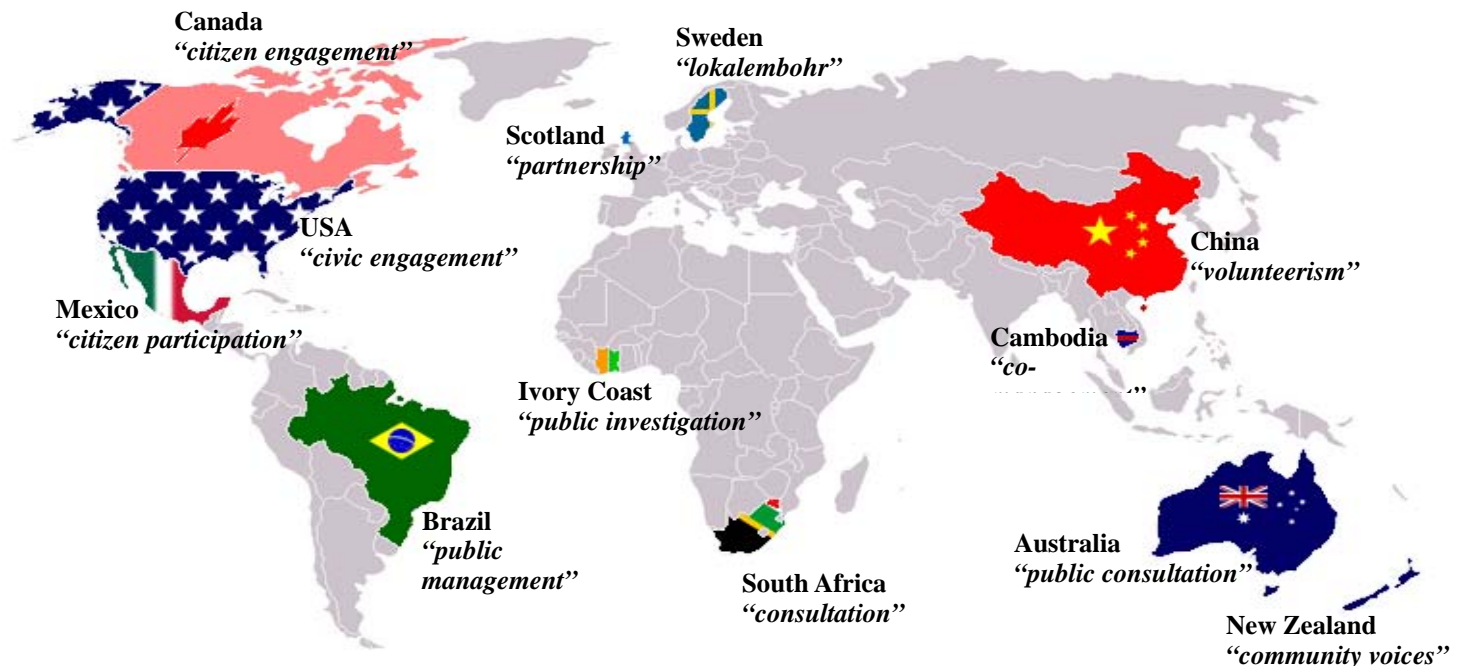


Figure 1 Reported countries and typical engagement terminology

Three key questions were used to guide the research:

Research Question 1:

What does public participation/deliberation in government decision-making processes mean in different contexts?

Perspectives vary across the variety of cultural contexts we studied. Interviewees discussed how they conceptualize participation or deliberation and their expectations for it, how their institutions organize it and what values, history and traditions influence how they define and carry it out.

Our study confirmed variance in how our interviewees understand the purpose, structure and implementation of public participation or deliberation and the role of stakeholders in such processes.

Research Question 2:

How do different cultures provide space for public participation/deliberation in government decision-making processes?

This project identifies and categorizes specifically how public participation or deliberation is practiced in 12 countries and it offers several reasons why those practices are particularly valuable to those who implement them or those who participate in them.

Although there are some similarities, a range of terminology for participation or deliberation was used across all 12 countries.

The study identifies who is involved, how and where people come together; the technology or tools involved; and the impact these interactions might have on government decision-making. Interviewees also discussed if the effects of participation or deliberation led to supplemental benefits such as increased trust in government, better accountability or other kinds of democratic outcomes.

Research Question 3:

What positive and negative outcomes occur as a result of public participation/deliberation in government decision-making processes?

The data gathered emphasizes the significant personal and professional commitment by officials, practitioners and NGO representatives to core democratic principles. Each interviewee struggled with fulfilling the often momentous expectations that are associated with these duties and sometimes with reconciling them to their own personal and professional ethics. Moreover, institutional constraints, barriers and even the goals of those same institutions can serve as obstacles to positive outcomes for stakeholders, despite good intentions.

Relevance and Applicability to Practitioners and Governments

While culture is an important differentiating factor between countries, other factors also affect the practice of public participation, such as each country's political system and history, and in particular the government's attitude towards public participation. Moreover, cultural influences on public participation are not static, and cultures change and intermingle as a result of many processes, including public participation itself. There is a complex interplay between cultural forces and political structures. Nevertheless, practitioners should carefully distinguish between the effects of culture and the effects of contemporary political structures. We should not be too quick to assume that all the differences in public participation across countries are due to cultural differences alone.

This study has broad relevance to democracies as a whole, as well as specifically to public participation practitioners and government decision-makers – across all boundaries, regardless of geography. Other implications are primarily relevant to specific countries or regions.

This report demonstrates to public participation practitioners, government decision-makers, NGOs and others who care deeply about engagement that engaging different cultural communities is both feasible and valuable. It provides useful insights to make such engagement easier and more effective, drawing from





experiences around the world.



Preliminary Findings


The following sections describe the preliminary findings of this study.

Each country uses p2 terminology differently and a wide range of activities are included under the banner of p2.

There is no single definition or conception of public participation that can be generalized across all cultures, places or political systems. This has important implications for practitioners operating and communicating across different local contexts. The same term can have different meanings in different countries.






 According to a US federal administrator who speaks multiple languages, the terms “community”, “public” and “stakeholder” are sometimes difficult to translate into other languages, and therefore s/he finds the phrase “civil society engagement” is useful when working internationally. In Mexico the term “public participation”  was rarely used, with most interviewees preferring “citizen participation.”


In several countries, interviewees said the term *consultation* has acquired negative connotations as a  limited and superficial process. For example, a Scottish federal elected official said that all the language in a recent bill was changed from consultation to  participation. A New Zealand p2 practitioner prefers to use the terms *community input* or *community voices*.



The term *co-management* was frequently used in  Cambodia to describe public participation and deliberation processes, although people tend to prefer the terms public participation or participatory management because they are less obviously about power. The term *co-management* was also mentioned in Brazil and Canada. A Canadian p2 practitioner pointed out that the government thinks of it “primarily an advisory process”, while other stakeholders “think of it as more of a delegation or a partnership.”

The use of terms often diverged from the meaning





ascribed in the IAP2 Spectrum. For example, to a South African federal administrator, *consultation* encompasses more participatory functions such as inviting people to be part of a decision. In South Africa and Brazil the term *empower* was generally used to describe building capacity, understanding or education, rather than placing final decision-making power in the hands of the public.

Interestingly, there are countries where the term *deliberation* was not used by interviewees – China, Cambodia, Scotland and Sweden – as compared to countries where it was used a great deal, such as the United States (68 mentions). However, this does not mean that p2 processes are necessarily more deliberative in the US than in any of these countries. 






In South Africa, the term *buy-in* was repeatedly used to refer to transparency by the government and participation by the community in government programs. This differs from the standard meaning of *buy-in*, that is “commitment to achieving a shared goal.” 


Clearly there is a great variety of meanings attached to terminology in each country and culture. Therefore to facilitate cross-cultural communication it may be useful to provide functional descriptions of a process rather than assuming a shared understanding of terminology. The IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation serves this purpose (see www.iap2.org), but it was only mentioned by interviewees in two countries: the US  and South Africa. 


Indeed, interviewees mentioned several activities as examples of public participation that fall outside the range of the IAP2 Spectrum:


-  Reporting damaged infrastructure to the government (e.g. leaking water pipe), even when the damage does not personally affect you (South Africa).
-  Accessing government institutions and benefiting from government services and programs (Mexico, South Africa).
-  “People filing requests for services or for financial support” (Mexico)
-  Participating in agricultural production activities (Mexico).





 Allowing people to volunteer in government run initiatives such as the Olympics (China).

 Seeking compensation in court if “the polluting companies or the government... [don’t] apply the law strictly” (China).


 Taking part in practical actions to protect the environment (China).


 A community festival in which diverse ethnic and social groups “participated” (Ivory Coast).


 People taking care of their dog, taking their child to school, and participating in the general upkeep of their community (Ivory Coast).

 Paying taxes (Ivory Coast).

There were also different views expressed about what activities by the public did *not* qualify as valid forms of p2, such as the expression of openly hostile opinions. A

 Canadian federal administrator attempts to structure p2 programs so that they minimize the number of participants who “have very little of substance to offer... [and] may just be, you know, contrary and hostile or have a bone to pick.” Similarly, “critiquing” governmental processes was not seen as valuable by an NGO leader and a locally elected official in the Ivory Coast. On the other

 hand, an Ivorian state administrator believes the population is in a good position to “critique the mayor.” According to an NGO leader in South Africa, public participation should not be a “grievance session” but a “two-way street.” However, a South African p2

 practitioner believes it is “unethical and stupid” to exclude people who “would be opposed to the project or vociferous or emotional” because “if you leave people out they find their own way to get into the process.”


