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Committee of Experts on Public Administration

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Item 4 (b), 4 (d) and 5 (b) of the provisional agenda

**Building Effective, accountable and inclusive institution at all levels**

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## **The issues for the current discussion are citizens' engagement in public decision making, effective institutions and access to information**

This conference room paper was prepared by Committee member Gowher Rizvi in support of the committee deliberations on participation and engagement in implementing the SDGs and contributing to progress.

The declaration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with relevant targets has created great expectations among many leaders across societies. With a global vision of transforming the world, the 2030 Agenda is also catered as universal, inclusive and integrated. This also accommodates the three pillars of development, i.e. economic, social and environmental, although *governance* as the fourth pillar must be placed at the center among these three crosscutting dimensions. And governance is assessed through institutions and traditions in a society.

Effective, accountable and transparent institutions are prerequisite to implement this ambitious agenda that aims for a happy globe where people and planet thrive together in peace, prosperity and partnership. On the other hand, the implementation of the SDGs largely depends on the whole of the society approach. It means how effectively a society can engage its citizens and accommodate their diverse views while aligning the existing public policies with the targets of the SDGs and while stepping towards any reform in the affairs of the state. This is why public engagement and effective institutions are mutually indispensable to good governance.

The SDG-16 is viewed as the 'Governance Goal', however, the specific SDG target 16.7 emphasizes on "ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels. Whereas target 16.6 attests importance on developing effective, accountable and transparent institutions; and target 16.10 advocates ensuring public access to information as protector of fundamental freedoms. These three targets are harmoniously interlinked to outline the governance issues in the 2030 Agenda.

As an essential aspect of effective state institutions, public participation in formulating and implementing public policy is not just a ritual, although this may not be uncommon in many societies: the proof of public participation is not just to prepare report on papers. Active civic engagement in the day to day implementation and review of state policies is equally important to make the representative democracy meaningful.

For definitional purposes, we may consider "civic engagement" to designate both individual and collective civil society actions with the objective of identifying and addressing the problems and prospects of public interest. On the other hand, the term "citizens' engagement"

may be referred to directives and actions endorsed by a national government to promote the participations of citizens in various prospects of public policy framing and implementation<sup>1</sup>. This is indicative that citizens' engagement is more on organized involvement of individuals and organizations to cooperate with government to address public problems. Direct public participation, in addition to functioning through the public representatives, in a society's decision-making process has been widely accepted as fundamental human right. It 'deepens democracy, strengthens social capital, facilitates efficiency and sustained growth, and promotes pro-poor activities, equity and social justice'<sup>2</sup>, which are also central to the SDGs.

In public participation whose voices are counted? Or to what extent the voices are considered in addition to the 'experts'? There are fundamental questions. Participatory decision-making processes are nowhere seamless. There is always a threat of elite capture and middle-class dominance which is accompanied by the usual hesitant mumbles and unaddressed silences of the socially 'not empowered' groups. This is big a challenge in some societies to bring girls and women, physically challenged persons, and people of third gender into public decision making. Some societies practice hereditary exclusion of people from so called lowborn *dalits* and untouchables, low income families, and believers of different faiths. Without meaningful engagement of the most vulnerable and excluded groups [so that they are enabled to influence policy decisions], the targets of the SDGs will be meaningless.

In happy and resilient society citizens feel good and they are confident that their pain and pleasure are taken care of by the effective institutions. What makes the institutions effective, transparent and accountable? The answer is the social and political will of the people in a society. And such will must be exercised and ensured by participatory systems. Effective institutions also depend on effective citizenship which is not only freedom of voting. Although electoral participation is an essential ritual, but there is no assurance that this will be the best effective tool. Many countries celebrate elections just as a periodic curriculum that may not guarantee the functionality of the institutions to ensure good governance. This is why societies today look for more direct and active engagement of citizens in framing, implementing, monitoring, and reviewing public decision-making process. And the institutions must provide the catalysts' supports. To do so, the institutions under the eyes of many will act responsive and transparent. This also will ensure public access to information which should be the both-way traffic: bottom-up information flow helps understand the public needs and top-down information flow helps minimize the gaps between government's decision making and purpose of the intended actions. Informed citizenry is the center point of social development.

