

Participatory Democracy: A case of a village

*If one takes care of the means, the end will take
care of itself.*
Mahatma Gandhi

When it hurts too much, it's time to look for a cure

The dualism of means and goals haunts individuals, societies, nations and civilizations, and the choices humans make as individuals, members of societies, representatives of nations and carriers of civilizations provide some relatively long-term solutions to this dualism. Transitional democracies are particularly challenged with this ambiguity, since transition implies a choice of new goals and a search for means that would provide for these goals in the possibly best way.

While the leaderships of these societies are busy with defining, re-defining and finally refining the public goals in the parliaments and governments, transition knocks on every common citizen's door, appearing on the threshold in the form of shattered infrastructures, lack of resources, mismanagement, corruption and poverty. While the first are engaged in political discourse of refining the goals, the second are striving to survive. It seems that these two simultaneous processes often lack the crossing line: the first are unaware of what the public really needs and the second are not appreciative of what the elites do. What can be done here seems rather self-evident: start a dialog.

This simple truism has not always been obvious while implementing various community development projects. Though appreciating the value of public participation, few significant efforts have been made to promote this means towards starting a dialog. The International Center for Human Development saw the huge potential of a possible initiative to encourage common citizens to take a decisive role in defining the goals for their own future. And what could have been a better place to start such an initiative, than discussions of a community budget which basically defines the social life of the community members? Thus, in December, 2005 ICHD and the leadership of a small village in Armenia, Sarnaghbyur, decided to experiment with a "gap-filler", i.e. introduce the practice of public involvement for initiating a dialog between the community members and leaders through an innovative public participation instrument – Town Hall Meeting (THM).

Never say never

One cannot claim that this was an easy effort. Though potentially realizing the benefits of such an initiative, it was extremely challenging to build up trust where its level was too low. The long and disappointing practice of silence between the community and its leaders was remarkable in the expressions of Sarnaghbyur residents, when they entered the THM hall. "I'm still not sure our leaders will heed to what we say..." was written on most faces. While leaving the hall, most faces revealed: "Well, at least I've said what I've always been wanting to say".

There was satisfaction with the opportunity to speak out, but there was still uncertainty hovering around whether what they had said would be heard.

June, 2006. When you eventually make it to the center of Sarnaghbyur, somewhat exhausted of the extremely bumpy road, the only sound breaking the silent heat of the noon is the noise of construction. Sarnaghbyur is constructing a sports ground, something that in winter the community members had voted for among the six possible options within the community's annual budget.

“We are the State”

At the THM among the 320 messages generated from the community members, there was one which stuck out with its simplicity and depth: “We are the state”. Looking at the construction you come to believe that this conviction works in at least one community in Armenia and you cannot but hope that it will spread in the country like epidemics.

The means provided by ICHD proved worthwhile on the way to the major goal Armenia has today: *participatory democracy*.

The next step? How to make sure the means leads to a tipping point from where the practice of public involvement hits communities over the country and the people really become the state?

The paper is elaborated based on the feedback from round table discussion on “A Case study on involving citizens’ voice into the policymaking process”, which took place on December 4th, 2006. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations.

The round table was organized with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation