Background

LogoLink – Learning Initiative on Citizen Participation and Local Governance (www.logolink.org), a global network of practitioners from the civil society organisations and research institutions has been actively advocating for Right to Participation, since its inception in 2001. In 2013, LogoLink undertook a review and analysis of the policies and practices on citizen participation in local democratic governance that evolved in the past decade. The analysis suggested the need for a renewed discourse on citizen participation around the world in a changing context of democratic governance. Over the last year more than 500 organisations of civil society, academia, local governments and their networks have been consulted in Asia, Africa and Latin America which resulted in the Global Charter on Right to Citizen Participation in Local Governance. The central message emerged from these consultations can be summarised as: “The existing institutional spaces and mechanisms for citizen participation are, though necessary, but inadequate to make participation meaningful and substantive. The decision making on mobilisation and utilisation of public resources for common public good is still dominated by the elite groups in the society and polity across the world.” The Global Charter, therefore, proposes a set of concrete actions for civil society, governments and donors to make citizen participation substantive and transformative.

The LogoLink partners from across the globe met in New York City from September 22 to 25 to review the last phase of its work and to plan for the next phase of activities. Taking advantage of presence of the partners who have been promoting citizen participation, democratic accountability and democratic local governance in various regions for several decades a roundtable discussion on Right to Participation: Moving from Symbolism to Substance was organised on September 23 at the New School, NYC. The purpose of the roundtable was to generate meaningful conversations with civil society, governments and donors and to explore new partnership between LogoLink and other actors.

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The Presentation by LogoLink

The discussion started with a round of introduction, followed by sharing of a brief history of LogoLink and the background of the Global Charter. The presentation was a preliminary synthesis of salient points emerged from discussions on the Global Charter. Here is a summary of the presentation.

The Big Picture

Certain global economic and demographic trends are becoming discernible. Globally we are experiencing a strong concentration of wealth in the
Societies and economies across the globe are experiencing profound economic and demographic dynamics characterised by:
- increasing inequalities
- concentration of wealth and power
- unplanned and unsustainable urbanisation
- growing number of young people

hands of a few, high levels of inequality, and persistent poverty. The practitioners are trying to understand and transform this reality. However, clearly a lot of work is yet to be done. A major urban transition is happening across Africa, Asia and Latin America. This particular trend obviously raises questions about governance, planning and citizen engagement. There is a need to recognise the fact that in many parts of the world the population is getting increasingly young and they must have a strong say in the democratic governance of the society and polity.

Despite significant progress in the past century, the democratic models are under stress. There is increased concentration of power and control in the state and political parties, undermining the practice of participatory citizenship; there seems to be a deeper crisis of representation, as citizens are losing trust in the political system.

The LogLink consultations held across the developing regions highlighted that the decentralisation of governance has been happening in different countries and contexts but with different paces. In many instances it is not just uneven but also incomplete. In some instances it is only adjusting administrative structures without real political decentralisation. This incomplete decentralisation has thrown up a host of challenges to deepen citizen participation. In fact in many contexts there have been strong trend towards re-centralisation. The central governments are taking greater control, taking away powers and resources, directing local governments on how to spend these resources and for what. There is also strong centralising culture within political parties along with increasing influence and clout of corporate power.

This often goes hand in hand with that stronger re-centralisation of power and interest.

The consultations recognised that there is growing concentration of power in the states, governments, and political parties. This concentration of power makes citizen engagement difficult even with the most innovative models. It has been difficult for the state and political parties to let go power in to the hands of citizens in an empowering sense. By and large, across the countries and regions representative democracy seems to be in crisis. There are issues around who represents whom. This crisis is not only directed to the political system but also to the so called intermediation by civil society. In many instances NGOs do not necessarily have their fingers on the pulse and are connected to what is happening at the community level. There is a declining interest in local governments in particular but also a declining interest in political parties and what all they claim to represent their constituencies and their interests. Many of these get a fit into a greater sense of contestation from below in many parts of the world as can be evidenced from mass protests and expression of discontents, many of which are expressed violently.

Technology seems to be all pervasive in this new era. The digital technology is creating opportunities for citizen engagement but not without associated risks. It expands connectivity and allows for more direct relationships between the state and the citizens. However, these relationships tend to be individualised and are not necessarily based on a collective practice of engagement. A warning sign is when state uses the digital technology for taking greater control over the citizens through range actions – from surveillance to outright suppression of right to expression.