Changing perceptions of p2 in China


Today public participation as volunteerism is generally the expectation among the Chinese people, one NGO leader reported. There does appear to be some movement, or interest in some movement, towards a more organized structure in support of public participation and deliberation that achieves political or administrative outcomes as well as those traditionally accomplished through voluntarism. Likewise, there is a shift underway towards individual action. “Because in China, people always think this kind of participation should be carried out under the leadership of the government or the party” said an NGO leader. “it’s not common for individual to take part in on his own initiative. Now the new wave of the public participation means that the public participates voluntarily.” However, it is incremental. “In China the wheel of the change is moving relatively slow. You cannot expect a perfect public participation in a very short time frame.” Ultimately, “the real establishment of the public participation needs a political system reform in order to thoroughly implement it” said one NGO leader.

Evidence of improved outcomes as a result of p2, but better evaluation mechanisms needed

There were many anecdotal examples of improved outcomes as a result of p2 in most countries. Interviewees spoke about the impact of p2 on government decision-making, as well as supplemental benefits such as increased trust in government, better accountability, increased open-mindedness to other points of view, or other kinds of democratic outcomes.

The following are some examples:


Building a culture of tolerance in Brazil: A p2  practitioner said “this agenda of actions and activities, it starts to generate a kind of culture of tolerance.” This is especially important in a country like Brazil, where there is little trust between the public and private sectors and civil society “for historical and cultural reasons.”


 **Exploring common values in the United States:** A public participation practitioner said, “I have seen this over and over, where I can see something where you have two polarized groups or starting to head in that direction. And just that simple thing of getting everybody





together—forget the positions, but let’s talk about your deeper interest. What are your interests here? What are the values that you care about? And that is the one thing that anybody in the public can talk about.”


Forging partnerships in Scotland: An NGO leader described how multiple formal and informal partnerships have been developed amongst local government units, service providers, community organizations and the general public. They “are around learning in its broadest sense, so that is formal learning, both from schools, colleges, and universities, but also informal learning, adult learning, community development, and youth work—young people getting with the partnership.” In some communities the culture of partnerships is ingrained, so that they become an automatic part of people’s work. “Officers within the local authority will almost as a matter of course in the day-to-day working environment have to talk to my colleague in health... that’s how we deliver the best quality of services.... That’s when community planning becomes mainstream.” Each formal partnership is funded by the Scottish Government and has an allocated administrative support officer and a lead officer.

 **Creating connections between people and ministries or government in Canada:** “You know, from my own personal experience, working inside a community, I think that members’ offices, I’m also in a particularly fortunate situation here. It’s fairly easy for me to connect people up with ministries” said a provincial administrator. This person also said, “Our situation is kind of a special situation in some ways. But on an individual basis, when things work right, members, politicians’ staff can connect individuals to government, people who make decisions, people who are looking at certain problems. I think that a lot of the initiative, obviously, is on the individual.”

Effecting the capacity for, or likelihood of, public participation/deliberation in China: For many  Chinese, the existence of such processes has created a focus on compensation. As a federal administrator said, “For the construction projects, the information disclosure for the public just means that there is a project and they know to be built. For the people who maybe are affected they want to know whether they can get any compensation for being affected by that project.

Especially for some poor people, they don’t really concern about if there is any significant environment impact, they concern more about how much compensation they can get.”

However, little concrete evidence was provided across project interviews to substantiate the outcomes of p2 processes. Surprisingly, most governments do not appear to have undertaken cost/benefit analyses of the various forms of public participation, to evaluate their financial benefits relative to each other or relative to not involving the public at all. Some interviewees pointed to the need for improved quantitative and especially qualitative tools to evaluate public participation processes and their impact. A Brazilian federal administrator was critical  of the ingrained culture of “eventology”, that is measuring the extent of p2 by the number of events and participants. By contrast, a US local administrator nominated these kinds of quantitative measures, as well as qualitative  feedback forms, but said that this is “something that often just totally falls by the wayside in terms of measuring the effectiveness.... It is something that often gets overlooked for a couple of reasons.”


One example of a detailed process and impact  evaluation was cited by a Brazilian p2 practitioner. S/he was contracted by the local government to evaluate the Participative Budget process in a particular city. The evaluation assessed “the methodology of the activities” that had been implemented since the new administration was elected, in order to improve the process. The evaluation required a review of all documentation produced by the process and interviews with all the actors that “participated directly or indirectly in the budget” including managers, project workers, government officials from other agencies, several “sub-mayors” and of course the delegates elected at Participative Budget Meetings. Some of the findings from the evaluation are described in the **Effective Practices** section below.





P2 prevents fraud in the Ivory Coast

Public participation is used to prevent fraud in land transactions. Before the government can issue a “granting letter” for a piece of land, it must first carry out a public investigation in the local neighborhood to make sure that nobody else had a claim to that land. In particular, the traditional ruler of that area is consulted, as well as adjacent landowners and the relevant government departments.


practitioner explained that people feel like the municipal government is a part of them, rather than feeling like the government is higher and separate to them. “We’re working from all different villages... working together to have a good relationship with the municipality... And the municipality is all of us. It’s not we are down here and they are up there.”




There is often a divergence between the views of government officials and the general public on what constitutes p2. Many US legislators believe that  public deliberation occurs exclusively in the halls of government, according to a US state elected official: “My perception as a legislator is that other legislators do not believe that public testimony and involvement, that that is part of the deliberative process.... The public gives us their opinions but the legislators deliberate among themselves.” Most members of the public accept this line of thinking, but others cherish “the hope that the legislators would deliberate with them... and include them in the deliberation, and they are almost always disappointed.”


According to a US NGO leader, genuine public  participation requires partnership between civil society and government. “Public participation is not simply I had a voice and I told you what to do to fix the problem and went away. It is far more collaborative and inclusive and we all have some kind of a role or responsibility in implementing those solutions.” This requires considerable courage on the part of public officials, according to a US p2 practitioner: “It is a big challenge for getting public agencies to sit down at a table as just another player because it is the community’s game and they are just part of the community’s game. Many of them see it the other way. So that’s another big obstacle, is getting people who have the power to make or break the agreement to actually sit down and participate in the process.”

 A Swedish NGO leader stated that when the community is “not satisfied with what the government has done, we also ask [government officials] out and have a meeting on-site.” A state administrator explained that government officials and politicians are willing to attend meetings organized by local community organizations. They take people’s concerns and ideas, and then “come back with an answer” later. A local elected official


In different countries, governments play different roles in instigating, facilitating and supporting public participation.


Views about what constitutes public participation are intimately connected with views of the relationship  between the government and its people. For example, a US state administrator saw the electoral process and representative government as a clear manifestation of p2, based on historical precedents: “We are a country that fought a revolution to be self-governed and to have deliberative bodies that we would elect that are representing our views.”

When government officials see little distinction between the will of the government and the will of the people, there is a risk that implementing specific p2 processes  may be seen as superfluous. In the Ivory Coast a local elected official said that due to the high degree of “symbiosis” in their city, “we think that, what we want is  what our voters want.” In South Africa, a local administrator stated “communities are part of government. These are not two separate things. For us, it is like one institution and so we are one.” In China, an NGO leader  noted the official mantra that “The communist party’s stand is to represent the widest range of the working people. So its suggestion or view should be supported by the public.” Yet the NGO leader believes some government projects are designed just to make leaders look impressive, and would be immediately opposed by the public, if they were asked.

By contrast, when the general public sees little distinction between themselves and their government, it may be a sign of healthy democratic mechanisms. A Swedish p2 

expressed a high degree of humility about government's role in leading social change: "The local political or people like me working for the government, we do not know anything. We do not know the needs and what people need."

The general public's views about the ultimate authority in the country have a significant impact on their desire to  participate. In the US, interviewees expressed an implicit understanding that the ultimate authority in the country lies with the US people themselves. For example, a public participation practitioner noted that government attempts to sell public lands were often met with indignation from the public, because "you as the School District do not have the ultimate—technically you have the authority—but not the ultimate authority to make these decisions because this is community property." Similarly, there was public outrage when a school board decided to appoint a new member without holding interviews for the position.

By contrast, in China an NGO leader complained about  "people's mentality.... They should realize that they are the owner of this land, the owner of this country. If they have the sense of ownership, they would not just passively obey whether comes out.... That will really help promote the public participation." Therefore the NGO leader is seeking to educate people and raise awareness so "they know that they are supporting the government [as tax payers]" and therefore they are entitled to support from the government.





Government's needs vs. people's needs in South Africa


A local administrator stated s/he expects community members to "advise us based on our policies so that things that they raised are in line with the policies of government and the institution itself." People's immediate need to obtain basic material resources such as "water to wash, to drink" means they only want to talk about certain issues. A state administrator said this causes them to misconceive "the purpose of the meeting to which we are inviting them for, and also to fail to understand the difference between the municipality and ourselves." However, perhaps this says something about the government's failure to provide forums where people can have their real concerns heard by officials that represent the whole of government. Ironically the same person also articulated a more holistic approach, perhaps as an ideal: "if things that you cannot deliver or have no answer, you call the relevant department or section of a particular municipality or department to come and talk to them about."