Information is power. Research and scientific community, academia, and the media provide the information. And to ensure informed decision making, these groups must be consulted. Yet, a large number of people stay outside. Their ideas, thoughts, and priorities are never taken care of. People have information, but the question is how to utilize the shared knowledge and information in public decision making? Access to information helps citizens evaluate public institutions and transparency of the institutions are measured through the standard to which the citizens are able to monitor and evaluate the actions of the public servants and public representatives which is also a testimony of individual and institutional accountability. Moreover, public information access also reduces market uncertainty and enhances efficiency.

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<sup>1</sup> Oyhanarte, Marta (2012), *Transparency, Accountability, and Citizens' Engagement* (p. 8), Discussion paper for CEPA 7<sup>th</sup> Session (NY 16-20 April 2012) [E/C.16/2012/4] 24 January, 2012

<sup>2</sup> CEPA Discussion paper (2007), *Participatory Governance and Citizen's Engagement in Policy Development, Service Delivery and Budgeting* (p.4), CEPA 6<sup>th</sup> Session (NY 10 – 13 April, 2007)

The SDG 16 is about *promoting* peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, *providing* access to justice for all and *building* effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. To make sure that the over-arching targets of the SDG-16 are achieved, strong and meaningful citizen review is essential. And monitoring of the SDGs may not be a separate issue. Whole of the society and whole of the government approaches are required with strong partnership among the public officials, social leaders, research and scientific communities, statistical institutions, private sectors, NGOs, development partners, professional groups and people of all walks of life. And here, the free media has a role play. Freedom of the media is not essentially the freedom of the media-owner to exploit the journalists or distort the information source. On the contrary, the current era of the ICT is flooded with smart devices and apps which are good platforms for social media and formation of public opinion. How the social media is used or abused to mobilize public decision-making process is the question of public sanity. But the state must care: that freedom of expression is protected but not with the cost of an individual or a group's rights and dignity. This delicate balance must be maintained. Only the effective state institutions and the meaningful freedom of the media can promote and protect each other in a democratic society. This is only possible when citizens have freedom and choices in public decision making.

There are multiple challenges to implement the SDGs all around the globe of which the following five are the most common in almost all nations:

- “Aligning” SDG implementation with national planning and policy processes
- Management, coordination and leadership for SDG implementation
- Adequacy of financing and other means of implementation including systemic issues
- Data-related issues and capacity of the national statistical agencies
- Partnership and stakeholder participation including institutional arrangements

In addition, the other major challenge of the SDGs is how to implement the universal agenda at the local contexts. The societies are diverse, and so are their contexts and priorities. This is why no specific model will work universally. This view must be counted while assessing the quality and process of citizens' participation and engagement in public decision making.

A state with effective and transparent institutions can confirm the essential features of good governance: transparency, accountability, access to information, and responsive institutions. Without ethical and political will, civic and state institutions never thrive, remain ineffective and function in *isomorphic mimicry* [i.e. building institutions and processes in weak states that *look* like those found in functional states]<sup>3</sup>. Ethics must have the central role for the functioning of effective institutions.

The implementation of the SDG targets depends on our value driven actions: individually and collectively. SDGs are no new tasks; just we need to change our working style where no silo approach will work. This is also a challenge: how to integrate our working styles: by all and for all?

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<sup>3</sup> Pritchett, Lant (2011), *One Doesn't Fit All: Lant Pritchett on Mimicry in Development*, Center for Global Development (<https://www.cgdev.org/blog/one-size-doesn%E2%80%99t-fit-all-lant-pritchett-mimicry-development>, accessed on 18 April, 2018)