These trends of increasing centralisation, concentration of power, wealth and control and increasing inequalities are also being contested by citizens from the below as evidenced through eruptions of mass protests across developed and developing societies.

There is also a shift from promoting the politics of democracy to promoting tools and techniques for transparency and accountability with strong focus on anti-corruption initiatives. There is no doubt that local governance must be transparent and accountable to the citizens. However, promoting
democratic governance requires robust understating of power and politics of decision making. There are certain global processes that are disconnected from civil society actions, activism and networks. A particular reference to this is the Open Government Partnership but there are other initiatives as well.

There seems to be an over-emphasised measurement impetus. The impetus to measure impact and outcome is then transformed and translated into tools and methodologies that can result in measurable outcomes in an extremely complex dynamics and processes. There is a reduced funding for the political work of the civil society groups and more funding is directed towards social accountability tools coupled with online apps.

**What do all these mean for citizen participation?**

Over the years, the decentralisation process, through incomplete in many contexts, accompanied proliferation of spaces for citizen engagement and participation. These spaces somehow or the other provided opportunities to get citizens and the state to engage. The big question, however, was raised by the practitioners in various consultations: Are these spaces really substantive? Are they really meaningful? Are they resulting in substantive change? In many instances in fact the answer is ‘no’. How do we make sure that those spaces meant to bring positive change actually help to bring about that positive change?

Despite decades of existence, the decentralisation of governance has remained uneven and incomplete in many countries of the global south. There is in fact a deeper tendency for recentralisation of governance and increased influence of corporate power over public policies.

The communities themselves have become disillusioned – disillusioned in the political system, in the local states and in the processes that are meant to facilitate their engagement. Many of them opt to disengage. Either a sense of apathy or wilful disengagement where they don’t recognise the spaces and opportunities that are created; because they don’t believe that it will really transform their lives or transform the relationships that exist. There are different realities and patterns in different places. In some places it is really important to still make sure that those spaces are created because they are not there yet. In other places where those spaces are created it is really important that those spaces are transformed and informed by our own practices and making those spaces substantive. So how do they become spaces for animated engagement for their liberation and for empowerment? We also recognise that citizen engagement is neither limited to local nor the relationship between citizens and the local state. In fact, there is quite an interest in governments to look at citizen engagement at other levels in terms of public services, particularly along social accountability tools and methods. Our practice in a way teaches us that local governments are still the site of citizenship learning and citizen engagement. So there is a real benefit in focusing in local governments to look at lessons and practices that can be taken forward to other spheres.

Emergence of digital technology is impacting the society in a profound way. Societies and people are getting connected with common interests and issues. There are opportunities to relate to the state directly, but often these engagements are individualised and isolated which undermine the values and strengths of collective engagement. On the other hand state is also exerting a new form of control over the citizens through digital technology.

In terms of the democratic models that are under stress, the consultations strongly emphasised the risk of ignoring the importance of political systems and political parties. Very often the way the relationship was configured was between the state and communities and the spaces that were created were about sort of mediating that relationship. However, the political parties are very much part of that broader spectrum and in many instances they co-opt and deflect these spaces and the power that may originate in these spaces. It is important to come to grips with the political parties and the nature of the political system. It must also be recognised that representation is a contested practice. The elected councillor cannot assume that the mandate for five years is taken for granted and all that s/he needs to do is then report back as and when s/he thinks it is required. In fact the whole notion of representative democracy is being
contested. Representation means that you need to go back and forth - you need to consult, engage, and get your mandate over and over again. In this context, the prevalence and problematic of patronage networks as barrier to real community empowerment came through the consultations very strongly. The political patronage system permeates through those spaces that have been created to develop opportunities for citizen engagement. A related point is the growing public protests and citizen eruptions, and the associated public violence in many occasions. The notion of spilt politics gets a prominence where whatever is put on the table is discredited not because of the substance but because of who the messenger is and who puts it forward. Clearly this is a real challenge but on the other hand it also presents an opportunity to harness that energy and to engage and assert through the political expression.