A local administrator stated unabashedly that the political priorities of the government override the preferences of local communities. For example, "ordinary people" need to be informed "so they know that that as much as you want community centers, our priority as government is to make sure that each and every area has a road." Yet the same person also stated that "we need to do this public participation... so that we do not provide something that communities do not want, but we provide something that they need."

The role of the government in initiating and facilitating p2

A US p2 practitioner said there is a tension between whether "public participation [is] there to serve the  needs of government where government goes out and gets what it needs to do its work from the public, or is it really community-based where the community has the capacity to get people in the community talking to each other, identifying their needs and then working with government in a partnership?" Government initiated p2 tends to focus on getting individual participants and assessing their views, and therefore does not require any community building. A US p2 practitioner stated, "Usually government processes want you—you come to me and you tell me what you think and then I will assimilate that."

 In Brazil, an NGO leader explained that “there was no civil society, in the true sense of the term, when the State was constituted here... and so we never got to say, as a society, what kind of State we wanted.” Therefore a formal, vertical, paternalistic relationship was established “between the State and society, and this meant that the society started to wait for the State to take action, not making any moves themselves.” Complementing this view, a local administrator stated that the government’s role is to “seduce” citizens into participating, “so that they achieve social control.”


 A Brazilian local administrator articulated the rhetoric of civil society independence yet in the same breath emphasized government’s role in facilitating this: “civil society, right, it needs to have autonomy, must walk on its own legs, we have to provide all the training, all the information.”

The government is not a monolithic entity, although it may seem to be from some perspectives. Some structures or even individuals within the government can play specific roles facilitating and implementing p2 processes that impact on various decision-making functions within the government. For example, a New Zealand government  administrator spoke about advocating for the interests of indigenous and marginalized populations, ensuring that their views would be accurately represented and considered in government decision-making.


Local government mediation in Scotland


In Scottish community planning forums, the local government is a mediator, a go-between facilitating communication and negotiation between the community members and the other government agencies. The community planning forums enable people to not only express their concerns and aspirations, but also negotiate with service providers and agencies to develop viable plans in response. The local government also provides community members with skills, support and expertise to negotiate effectively and influence service providers. There is also a network of several community planning forums that coordinate together on issues at a larger scale.

Funding p2 processes

The study revealed how government organizations support public participation and deliberation in different countries, and suggests ways of improving this support. When governments put resources into developing the capacity of communities and NGOs to engage effectively in democratic structures, the results are often encouraging. A Scottish p2 practitioner described how public  participation structures can continue to function even after funding runs out, because they hold considerable benefits for participants. In this case, it was a civil society network that yielded considerable benefits for its members through “a process of continuous improvement” and therefore was able to continue without external funding.

However, the p2 practitioner argued most community organizations need some funding to continue—or at least a venue where they can meet for free. “You would be surprised at the number of community organizations in Scotland that cannot find anywhere to meet for free and they have no money to pay rent, have no money to pay heating bills, et cetera, et cetera.” S/he argued there needs to be a system for allocating small amounts of funding to all community organizations, retaining accountability without requiring new funding applications every year, which drains time and resources.


A US federal administrator noted that private  philanthropy is becoming an important additional source of funding for their projects, to enable complete implementation of their “vision.” S/he pointed out that attracting philanthropic funds is easier if you can demonstrate that you are engaging people at the most basic community level, effectively eliciting diverse points of view, and building a strong sense of common ownership for the project.


A Swedish local administrator observed that the  government traditionally funded community organizations with the presumption that “the receiver should be grateful and shut up and do whatever it is they got the money for.” This kind of mentality still exists both in government bodies and in the community, which is a “hindrance.” However the government has less money to give out, so “now we are leaving time when we were given money in order to be happy and to exist.” Now community

organizations will be expected to deliver products and services, and the relationship with the government will be a “client-provider situation.”


Legislated p2 enables greater access but may reduce quality of processes.


As discussed above, well-functioning representative democracies automatically provide a measure of public participation by making elected officials directly accountable to their constituents. If they make decisions that fail to consider their constituents’ wishes, they risk being voted out. However, minority groups have little voting power, and decisions may also affect other people outside the constituency. More importantly, public servants are only indirectly accountable to the general public, and often lack strong incentives to consider the public’s views in decision-making. Therefore public participation legislation seeks to ensure that decision-making will consider the views of people affected by a decision, regardless of their ability to leverage political influence.

Having a legislative requirement for p2 enables smaller groups to be involved that otherwise may not know about the opportunity for p2 or lack the necessary resources. A  Canadian federal administrator described how small local aboriginal and environmental organizations “are both far less adept at getting their voices heard on a daily basis and they tend to be far more passionate about the specifics of the project.” They are much more likely to become involved in p2 when there are formal statutory provisions with an attached funding program to facilitate participation.

However, p2 processes that are conducted simply to comply with statutory requirements are sometimes lower quality, according to a Canadian local elected official.  “The public participation was minimized or the potential effect of the public participation was carefully crafted to be eliminated essentially. And sort of there is a sense of people were being co-opted into attending an event or a process that really did not have any kind of intention of having an outcome that would reflect that public participation. It was just more of going through the

motion.” In addition, some legislation specifies that only comments directly related to a specific aspect of the subject at hand will be considered. Participants are free to comment on other aspects, but “the law doesn’t allow us to look at that”, explained a Canadian federal administrator.

The statutory basis of some p2 processes affects how they are structured and the associated terminology that’s used for them. For example, Canada has a significant population of native or aboriginal Canadians, who  belong to tribes known as First Nations. A local elected official described how the process of decision-making varies for First Nations as compared to others that are commonly used in Canada. “We have secret ballots on major initiatives, like, land code, the treaty agreement in principle, land code is through First Nation’s land management act, a federal initiative to devolve land management from the Department of Indian Affairs.” A federal elected official said that legislated p2 processes with aboriginal communities are referred to as *aboriginal consultation*. “The aboriginal people, in fact, would be the first to say their engagement, their involvement, is not public participation like anybody else’s, that it’s special therefore, you know, somehow qualitatively different to determine and deserving a different terminology.”

In China, there is now legislation that requires  developers to conduct environmental impact assessments for major projects, including a public participation component. However, the law is not well enforced, according to an NGO leader. “Even [though] the law is passed, there are still not so many cases for this environment impact assessment with the public.”



Pressures on the government in Cambodia

An NGO leader, “one of the main partners” with the government, was openly critical of government processes. There is “very limited public involvement in developing legislation.


Much of the rhetoric about public participation in the country is driven by pressure from international donors, but there is a “big gap” between the theory and the practice. Most programs are “set up by the experts” while the stakeholders simply focus on implementing their allocated components, often learning as they go. “The government is very careful about what they are going to discuss” said the NGO leader. The public participation that does exist is limited to the natural resources sector. However, the government is strongly biased towards seeking short-term economic development goals rather than long-term conservation and protection of natural resources, according to the NGO leader.


At the local level, there is more evidence of p2. Each commune is required by law to formulate a development plan. A commune official gives a presentation about issues and problems that have been identified in that village, then participants give feedback on the relative priority of each issue as well as any other issues they want to raise.


damage the functioning of democracy by depleting trust. A Scottish p2 practitioner said “trust is built when people see that it is worthwhile to participate.” By contrast, a p2 practitioner in South Africa argued that trust between stakeholders and the government can increase simply “by putting people together and helping them to talk to each other and to understand each other.”


Decentralizing power and reforming government organizational culture

There are tensions between different levels of government in many countries, which affects public participation processes.



In Britain, including Scotland, there is a high degree of centralization, with the central government controlling as much as 70% of local authorities’ finances. Local governments hoard what little power they’re allocated by the highly centralized national government. 

An Australian local elected official noted that the power of local governments is limited, because “local government is not recognized in the Australian constitution, so it does not have any law-making powers of its own.” 

In Brazil, a local administrator noted that local government decisions are often constrained by the state government, especially around environmental issues. This means that people can become disappointed in the local government, when it approves a project and later is forced to cancel it. 

In many countries, such as the US, Australia and Cambodia, local authorities are using p2 more frequently than national governments. A prominent exception is China, where the central government tends to regard public participation more favorably than do the local authorities. Local governments are “very concerned these NGOs can constitute a threat to their wrong doings” because “can reach Beijing to higher official, they can also reach to international community.” The central government often uses public participation by NGOs to monitor local authorities and keep them in check, according to an NGO leader. However, the Chinese 



Public perceptions of impact on government decision-making affects trust and democracy more broadly.



The credibility of public participation, and the general public’s willingness to invest their time and energy in these processes, is heavily affected by perceptions of their impact on government decision-making. Governments risk losing the general public’s interest in participating if they repeatedly fail to show how their decision-making processes have been influenced by public participation. Consultation fatigue was mentioned by interviewees in most countries. Governments should give feedback on what they’ve done in response to input from p2. “Even if they’ve done nothing, they should explain why and apologize” according to a Scottish local administrator.  According to a US local administrator, the failure to give  feedback is simply due to lack of resources. “It is not a malicious thing...it is a time and energy thing.”

Failure to give feedback after a p2 process may actually




federal agency responsible for EIA regulations (SEPA) “is the least powerful agency in the government. That’s why it needs the public support to enhance its power” according to an NGO leader.

