

# Citizen participation for sustainable cities

**Astrid Nilsson**, Stockholm Environment Institute  
**Fedra Vanhuysse**, Stockholm Environment Institute  
**Venni Arra**, Stockholm Environment Institute  
**Alicia Requena**, Cleantech Scandinavia  
**Magnus Agerström**, Cleantech Scandinavia

Often, decisions on how to best invest to achieve sustainable cities are made without consulting the most important stakeholders: the citizens themselves. Involving citizens in the decision-making process is crucial because by giving them the opportunity to propose ideas, voice their concerns and influence decisions about what to invest in and why, the impact of investment can be greater.

Citizen participation methods can foster a strong and transparent democratic process, while at the same time benefit municipalities by finding innovative sustainable solutions, strengthening local action and gaining support for the implementation of new ideas. With investments, participatory budgeting can support inclusive and creative decisions throughout the whole process: from what to invest in and why, to giving feedback on the achievement of the investment.

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## What is citizen participation?

“Citizen participation is the process in which individuals, groups, and organizations are given the opportunity to take part in decision-making that will affect them, or in which they have an interest.”<sup>1</sup>

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## Why is citizen participation important for sustainable cities?

Global warming has exacerbated global inequalities. Economically poorer people suffer disproportionately from the adverse effects of a changing climate, despite being those least responsible for global carbon emissions. According to Oxfam, the richest 10% emit 24% of carbon emissions

### INFO BOX SDG 11 SUBGOAL 11.3:

“Enhancing inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated, and sustainable human settlement planning and management”; measured by the proportion of cities with a direct participation structure of civil society in urban planning and management that operate regularly and democratically.

in Sweden.<sup>2</sup> As reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring that the transition towards fossil-free societies does not further exacerbate inequalities is crucial to securing a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable future. In particular, SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities directly links achieving sustainable societies with citizen participation.

## What does citizen participation bring to the table?

By empowering residents to engage and giving them a voice, citizen participation is a powerful tool to build **strong and inclusive democratic processes** and create higher levels of **trust** in the organizing institution. Through citizen participation, citizens that typically have lower levels of political and economic power are given the chance to voice their concerns, participate in the local decision-making process and affect its outcomes. A higher level of citizen inclusion enables a **redistribution of power** and hence **reduces inequalities**<sup>3</sup>, which is central to creating a just and sustainable city.

Furthermore, citizen participation is an effective governance tool for finding sustainable **solutions that match the local**

*“The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you. Participation of the governed in their government is, in theory, the cornerstone of democracy—a revered idea that is vigorously applauded by virtually everyone. The applause is reduced to polite handclaps, however, when this principle is advocated by the have-not blacks, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Indians, Eskimos, and whites.”*

– Sherry R. Arnstein 1969

**and regional context.** By utilizing local knowledge, experience and ideas, cities can find innovative ways of solving their local challenges. Additionally, finding and testing solutions through citizen participation builds consensus and can create stronger **momentum and support** for ideas and their implementation.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, greater involvement of citizens in the decision-making processes can be a **learning experience** for both citizens and civil servants. Municipal representatives get a space to explore in more detail the challenges faced by the city and present the co-benefits of different solutions. This can **encourage action** at individual and community levels and deepen local networks. At the same time, civil servants can gain a deeper understanding of the different concerns and viewpoints of the community and enhance their accountability.<sup>5</sup>

According to the World Bank, **“Growing evidence confirms that under the right conditions, citizen participation can help governments achieve improved development results in creating links between citizen participation and improved public service delivery, public financial management, governance, social inclusion and empowerment”.**<sup>6</sup>

## Forms of citizen participation

One of the most popular models for describing the forms of public participation is **Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation**.<sup>3</sup> It describes the different degrees of citizen participation, ranging from deliberate manipulation to citizen control. It also illustrates the significant gradations of citizen involvement, where, at the lowest level, certain procedures may result in powerholders being symbolically inclusive or manipulative, rather than being genuinely committed to giving a voice to citizens and incorporating their views into decisions that affect them.

Citizen participation can take many forms, with varying levels of participation throughout the decision-making process. Participation methods can include informing, consulting,

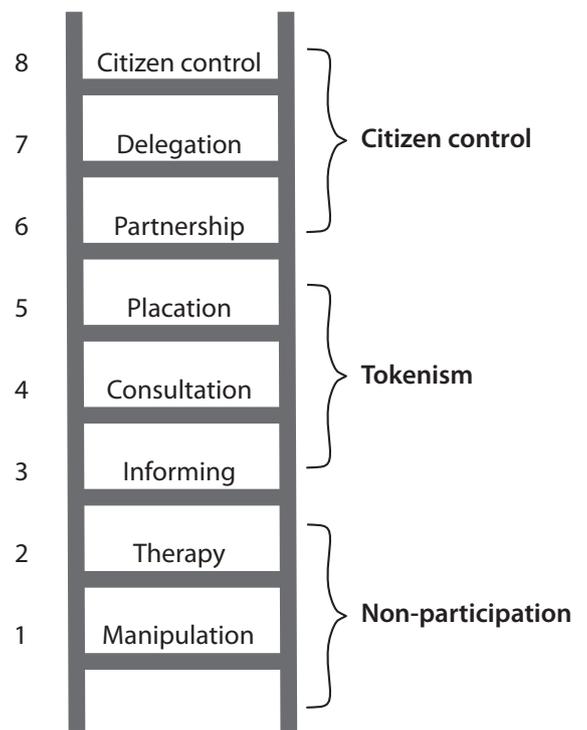


Figure 1. Arnstein’s Ladder (1969). Degrees of Citizen Participation.