The digital technology does hold opportunities for getting citizens more engaged, for reconfiguring the relationship between the state and communities; particularly between the state and citizens but also between state and communities of interest and that interest is not just geographically defined but is very often based on particular interest that resonates regardless of where someone may live. The locality and other types of interest can be the basis for collective action. However, unchallenged interest in digital technology also holds risks. It really limits engagement at a level what we call ‘thin’ participation. It can be quite individualised and ad-hoc. As all these civic technology initiatives are taking place in isolation, they are not adding up to something bigger. So how do we connect these disjointed initiatives? The risk with the technology hype is that they are seen as magic bullet that will resolve all the issues, challenges and problems. There is a need for greater deliberations on how we hold the state to account through various metrics.

The ‘deep-democracy’ discourse is now equated with tools and techniques of transparency and accountability. A major focus is on anti-corruption and making governments open. Many a times the global efforts are disconnected from the local civil society networks.

In terms of the last point that we noted around the big picture – a shift from recognising the real complexity around politics of democracy to promoting tools and techniques of transparency and accountability. It is particularly evident in the growth of social accountability. There is strong emphasis from governments, donors and civil society on the practices of social accountability. Obviously there is value in it as it links rights to information and participation. It also provides useful tools for engagement. However, it can limit the broad depth and breadth of democratic practice to a particular tool and methodology and make it quite a technocratic exercise. It also limits the engagement to monitoring right at the end of a process and not on co-design, co-construction, co-implementation, and co-production. So it really runs the risk of trying to bring very complex processes into very simplistic measurements and metrics, and that obviously is something that we want to guard against. We do recognise the value and importance of it but it shouldn’t be the end of all. It needs to be linked into other practices as well.

These reflections prompt to ask some important questions:

- How do we re-constitute and/or re-energise the spaces for citizen participation, bearing in mind that in many places they don’t work the way they were intended to work and lead to substantive results.
- How do we harness the political energy of new social movements to strengthen local democracy? And not to undermine local democracy and criticize local democracy and the systems and procedures that are in place.
- How can we maximise the potential of technology for learning and linking innovations in the field of democracy?
- How can we link the tools of social accountability to deeper and broader forms of local democracy? How do we make sure that it is not treated as the end all but it is connected to a broader set of practices that enhance local democracy?
- How do we deepen the political understanding of social accountability and foster the learning that needs to happen across different contexts, the diffusion of knowledge and innovation to strengthen practice in this regard.

**Dialogues Round the Table**

Cynthia (Open Society Foundation): What is the global scope for LogoLink to include Eastern and Central Europe?

LogoLink: LogoLink has the presence in Asia, Africa and Latin America. It does not have much
presence in this region but we have worked with people and organisations within these region and still open to learning from the region.

_Cynthia (Open Society Foundation):_ What are the attempts made by LogoLink to raise these issues at the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and other donor circles focused on social accountability?

_LogoLink:_ There is a member on advisory committee to OGP but feels there is less interest from the donor community.

_Cynthia (Open Society Foundation):_ There is room to agitate and more work should be done in this regard.

_LogoLink:_ LogoLink members are related to various capacity building networks and the consultations show how democracy at the local level has been improving, but are also challenged by difficulties in articulating global issues.

_Roland (UNDEF):_ The issues raised by LogoLink are important ones. Indonesia is an example of radical decentralisation without developing necessary capacity at the local level. There are certain lessons to draw: civil society is strong at the national level but weak at local level. Civil society must be strengthened at local level as important solution to most of these problems. Right to information is needed to be addressed on both demand and supply side of government dissemination. Need to pay attention to supply side of delivery. There is a tension between global, national and local which could be mediated by the civil society.

_John (Hunger Project):_ There is a need to emphasise the role of gender and addressing patriarchy and need to intervene at the local level through civil society engagement. Building women’s networks at grassroots level is a game changer. Another point of entrance is to ensure the independence of judiciary systems from political parties (e.g. in Bangladesh).

_Anselmo (Korean Human Rights Foundation):_ How does LogoLink link to other institutions? How to engage with the post-2015 agenda to aid global, national and local tension? UN is beginning to discuss local governance and how is LogoLink engaging?