 Changing the organizational culture of government agencies is essential. “The real challenge is the organizational culture of bureaucracies to make them responsive to citizen participation”, according to a Scottish p2 practitioner. A Brazilian local administrator  observed that technocrats often lack experience dealing with the general public, and they need to be sensitized because “they think that what they know is important. They do not take the population’s knowledge into account.” A Brazilian federal administrator noted that the number of technocrats grew during the decades of military dictatorship.

 A South African state administrator observed how useful it is for public officials to have a personal connection to the region they are serving. “[We] identify ourselves with them because we were born and raised there.... We know their needs and we know their frustrations... until you speak the people’s language, understand exactly things from their own perspective, not from your own comfortable side of the situation, it is then that you would have a true perspective of what they want and what you should be doing.” Such a perspective can be developed when government officials engage with communities through p2 processes, changing “the way in  which decision-makers view their communities” according to a Scottish local administrator.

There is a need to “change what you might call the hearts and minds of government officers and elected members to encourage them to be more receptive to community participation” according to a Scottish p2 practitioner. The


 organizational culture needs to value what citizens are saying, and integrate that with what professionals and elected politicians are saying, in a systematic decision-making process.




Highly formalized p2 in Mexico


Government initiated p2 processes are often highly structured, formal and only open to individuals selected by the government, such as academics and civil society leaders. For example, the advisory council associated with a federal agency “represents a carefully planned sample of civil society.... Once council members meet, they receive training on parliamentary procedures. At meetings, each member has a sign bearing their name that they raise when they wish to speak. Each member is allowed to speak for a maximum of three minutes. The rules facilitate the participation and input of all participants.” Such a regimented process is understandable given the unwieldy size of the council, with approximately 450 members. The selection process for this council is unclear, but a p2 practitioner who conducted a different p2 process for the government noted how “sometimes good or bad personal relationships influence government staff, and they include the people with whom they have good relationships and leave out those with whom relationships are conflictive”.


According to a Mexican p2 practitioner, “there is no culture of public participation in Mexico, or in any branch of the Mexican government, or in political parties.... There is a lack of education on how to conduct the kind of work required for public participation activities.” An NGO leader complained that both government and non-government organizations in Mexico lack “institutional expectations for public participation.”

For government decision-makers there may be a conflict between loyalty to their colleagues, or being loyal to citizen groups. A US state elected official claimed  that due to his loyalty to citizen groups, “at first my colleagues were distrustful and there was a sense of disloyalty on my part, but I have been doing this long enough that my colleagues know that I’m not out to get them and that I’m not doing it for political ambition.”

A US p2 practitioner suggested providing incentives for public officials to take p2 seriously, such as  including p2 in their job description and reviewing their performance on this regularly.

Bias towards seeing p2 in terms of its impact on government decision-making:



Most interviewees tended to talk about public participation in relation to government decision-making, and rarely mentioned the capacity for civil society to make decisions and undertake autonomous action. The structure of the research project may have contributed to this bias, since all three research questions specifically mentioned government decision-making, and none of the  interviewees were members of the general public. A Brazilian NGO leader identified the government-centric focus of p2 discourse, arguing that “much of what we call social or public participation... is biased [towards] this idea that you will decide something for the public authorities to do. So there is no autonomy for [civil society] to transform itself into a public agent... and we end up having a private lobbying action on public spheres, rather than public action.”


Some NGO leaders talked about the use of participatory decision-making processes within their own organizations. This was particularly apparent in communities that felt an acute lack of representation of their interests within the government. For example, an  NGO leader in Mexico defined p2 as a set of processes whereby the indigenous community acquires ‘autonomy’, ‘liberty’, and ‘decision-making’ independently of the government. (This definition arose from their community’s experience “of being excluded from government decisions or being asked to participate in a ‘token’ manner in government meetings” according to the regional coordinator for the Mexican interviews). The NGO leader noted that indigenous peoples in Mexico “have always been outside the colonial governments... [which] have denied us participation within the community.” There is still discrimination today: “There is a belief that indigenous peoples have no capacity to think, or no right to decide.”

Therefore s/he argued, “We have to think about public participation as indigenous peoples, not only in connection with national states or in connection with governments.” As such p2 involves regenerating traditional community structures and the attendant “power of collective participation, the participation as a people

who have an ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity.”

At the same time, the NGO seeks to influence government decisions, for example by protesting for the release of leaders who were “unjustly imprisoned”, advocating for legislative reform, and participating in public surveys conducted during development projects. The NGO leader believes p2 is also important “to watch over government representatives at all levels, even international representatives.” This NGO also participates in international forums to influence “different international agreements and treaties.”

A small number of government officials demonstrated awareness that public participation includes community involvement to achieve social change independently of government. For example, a Scottish local administrator said that public participation can affect “the things  that people can achieve for themselves.” A local elected official in Mexico defined p2 to include processes independent of government, such as “groups, or  people, who get together to support each other in order to solve common problems for mutual benefit.”

A possible implication is for NGOs to focus more energy on facilitating such processes, and for governments to be willing to fund them, at least at the outset. An Australian local elected official was supportive, describing how  local governments support community members by “giving them reduced fees or access to information, or if they come along and say, ‘hey, we are trying to get this together, can you give us some help!’ Council gets the idea that they should be supporting this rather than thinking oh well, they’re doing that over there and it’s got nothing to do with us.”



Collaborative community action in Sweden

For several decades, the Swedish government has provided a traditionally high level of services to the population, but can no longer afford to do so, according to a state administrator. "People are so used to the state and government coming to solve it. That bad side of the Swedish model is that it partly ruined the peoples' capacity to deal with and solve things themselves." On the positive side, the government is being forced to try new strategies and observe approaches from other countries, according to a state administrator.

Communities can respond in two ways, according to a local administrator: "In one classic way, people just accuse the state of not doing what they should. Another is to actually try to produce that service yourself by making a deal with the authorities." He gave the example of a new organization that is facilitating villagers to "take part in the production of their own services, so they will be some sort of supplier to the municipality. The municipality buys their service and brings it back to the local population." However, there is still a long way to develop greater "awareness from the public bodies of the... potential of local communities becoming professional suppliers and performing services that are in demand from both the local community and from the public bodies."

An example of independent collaborative action by the community was given by a p2 practitioner. He said that when the government closed a local school, parents got together and established a free school, employing teachers themselves. "You can never give up. Even if sometimes you think there's no money, no one is listening to me or to us."

In small rural villages where there is traditionally a strong sense of social cohesion and community involvement. There are less government services so people need to meet and collaborate together to support each other. There are frequent informal meetings in many villages, mostly addressing local issues, which the local elected official generally attends and sometimes also the state administrator.

p2 practitioner argues "you need to have people in the community organized enough to be able to know what their interests and concerns are, to be able to talk to each other about that, and then to be able to engage with government from a position more of strength of knowing their interests and concerns." Similarly, a South African p2 practitioner noted that a large proportion of the population lacks the resources and knowledge to challenge government policies, and therefore s/he often helps them "to get organized." Facilitating this process is a fundamental form of capacity building.

The impetus towards public participation is a common characteristic of civil society organizations, as they seek to change the surrounding environment and influence other social and political elements. In turn p2 processes strengthen and revitalize civil society, especially when they are initiated by civil society or in partnership with governments. For example, a US NGO leader helps people engage in a dialogue around their highest priority issues, through small focus groups. This opens the possibility for more in-depth engagement initiatives.

A wide variety of different manifestations of civil society were observed in this project, from village committees undertaking local projects in Sweden to an NGO advocating for justice reform in the Ivory Coast. The project identified many roles that civil society plays in encouraging or facilitating public participation and deliberative practices.

The following are some surprising examples:


In China and Cambodia, civil society plays a central role in mediating between the government and citizenry to enable public participation. In Cambodia, public participation in government decision-making is almost exclusively carried out through NGOs or other organized groups, under the rubric of co-management, due to the very low level of human resources after the Khmer Rouge and 30 years of civil war. In China, an NGO leader said individuals can in theory participate in public hearings by themselves, but China does not have a strong tradition in providing public hearings. Therefore NGOs are a more effective avenue for the general public to "interact with the government."

However, Chinese NGO leaders showed signs of


Role of civil society in p2


Civil society generally refers to all non-profit, non-governmental organizations, networks and associations. These social structures enable people to participate, and they are also strengthened when people participate. A US


frustration with the difficulty of obtaining and keeping government registration to operate, especially if they express any anti-government sentiments. An NGO leader said “although in China there is constitutional right that people have freedom to associate... In practice it’s not free for people to associate... According to Chinese law, it’s illegal to organize any activities or organize a membership group if you’re not registered... It’s very difficult to register, because the government doesn’t want so many groups there.” Although “you can be recognized as a legal entity even without registration” the government can “use this as an excuse... to turn against” any organization that has more than 100 members and is not registered.


 In the Ivory Coast, NGOs and community leaders play a key role in public participation. Government officials often meet with the leader of a community before meeting with the wider community, and they admit that the leader’s decision on a matter will ultimately be the one that prevails. Therefore individuals who do not belong to an NGO or a community with organized leadership are often excluded from p2.