involving and empowering the citizens (Table 1). The various methods present the different degrees to which citizens have influence on final decisions. For any chosen method, citizens should be included throughout the entire decision-making process. Multiple modes of activities – e.g., digital tools and in-person events at different days and times – should be utilised to encourage a wide range of actors to participate. Studies have found that citizens who take part in participation initiatives often belong to a relatively well-educated group, regularly engage in participation activities and have participated in the process for a long time. This reduces diversity and can hinder inclusion.<sup>7</sup> Hence, special attention should be paid to ensuring diversity in the process. Additionally, the process should be transparent and give citizens insight into how their input will be processed, shared and responded to.



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Table 1. Degrees of public participation with contemporary example, adapted from the IAP2 public participation spectrum.<sup>8</sup>

Degree of participation, low to high 					
	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
<b>Goal</b>	Provide citizens with objective information to understand proposed problems and solutions	Obtain public feedback on proposed solutions	Work with citizens to ensure that their concerns are understood and considered	Partner with citizens for the development of alternatives and identification of solutions	Place the final decision-making in the hands of the citizens
<b>Promise</b>	Keep citizens informed	Acknowledge citizen concerns	Reflect concerns in the developed alternatives	Look for and incorporate citizen advice	Implement citizen decision
<b>Example tools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Factsheets</li> <li>• Websites</li> <li>• Open houses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public comment</li> <li>• Focus groups</li> <li>• Surveys</li> <li>• Public meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workshops</li> <li>• Deliberate polling</li> <li>• Citizen panels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizen advisory boards</li> <li>• Participatory decision-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizen juries</li> <li>• Ballots</li> <li>• Delegated decisions</li> </ul>

## Examples of citizen participation methods

### Participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting is a citizen participation method in which citizens vote to decide on how to spend a specific portion of a public budget. According to UN-Habitat, participatory budgeting is one of the most successful democratic innovations of the last 25 years,<sup>9</sup> as it gives local citizens power over a budget and brings transparency and direct democracy to the budgeting process. The procedure usually consists of deciding on the budget, rules and plan for the process. Then, ideas are brainstormed in the community, proposals drawn up and votes cast.

The method was used in Madrid, Seoul, Delhi, New York and many other cities. In 2016, under Mayor Anne Hidalgo, Paris chose to put €100 million into participatory budgeting (approx. €40 per inhabitant), and 5% of the population participated in the vote. Funded projects included creating urban gardens in schools, transforming derelict buildings into a centre for refugees and installing vertical gardens on facades.

### Citizen panels, advisory boards and juries

Citizen advisory boards, panels and juries are forms of citizen participation where a representative group of randomly chosen citizens are invited to consult on certain questions. Citizen advisory boards are local government entities consulted regularly to give advice on officials' work. Citizen panels, on the other hand, are convened on only one occasion to deliberate on a specific set of proposals.

Citizen juries answer a specific question posed by the organizing body through informed deliberation. For example, the successful French Citizen Convention for Climate was convened to discuss and propose measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, leading to 149 proposals being developed.

### Digital platforms for participation

The growth of digital tools represents an opportunity to make participatory methods easier and expand the reach of participants. For example, there is potential to reach more young people by engaging with them through quick digital interactions. Another advantage of digital tools is that they can make it easier to present quantitative data to the decision-makers which can then be analysed and integrated into the decision-making process.

A good example of a participatory process that can be set-up digitally is an e-petition, where individuals can submit a proposal and get support for it from other citizens. Further examples are e-democracy platforms such as CitizenLab, Maptionnaire or [coUrbanize](#) which allow for digital interaction between officials and citizens.

### Learn more

- Learn about more **public participation tools** such as focus groups, consensus workshops, charettes and public briefings on the [US EPA Public Participation Guide: Tools webpage](#)
- Find **Swedish examples** and tools on [SKR's webpage](#) dedicated to public participation
- Find **international examples** on [Participedia](#), a network and database for public participation
- Find **ideas and theories** on the OECD webpage on [Innovative Citizen Participation](#)
- Find ideas and theories on citizen participation on the World Bank webpage on [Citizen Participation](#)
- Learn more about participatory budgeting through [UN-Habitat's Participatory Habitat Initiative](#)

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