_LogoLink:_ We were part of Rabat declaration. We recognised other global charters which also dealt with local participation and looking for opportunities to build solidarity. They are part of process and we focus on the capacity of civil society to participate and to bridge the gap.

_LogoLink:_ Middle class at the national level is agitating against corruption, but are not evident on local level because of lack of avenues. In Myanmar civic engagement in OGP is a means of legitimising NGO.

Logolink: We need to recognise that the question of the local has been side-lined as a recipient and beneficiary rather than an actor. Is this a proper diagnosis and if that’s the case how do we make the local an active agent again?

_John (Hunger Project):_ The sectors are big push for centralisation and that’s where all the resources are. A concerted effort must be mounted to show sectoral efforts must be holistic and local, for example, nutrition, resilience and gender. LogoLink cannot win it simply through governance window and network like LogoLink must shift focus to sector. UCGL is also a great avenue for engagement.

_LogoLink:_ How do we create the best space for this multi-dimensional approach, for example, the relationship between invited and invented spaces for citizen participation? It is important and LogoLink needs to do a better job articulating a response.

_LogoLink:_ There is still a period of democratic transformation in the North including even in the UK. Networks like LogoLink can help deliver learning beyond the North-South binary. Lots of innovation from global South for multidirectional learning but are there structures for translating to North in funding structures.

_Roland (UNDEF):_ Digital revolution a means to increase spaces – but there is a tension between digital and deliberative. LogoLink is to be learning organisation. Can do advocacy and normative work, but to focus on being a learning organisation. Learn from success and failures. The other point is the Charter should not use utopia as a reference to democracy and to think through rights concept only. It should not make an assumption that these rights do not currently exist. It must focus on deepening and actualisation rather than impression of new rights are needed.

_Oana (IIT):_ There is an issue of cultural diversity – how do we make sure the invited spaces are inclusive of citizens and not just the majority and certain minorities.

_LogoLink:_ Brazil is interesting in the sense that right to participate and diversity are both enshrined in the constitution and yet it has not effectively achieved this aim. There could be cross-cultural learning to improve.

_John (Hunger Project):_ More alliance building needs to be done to bridge international development civil society and local governance. The root is ignorance on the basic understandings of citizenship. The democratisation of civil society itself and the invited spaces – need to impact the international CSOs in order to impact large institutions. If local participatory structures are not working, fix them, do not bypass.
**Logolink**: Urban SDG is not the same as local because in many contexts the roles of technical para-statal institutions are of paramount and this in a way has centralised the way of managing urbanisation.

**Logolink**: Is the new SDGs now taking a turn for universality or stuck in North-South divide?

**John (Hunger Project)**: Many countries in the North like Germany, USA, UK, etc. see SDGs as means to embolden domestic agendas. There is a desire for universality. There is also a push to measure learning objectives and outcomes.

**Logolink**: What does this argument for universality and the existence of these right mean for the work to be done, including technology?

**Logolink**: The potential of online is great but what is the risk of losing the deliberative? There is a concern that it is drawing away from face-to-face is not necessarily true. Deliberation may in fact be possible even through technology. When geography and digital intersect this is great for example hyper local online forums. These are exciting new spaces but not necessarily political. This is evident in stories that are represented through Logolink and should be highlighted.

**Logolink**: Politics of exclusion must be brought back into the stakeholder language.

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**List of Attendees in the Round Table Discussion**
23 September 2014, New School, NYC

1. Bob Buckley (New School)
2. Cynthia Eyakuze (Open Society Foundation)
3. John Coonrod (Hunger Project)
4. Teal Acadia (Public Agenda)
5. Nelson Saule (Polis Institute)
6. Silvio Caccia Bava (Polis Institute)
7. Alex Shankland (IDS)
8. Patrick Patino (Institute for Popular Democracy)
9. Miriam van Donk (Isandla Institute)
10. Zhuang Ming (Participation Centre of China)
11. Matt Leighninger (Deliberative Democracy Consortium)
12. Roland Rich (United Nations Democracy Fund)
13. Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay (Participatory Research in Asia)
14. Anselmo Lee (Korea Human Rights Foundation)
15. Lucine Munkyung Park (John Hopkins University)
16. Theodore Przybyla (Rockefeller Brothers Fund)
17. Oana Nestian Sandu (Intercultural Institute of Timisoara)

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