Interviewees in most countries recognized that many civil society organizations require substantial capacity building to engage effectively in p2. Several NGOs specialize in building the capacity of other NGOs to become more effective in p2. For example:


 A US NGO leader provides organizing training and moderator training to local community organizers, providing them “with a tested model that they could then use and learn about and get better at it and adapt to their own needs and purposes.” After that, they trained a large national NGO to carry out these training sessions in other communities. “We made ourselves sort of obsolete.”


 A US p2 practitioner provides a community asset-mapping service to help communities “look at who they are, what are the kind of organizations we have, what are the kind of people we have. And then you can develop a strategy of how do we engage all these groups. How do we link them together? We are sort of the host. We want to be the hostess of the party to identify people, bring them together into this party, and then get them to start to know each other and develop those relationships.”

A South African NGO leader said “we try to educate  the people to do public involvement efficiently and effectively from the community’s perspective. [We do] not have the capacity to get involved in all public involvement opportunities that there are, so we focused on the education part so that the community is empowered to do it themselves.”


Partnerships between different sectors of the community can be very helpful in achieving good local governance. However, partnerships may be difficult to establish when there are wide divisions between different sectors. For example, a US NGO leader attempted to establish  partnerships with other civil society organizations, but found that “all the sort of usual suspects in the community were not used to working with native people. And so there was a built-in sort of lack of information or lack of experience in working across difference.”


An NGO leader in Brazil convenes a civil society  network, and sees the value in establishing genuine partnerships with the government, because this means asserting a certain degree of autonomy and changing the traditional Brazilian “political logic that turns society into a kind of dominion of the State.” A partnership implies that the government cannot achieve everything by itself, and therefore civil society has an essential contribution to make in achieving social goals. “The idea is the following: the Government power is indeed necessary, essential and irreplaceable, but does not suffice, this is the central idea.”



Government officials can also be instrumental in building civil society capacity. A US state elected official  provides “consulting and educational and coaching services to citizen’s organizations... to brief them about how the [legislative] process works on paper and how it actually works in reality, the internal behind-closed-doors dynamics, and I support them in devising action plans, approaches, strategies for increasing their effectiveness at the legislature.”

However, government officials are often constrained by a lack of funding. A US federal administrator expressed a  desire to share their knowledge and methodological tools with civil society organizations, if only funding was available. S/he believes civil society organizations could

achieve a much greater impact if they adopted better methodologies, because their findings would be less vulnerable to criticism. A US state administrator agreed that many advocates for good causes do “a bad, bad job of marshalling the kind of persuasive information that is going to help change anybody’s mind.”


In countries where there is a history and culture of authoritarian government, the role of the government in training civil society is disputed. For example a  Brazilian p2 practitioner argued that government investment is needed to train NGOs that are active in bodies known as Councils, so they “stop being a joke.” The incompetence of civil society is due to the years of authoritarian rule, during which the government “disqualified, dismantled, disassociated” institutions that were critical in building civil society capacity. However, a Brazilian NGO leader disagreed, arguing that civil society has to build its own capacity without relying on the government, and if anything “society has the duty to educate the State in this regard, and not the opposite. The State must not educate society.”


 A Scottish p2 practitioner pointed out that effective p2 requires building the capacity not only of civil society to contribute ideas, but also of the government to receive them. “It is more important, actually, that you have capacity-building that involves all the members of the decision-making process, so capacity building that involves, for example, city officials and citizens together.”




 **Accessing people who do not belong to organized groups in Australasia and New Zealand**


Random selection of participants in citizens’ juries and community panels has been used in Australia and New Zealand, especially by local governments. This helps to increase access by people who don’t belong to any community stakeholder groups, according to an NZ p2 practitioner. An Australian state elected official elaborated, “I think increasingly local governments now, on planning questions, are better placed to randomly select people and to seek their advice on whether something is appropriate or inappropriate in terms of their local area. I think the inequality between those who seek to get involved and do become involved and those who, perhaps, have a more private existence needs to be better, that balance needs to be better reflected in the processes we’ve set up, and that can be done through a random selection.” When selecting participants randomly, it is all the more important to ensure they access high quality balanced information prior to making recommendations.


The importance of community-mindedness


Community-mindedness refers to the experience when you “sort of cut the rope and let you rise up in the air and then suddenly see yourself as a community”, rather than having an individualistic or tribal sense of “I must go out and get things to answer this or I must ward off attacks on it”, in the words of a US p2 practitioner. 


Across most of the countries, interviewees agreed that high quality p2 requires people to move beyond their individualist mindset and embrace a sense of community. For example, a Canadian locally elected official drew  out a natural tension between individual and collective interests. “And in this process where my interest versus your interest, which is what it always tend to boil down to—well, it does not always tend to but it always does—in this majority rule process, it is always going to be that approach that I have to convince the council to do this thing that I believe is in my interest and not do this other thing which will adversely affect my interest, but it may be in the interest of my neighbor,” said the interviewee. “So you are always put into this position of as having to stand up for yourself because no one else will, and that is really a shame. I think structurally that is a big problem.”



 A US p2 practitioner saw this more communal mindset as being related to Eastern spirituality. However, the data in this project suggests that people in every country have a tendency to pursue their self-interest ahead of seeking the wellbeing of the whole community. Individuals who engage most energetically and effectively in p2 are those who have overcome this tendency. A  Swedish state administrator called such people “fire souls... because they are burning for interest for the locals.”

 A Swedish NGO leader talked about the willingness of people to put a lot of hours into participating in committees that develop community projects, not for any personal gain but because “we just try to help by being there.” At the same time, “there are always people that—perhaps they feel that they... will [not] bring anything into the committees so they do not care.” A locally elected official said “we have people who do not care about the society or anything. But there are not so many, a few of them.” Also, a p2 practitioner stated that many people do not volunteer their time, because “they think they have too much with their own lives.”

Young people in Sweden seem less willing to participate  in p2 activities. A local elected official said “that I’m a little bit afraid of that is that nowadays young people they do not want to go together in those groups. Then it can be that young people’s wishes cannot be heard so much.” Young women are particularly disengaged, prompting a call for redoubled efforts. “I have no answer how to make it, but we must be more interested and we must listen even more to what do they want.”


 A Scottish federal elected official celebrates the contribution of volunteers by hosting an annual volunteer party during volunteer week, inviting two representatives from each organization in the constituency.


 A Brazilian p2 practitioner noted that involvement in p2 processes can actually increase people’s understanding of, and sympathy for, others’ needs. For example, they may come realize that “a pothole in [that area] is more important, at this particular moment, than a pothole in [this area]” An example of this was the process where Municipal Budget Committee representatives from each region have to travel to other regions and see the


conditions there, before they deliberate on recommendations for funding across the city. “So this also creates a relationship of solidarity between them, and solidarity includes practicality, so my region is difficult, but yours is worse. So, therefore, I also want your region to be okay.” A Canadian local elected official  commented at length on this Brazilian process and  complained that “our process is a long way from that because we are not encouraging that kind of compassionate conversation.”

Role of commercial interests in government decision-making

Some interviewees argued that commercial interests have a disproportionate influence on public decision-making:

A US state elected official  said “citizen groups’ views can be not necessarily disregarded, but not heeded as much as lobbyists’ views. And my opinion about that is the reason is there are... very little consequences because when it comes to election time, citizen groups do not hold their legislators accountable, whereas lobbyists and moneyed interest groups have the capacity, through funding, to hold legislators accountable for killing or supporting the bills that funded interests have.” Indeed, s/he argues there is a “symbiotic relationship” between lobbyists and government decision-makers. However, s/he also believes that legislators are more nervous about citizen issues, because citizen groups tend not to be willing to negotiate, unlike lobbyists.


Similarly, a Brazilian federal administrator  believes that commercial interests have an “excessive weight” on the policy agenda, since they are much less dispersed and have more “rallying power” than civil society.


A Canadian locally elected official  noted “a power imbalance” between different interests that seek to influence government decision-making. For example, “if they were looking at preserving a wetland where essentially nobody is going to make any money, and actually the [locals] may end up having to pay a bit of money to protect this wetland, versus a real estate developer who is going to make a pile of money, and people will get work, and people can buy their two


million dollar homes, and there are powerful interests therein that are backed by some wealth that can afford to either wait it out or bring in their hired guns to put forward reports to compete with your staff reports to convince neighborhoods that their opposition is unfounded. So there is—that power imbalance is not to be underestimated even on a very small community. And that is another central problem.”


Assumption that p2 is more closely aligned with Western culture


Some practitioners from non-Western countries appear to believe that public participation is most closely aligned with Western cultures. For example:

 A Chinese federal administrator said “I don’t think that there are lots of government officials have the opportunity to learn how the other governments in other countries to conduct the public participation.”

 A Chinese NGO leader described how an American taught NGO staff “about the public participation in his community.... In the US or overseas, there are much more community activities than here in China. The sense of community is very strong. But in China the sense of community is very weak.... So the public participation is much easier in overseas than it in China.... I think if China can promote the concept of community to a wider extent, then the public participation would become much easier.”

 Another Chinese NGO leader said “people in overseas have better capacity and background than the capacity and the cultural background in China. That is to say they know better than us.”


 An NGO leader in the Ivory Coast stated that public participation is well-known in “western culture”, whereas “in Africa, often times, the decisions are made without consulting the bottom.”

Similarly, an NGO leader in South Africa complained  that “people already have made decisions before they actually go do public involvement” and noted that the US and Europe have more experience with p2 and have “learned from the mistakes that have been made.”

Therefore s/he seeks to apply “Europe and US principles” while at the same time “adhere to South African conditions.”


Recognizing traditional p2 practices to improve engagement with different cultures


Many cultures call for leaders to recognize and act upon the expression of these feelings. Different cultures and religions have their own traditional practices for meeting and communicating together. For example:


A Mexican NGO leader described the deep cultural  roots of public participation processes in their indigenous communities:

“We indigenous peoples have our own traditional social organization, and therefore our own forms of decision-making and public participation; this is how we solve different problems within our communities.”


“Since ancient times, the... collective vision of communal participation in the indigenous world... entailed... exchange at forums, meetings, conferences and assemblies, where discussions were conducted about... how to ensure the survival not only of a community, but also of an entire people and all of its knowledge.”

Mexican indigenous conceptions of p2 seek to  “maintain harmony, ethnic and social cohesion, especially reaching consensus.” Decisions “are typically made by consensus” with the “wise men, elders, men and women... sit[ting] together in the form of a circle.”


Interestingly, a local elected official showed no  awareness of these traditions, claiming that Mexican culture encourages private endeavors that benefit one’s relatives, but not community activities that benefit a wider range of people. S/he said people do not tend to meet with others who are not their relatives, “and when they do, it is for private parties, but not to discuss common or important problems.”

 In the Ivory Coast, people generally feel “honored” when they are granted some power to influence decisions that affect them, although there is no legal requirement for in-depth p2. The cultural understanding of public participation is that issues will be discussed at length,



with the aim of reaching consensus, rather than making a decision based on voting. Meetings are held informally, often “because the population feels the need for it” rather than as part of an institutionalized process. In public discussions, women tend to initially remain silent, and the facilitator needs to encourage their participation. However, women are more frequently becoming community leaders. They have a central role in community life, and are the most keenly aware of impacts from government decisions. A federal administrator said that women “are the cornerstone, those who make everything, so, whenever there are impacts, they are the ones who are able to appreciate it.”

 In Cambodian village meetings when there is a need for discussion, people are divided into gendered groups to put forward their ideas. Afterwards they join back together to consolidate their ideas.

A p2 process that emulates cultural practices is more likely to be accessible for people who may have been less comfortable providing input to governmental agencies through more conventional methods. When implementing a p2 process targeting indigenous communities, a New Zealand p2 practitioner works in collaboration with indigenous organizations to make sure the process incorporates cultural practices and communication preferences. Partnering with local churches to implement p2 processes is also very useful with some minority communities. “Then they come to our meeting and it’s organized properly, you have a church minister there who blesses the meeting. Then you have a person who can explain things clearly. And you have a group of people that belongs to their own community. It’s good to see someone from your own community be part of running or facilitating it.” However, some Pacific Island and immigrant populations are not affiliated with a particular community group, such as a church, and therefore tend to be less represented in p2 processes. The New Zealand government addressed the lack of success in engaging specific cultural groups (in this case the Pacific Islander community) by employing an officer from that community to act in a liaison role.

Innovative use of communication technology can also improve the effectiveness of p2 processes with indigenous communities. An Australian state elected official 

encouraged feedback in a culturally appropriate and responsive manner by using “three-dimensional plots” to talk with Aboriginal groups “about the areas that they were interested in, and the feedback we got was overwhelmingly positive and they regarded that as being a very effective way of consulting with them because two-dimensional maps with dots and lines tend to be produced in western countries do not necessarily mean a lot to some indigenous people. So that particular technique is one example of developing appropriate techniques to deal with the right audience.”


The most important factor for successful engagement with indigenous communities is the level of genuine government commitment and mandate to actively protect native rights while ensuring true representation.  Flowing from this comes an emphasis on building  strong collaborative relationships and trust with indigenous communities. This was most apparent in the New Zealand and Canada interviews.




Common Pitfalls and Barriers

The project identified some serious pitfalls and barriers to public participation that occur in all countries. Some of these can be addressed by practitioners and IAP2, while others require changes in governmental, NGO and community practices and attitudes.


Lack of access and equal opportunity to participate

In all countries, certain groups generally tend to be excluded from p2 processes, such as caregivers, people with mental health problems or learning disabilities, indigenous communities, immigrant communities, people with low literacy, people who do not belong to an organized interest group, children and young people, rural  residents, and the elderly. A US NGO leader also expressed a strong sense of solidarity with “the animal nation who do not get heard nor considered in decision-making, and I mean that very deeply.”


Several approaches were suggested for making p2 processes more inclusive:


 A US NGO leader described a successful process to increase participation by adult literacy students who feel uncomfortable participating in public forums because they are scared of standing out. S/he organized a large number of activities for these participants, prior to the public forum, to help them learn about the issue with a tutor, conduct research at their own pace, identify difficult words and gain a certain level of comfort and confidence. S/he said “I think it is a matter of being creative and thinking about, ‘what do people need to get to the table?’”

The challenge of working with minority ethnic groups is to develop processes that will increase their feeling of being safe despite obviously standing out in a public

 setting. A US federal administrator noted that “certain ethnic communities... are uncomfortable speaking up at a microphone before a group of people where they feel there may be views that are different than theirs.” A US NGO leader noted that engaging ethnic communities is much easier if you form a partnership with an organization that is very close to the community. In addition, it is necessary to make a special effort to



encourage their participation. S/he gave the example of going out to the parking lot to welcome some ESL students to a public forum, because they were hesitant about attending.


Translating information and surveys into people’s native language is critical. A US state administrator  commented on the value of translating a public survey into Vietnamese in a particular community, in addition the usual Spanish translation. S/he was also surprised to discover that the largest language minority group in Los Angeles was Armenian.

There have been effective attempts to include children and young people in participation and decision-making. For example, a Scottish NGO involves children and  young people in the process of recruiting and selecting their staff, and has produced an information pack for other organizations that are interested in adopting this methodology. Projects like writing letters to council can also have developmental benefits for children and young people. A Scottish federal elected official described an innovative effort to enhance youth participation, called a big brother diary room. It worked well because “because those were things that they thought were fun, too, and there was no stigma attached to them speaking of the different things. They weren’t necessarily talking to old fogies. We had youth workers running it for us.”


Insufficient access to information


Having access to information is clearly a prerequisite for p2. Lack of high quality information is a barrier in most countries, but levels of access to information vary greatly.



 In some countries access to information is often very limited. A basic prerequisite for p2 in government decision-making is simply being aware that the government is making a decision that will concern you. This understanding appears to be lacking for 


 significant numbers of people in Cambodia, South Africa and the Ivory Coast. A South African NGO conducted an “education drive” to “empower” people so they would “know when a decision is actually going to affect them.” The Ivory Coast is establishing local “listening centers” which provide opportunities for people

to access timely information. They will include satellite TV reception. There are also plans to install microphones so community members can make announcements using a public address system and potentially also on community radio.

Some governments focus on p2 at the bottom end of the IAP2 Spectrum, that is providing information. A Mexican  state administrator explained how the responses prepared by their agency to questions from the public represent ‘public participation’. “Often we are amazed when we receive e-mail messages from very distant places, from people we could not even remotely think might have access to this information.”

 In China, government officials boasted about their initiatives to make government information available to the public, although a federal administrator admitted that “governments don’t have any funding for educating the general public.” However, an NGO leader made a harsher assessment, stating “if you want to have a piece of information, you can, you have to, say through private personal channels, you know, personal connections.” An NGO leader said “there should be a regulation, or there should be an incentive for government to release [their research findings].”

 A Chinese NGO leader said it is difficult to identify which part of government is responsible for making a decision on major development projects. Similarly in  South Africa, there is a “blame culture” amongst government officials, who tend not to want to take responsibility for decisions that are made (according to an NGO leader).

 According to a Brazilian p2 practitioner, the government’s provision of participatory mechanisms and spaces is somewhat negated by its lack of transparency and the limited amount of reliable information it provides.

Providing information not only enables access to p2, but it is also the prerequisite for more sophisticated participatory functions such as deliberation and making an imaginative leap to understand the world from others’ points of view. A Canadian locally elected official said “an underlying fundamental difficulty in moving to a more participatory and collective decision-making process is the examination and sharing of information in a broad

and equitable way, that everybody is from the same page because they have all the same pages. In that way, if everyone can understand what is before them in terms of decision, the next problem is understanding each other’s interests and that is very difficult because it requires a leap of the imagination.”



Finding and interpreting information in the US

Simply making information available is a necessary first step, but making it easy to find and understand will facilitate public participation. In countries such as the US, government information is more readily available, although the problem of finding and interpreting that information still remains. A US NGO leader complained about the “highly partisan, highly simplistic” quality of political debate and the media’s failure to help “citizens really understand and deliberate on issues.” It is difficult for members of the community to find the information they need, but there is some assistance:

- Many US NGOs run email lists to alert people to relevant new legislation or policies on particular topics.
- The online search tools for the US Federal Register enable community activists to identify specific changes in regulation by doing keyword searches, according to a US federal administrator.
- A US state government has established a citizen assistance center, where citizens can learn about the legislative process and how to identify bills online.

Effective Practices & Opportunities for Cross-fertilization

This report scoped a range of distinct and common practices. Although countries and interviewees were not chosen based on their reputation for consistently adopting effective practices, some examples of effective practices did emerge in our data. This presents an opportunity for learning between countries and seeing the potential overlap between different contexts. In particular, it is necessary to harness cross-fertilization to accomplish trans-national goals, such as responding to climate change. While there is much good practice and there are huge differences, there is great scope to encourage those who are developing innovative practices. Some effective practices are most relevant within particular cultural contexts, and may be less effective in other cultural contexts. Other effective practices are applicable internationally. Understanding this variability can be useful for practitioners who are working cross-culturally.

In the Ivory Coast, neighborhood councils have been implemented, which are comprised of local leaders and a president elected by each neighborhood. They formulate ideas, send representatives to participate in town council meetings, implement community and government projects, and disseminate information throughout the community. The current government is planning to increase the authority of neighborhood councils by filling town councils with elected neighborhood council members, rather than “cronies.”

An NGO in the Ivory Coast claims to make decisions with full involvement from members of the general public and representatives from other organizations. Rather than prejudging a decision, the NGO makes a proposal and remains completely open to participants’ criticisms, feedback and rephrasing of the proposals. The NGO considers the final decision to be “the result of everybody’s participation” (although it is not known if the participants have a similar perception).





Participative Budget process in Brazil


Brazil has a Participative Budget (PB) process, explained a p2 practitioner. ‘Theme meetings’ are held in local communities and are advertised not only using printed leaflets, but also with banners and “combis passing through the neighborhood” several times. The attendance can be very high: they “sometimes had one thousand, two thousand people, or three or four hundred thousand [*sic*] people there” The presentation provides “a quick and general overview” of the economic status and problems in the local region. Participants raise a green card or a red card to vote on different proposals. However, no surprises emerge at these meetings, because the organizers spend a month engaging with the community leaders beforehand to reach an agreement on each proposal.


Brazil also has Municipal Budget Committees, which have 50% government representatives and 50% civil society representatives elected from each region in the city. According to a local administrator, “the construction of the agenda is done jointly.” The government submits “demands” as do the civil society representatives from each region. An electronic voting system is used to select the final list of demands for each region and for the city. The local administrator said that government plans changed as a result of these meetings. For example, civil society indicated that a hospital expansion program was more important than park revitalization, so the government completed the hospital expansion first.


The p2 practitioner who was contracted to evaluate the PB process said “it has had an impact... indirectly, there have been large changes to planning [because] the decisions taken at the meetings have been taken to the agenda of the Secretariats” and the public servants are forced to respond to each of the recommendations, either implementing them or explaining why they are not feasible. In addition, the PB process has impacted on the political dynamics of decision-making, with some forces in the government feeling “that they had been extremely sidelined from the process.” It also fostered wider public debate about budget decisions, which in turn increased the level of participation in subsequent PB processes. Nevertheless, the PB process has limited power, because it only relates to decision-making about 3% of the municipal budget. The p2 practitioner also said there was insufficient room in the PB process for diverse viewpoints to be expressed openly and debated frankly.


 A p2 practitioner in South Africa described the practice of conducting a series of small focus groups separately with each stakeholder group, prior to holding a large multi-stakeholder process. This is especially useful when there is “public sensitivity around a particular proposal.” The focus group meetings “generally take place either in people’s own homes or offices.”

 A South African local administrator described an annual p2 process with three phases of citizen participation: raising issues; monitoring and providing input to the city’s budget plan; and receiving feedback about the final budget and reasons why the government included certain things and not others.

 An NGO leader in Brazil highlighted a strategy for maintaining vitality in a civil society network. “The network must not be based on meetings, as if it is based on meetings then it is sure to diminish. The network has to be based on connection, contacts and action. Sometimes celebrations, parties or other type of activity, if you reduce it to meetings, then you will reduce the contingent to those meeting professionals.”

 A US NGO leader is working with a former news director to cultivate citizen journalism and increase the dissemination of little heard stories from communities. They are developing podcasting infrastructure so that content “can be widely distributed for folks to hear stories of what other communities are doing that they could replicate in their communities.”

 A US state administrator ensured that politicians could not ignore the outcomes of an internal deliberative process, by setting up a 15-member board of senior elected state officials and administrators. The board focused on achieving consensus support for the project outcomes.

 Walkabouts, or *imbizos*, are public meetings in South Africa where government officials at the local or national level visit local communities to discuss specific issues that need to be addressed. These meetings occur regularly at the national level and are attended by government ministers or even the President or Vice-President. Imbizos also occur at the local level, with the executive mayor of the locality visiting the communities that have made a petition to have an imbizo.



Democracy that works in Sweden

A Swedish NGO leader gave the example of a village where “the democracy process works” because virtually every resident belongs to one of the many committees that make recommendations on various issues. These small committees cater to people with a broad range of interests, including homeowners, the elderly, and people who like football or skiing. Some committees have members from business interests too.


The NGO facilitates the process of getting the community organized to respond to particular issues that concern them. The NGO leader chairs an umbrella committee that brings together the chairs of all the other committees, who are meant to communicate issues raised in their committees. The NGO leader said “we felt that we cannot just sit on our backs and wait and see what the government will do. I feel they will not do what is necessary to bring success to it.”


When the umbrella committee decides “we want to do something and bring that into the government, you can say that almost 100 percent of the people in the village stand behind it.”


For example, the IT committee recommended broadband for the village, and the “whole village” backed this project. They negotiated with the infrastructure providers, and people from the village organized themselves into groups to dig trenches for the cables. This “brought a lot of people together that do not socialize, normally.”


While this process was not initiated by the government, it has been viewed favorably by the government. The government supports the process and it helps them save money.

This structure is not necessarily very common in Sweden. The NGO leader believes it was possible in this village because of the small population. “it is more easy to feel what people want, what they think, how they will react to certain things. If there are also a couple of thousand people you will not know what all of them are thinking.”

 Australia, at the state level, sponsors community cabinet meetings that encourage community residents to engage with decision-makers on a wide variety of topics. According to one state elected official, these meetings are publicized through an “open invitation” broadly distributed to citizens within a specific geographic area. At these meetings, “people can book a delegation, an interview with a specific minister” explained a second Australia state elected official. Residents that commonly participate in these cabinet meetings tend to “come along out of interest” said one state official. This official also noted that sometimes “with the community cabinet meetings, you can have 300 or 400 people involved, and some of them will never have had any contact with government in this way before.” Community residents are encouraged to select a preferred minister and spend the allocated amount of time asking questions.

 A US NGO leader uses a wide variety of prompts to stimulate public discourse with Native American participants. “We have used art, and sometimes even using national issues-forums books or the study circle resource center book, pre-prepared discussion guides. We will often also bring in art, music, whatever there is to further spark dialogue.”


 In Sweden, a local elected official organized breakfast meetings every week in a different village. They attracted a higher than expected turnout, with almost a hundred people on average, out of a population of four to eight hundred in many villages. All of these meetings are open to all of the public and any issue can be discussed. The locally elected official answered their questions on the spot. When there were 20 or 30 questions and insufficient time to answer them all, s/he took the questions away and sent an email response to all the participants soon after.

 In Sweden, local activity groups have been organized to develop projects in various sectors such as tourism and cultural development. The groups are mainly composed of individuals from the community, but a local administrator also participates in the group. Project ideas are sometimes suggested by the local administrator, but in other instances “it’s a member initiative, where a member feels that a field is very interesting and would like to do something there. They work out a plan and objectives of what to do.” The group then submits this plan to the parent organization board for approval and funding.

A Swedish p2 practitioner gave an example of the value of small group deliberation, with face-to-face discussions with external experts and the opportunity to question the experts’ opinions. The municipality organized the group of ten parents from several villages to deliberate about starting a school, and the group met with many experts. The experts presented the financial costs of running a school, which seemed prohibitive. However, the parents disputed these costs and were able to develop cheaper solutions to provide the same functions, so the school project was able to go ahead. For example, instead of having a school bus they made an arrangement for a hire car that costs half as much.

A Cambodian NGO leader described a key mechanism for announcing official projects and seeking input from stakeholders: the use of two-way radios. This enables stakeholders to access information but also “to make their concerns or their comments back to their proponents.” Communities can also use these devices, known as *Icoms*, to contact officials and communicate issues that arise.



 A Canadian provincial administrator described an open-ended investigative process called the Questions Project. In the first stage, government officials went out to visit service providers “to get their sense of what was working and what wasn’t working.” One of the key points that emerged from this was the worsening gap in youth services due to funding cutbacks. Therefore in the second stage they “decided that we would go out and talk to youth. So we have our youth coordinators doing that, so that they were youth themselves talking to youth, and they went around and talked to quite a large number of varied groups throughout the province, and then pulling that together and trying to create a report that reflects that but also has our own reflections as well.” The outcomes of the process included not only significant learnings for the government, but also greater connections formed amongst community organizations and young people.

 **Fear of, and yearning for, public participation in Canada**

A locally elected official articulated the underlying fear that public participation arouses for some government officials. “So when we are talking about public participation, does that mean that we really do want to hear what people have to say, or are we are afraid to hear that because it could move us from what we have already decided we were going to do, or it could create a real problem where the public has expectations that may not be equally met.”

At the same time s/he expressed the urgency of increasing public participation so that outdated thought patterns do not continue to have disproportionate power. “I think that authentic solicitation of public participation and decision-making is crucial right now. It is really crucial in terms of planetary survival. Because what I’m seeing and what I’m experiencing is a greater collective understanding in the community of the need to change our processes and our behavior

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About this Study

Working from literature review findings, field work between 2006 and 2008 included conducting semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 66 individuals in five categories: federal, state/provincial and municipal government representatives (including elected officials and administrators), public participation practitioners and non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives that were involved in public participation activities and civic engagement.

Data were collected by an 18-member team of interviewers, most of whom worked closely with a country/region coordinator (except in those instances where the interviewer also served as a regional coordinator, as was the case in the regions of Asia, Latin America - Brazil and Australasia). An interview protocol and standardized training for interviewers and country/region coordinators ensured internal and external validity.

Countries were selected for this study based on those within which project interviewees had existing relationships and familiarity with participatory or deliberative processes/practices. Effort was made to include as broad a cross-section of countries as was possible under the limitations of the project budget. One country initially chosen, Thailand, experienced a military coup that caused the project subcommittee to withdraw it from the project sample in 2007. *See the Appendix for a complete list of country/regions included in this study.*

Interviewees were selected based on their operational knowledge or leadership positions or as observers of democratic/participative systems or practices. Interviewees verified the eligibility of candidates prior to submission for review and approval by the project coordinator based on the established criteria. Efforts were made to ensure ethnic and gender diversity to the degree possible as part of the candidate selection process to encourage a range of voices, perspectives and experiences was included in the study sample.

Limitations

Limitations to this research project include:

- the age of the data at the time of writing (interviews were collected between 2006 and 2008)
- dates in the past that were referred to by interviewees
- difficulty gaining interviewee commitment to participate for some candidates (legal, logistical)
- ability for some interviewees for whom English is a second language to fully comprehend questions included in the semi-structured interview instrument
- the size of the sample, which is small and not intended to be representative but rather a descriptive study.

Further Research

IAP2 and the Kettering Foundation have identified several potential research questions for continued exploration in this vein, either by using the existing data that has been collected or by supplementing this data.

Recommendations include a more in-depth focus on who is involved in public participation or deliberative processes; how such processes are implemented and for what purpose; more definition and exploration of outcomes or for what purpose participation or deliberation is engaged; and enhanced consideration of differences and similarities across cultures, regions and countries as it relates to participatory or deliberative processes.

Appendix

Summary of Countries in Study

Country	Example of Tools / Techniques	Common Terminology	Select pitfalls and barriers to p2
Australia	Community cabinet	Public consultation	The timing and location of public events and participation processes can present a significant obstacle for specific populations. Interviewees highlighted office hours, meeting locations, and the physical location of governmental offices as potential barriers to participation. As one municipal level administrator described, the physical presence of municipal buildings can discourage people from stopping by to discuss issues with local councilors and agency staff: “the configuration of the Municipal Building here in [community name] is really poor... the presentation to the customers is all these steel bars, you know, security screens down, that looks horrible. And so, we tend to not get the level of visitation into the Council customer service area that we should have.”
Brazil	Participatory Budget process	Public management	Brazil’s history of colonization and dictatorship has created “a paternalist relationship between the State and society” and fostered clientelism, according to an NGO leader. Civil society went from blaming the government for most problems to becoming a part of the government themselves, because “deep down they had the view that they could only do something in public terms if they were inside the State”, according to an NGO leader. The current government includes many former civil society leaders. This results in civil society losing its autonomy and becoming co-opted, since leading a civil society organization is seen as a “ladder, a liturgy, that you must go through to enter the State.”
Cambodia	Commune development planning	Co-management	Cambodia’s history of colonialism and communism has resulted in a top-down approach to governance. This means that “high position or big position always right while low position and low power always wrong” according to a federal administrator. The NGO leader said that government officers “tend to be the most knowledgeable in the area and they do not want to listen to the other stakeholders. But then that causes the big problem at the end.” Traditionally Cambodians have been reluctant to challenge authority, according to the NGO leader. They do not understand that they have rights or that the government is accountable to them. In addition, people in some areas are afraid to provide written comments about a problem because “they fear about their security.” Instead, they sometimes write letters to the newspaper using a pseudonym.

Country	Example of Tools / Techniques	Common Terminology	Select pitfalls and barriers to p2
Canada	Questions project	Public participation vs. citizen engagement	<p>Large, rapid shifts in the social and economic landscape have left some local authorities struggling, especially because they do not have a mandate to address many of the issues. A local administrator said, “the work that we started really happened because there has been a huge shift in the social landscape in the downtown core of [municipality name]... in terms of increasing homelessness, increasing public drug use, business decline, economic development stagnation, and difficulties in terms of managing the balance around the environmental footprint and the amount of potential growth within the confined boundaries of a city like [municipality name].” Further, “as a municipality, we are being put under a huge amount of pressure by the general public, but we have not been very good at using community energy in order to help us to resolve some of these issues, even when we do not have the mandate to do it.”</p>
China	NGO partnerships	Information disclosure, volunteerism	<p>In China, there are many bureaucratic and legal obstructions to participating in a public hearing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to an NGO leader, “sometimes if there is a public hearing, you can not put everyone at the meeting place. Only the people who have been approved can go the meeting place and attend the hearing.” • An NGO leader said “each time the government wants to organize this opportunity to participate, there are more candidates applying for it. They had to turn down, have to delete many people from the list, because there are not enough seats.” • An NGO leader said public hearings “are not open for everyone. They will only select few concerned. They would evaluate your qualification—whether you are qualified to be invited to their public hearing.” A federal administrator confirmed that people who lack scientific knowledge tend to be excluded from participatory processes in China. • An NGO leader said the current regulation is unclear about who can participate and how to become involved. For example, “[is it] true that only the local people can participate; a Beijing person like me will be declined?”
Ivory Coast	Listening centers	Public survey, public investigation	<p>In some countries, poverty is a major barrier to p2. A financial administrator in the Ivory Coast stated that people are much more likely to participate in surveys when financial compensation is offered. Young people are considered to be higher “quality” participants. Similarly In South Africa, poor people who are affected by a project may not have “money for transport” to attend “public involvement meetings.” Some people cannot afford to buy newspapers, and therefore a state administrator also uses radio to disseminate their message.</p>

Country	Example of Tools / Techniques	Common Terminology	Select pitfalls and barriers to p2
Mexico	Federal agency advisory council	Citizen participation	There is a lack of stability in the executive branch of government. When a political group loses power, about 90% of administrative staff are replaced by the new government, according to a local elected official. As a result, the projects initiated as a result of a p2 process may simply be abandoned by the subsequent administration. Even worse, a local elected official said there are “almost no records” of the findings from p2 processes conducted by previous administrations, since “almost everything starts from zero” when a different political group takes over government. This makes it virtually impossible to follow-up on previous p2 processes or to provide feedback to participants regarding ongoing progress.
New Zealand	Random selection processes	Community voices	According to interviews with New Zealand based public participation practitioners, Pacific Island or immigrant populations that do not belong to a particular community group, such as the church, tend to be overlooked in public participation processes because access is more difficult. This practitioner said, “I know that we have missed out, particularly with smaller groups like the Tokelauans, the Tuvaluans, and the Fijians. When we look at our statistics at the end of the day, they are not really represented.”
Scotland	Community planning forums	Partnership	Barriers to participation include the concentration of power in the British government and the tendency for highly top-down approaches to governance, even at the local government level. A p2 practitioner said “this is one of the biggest problems in the United Kingdom: Britain is probably the most centralized country in the OECD; so much power is wielded by central government and treasury. Very little of it trickles down to local authorities, and the local authorities then hoard what they have, what little authority they have, what little financial control” Some local authorities are seeking to shift their culture following the introduction of the Local Government of Scotland Act 2003. However, others are still referred to as “Stalinist local authorities” implying organizations which are completely top-down, which are self-serving and which mainly served to keep their own kind of employees in business rather than to encourage any kind of participation.
South Africa	Imbizos	Consultation	Communications over long distances are not reliable in much of the African continent. Email is not a very useful tool in p2 processes, because a large part of the population do not have access. Even telephones are not always reliable, and a p2 practitioner in South Africa expressed caution about using “flashy technologies” during p2 meetings. In addition, there are 11 official languages in South Africa, so p2 consultancy agencies benefit from having staff that are fluent in different languages.

Country	Example of Tools / Techniques	Common Terminology	Select pitfalls and barriers to p2
Sweden	Breakfast meetings	<i>Lokalemböhr</i>	<p>Close-knit small village communities in Sweden create a barrier for people who move there from the city. Participating in collaborative action is more difficult for them because “they don’t have any natural belonging to the villages” and locals may resent their new ideas, according to a state administrator.</p> <p>Although most of the examples of p2 cited by Swedish interviewees were in rural areas, a local administrator admitted, “I think the whole population in the countryside feels that they are left out in bigger political decisions.”</p>
United States	Community asset-mapping	Civic engagement	<p>In the US, there is a lack of public spaces where people can meet, according to an NGO leader. There is also very low attendance at some p2 meetings. A locally elected official described a public hearing for a referendum related to a tax increase: “Our first meeting, we had only one resident. Our second meeting, we had three. And our last meeting, the third meeting, we only had two people.” Ironically several US interviewees believed that high quality p2 relies on small group encounters, whereas in many other countries large scale public meetings were the norm and were not seen as an impediment to quality p2.</p>