

## Civic Engagement, Citizen Participation and Quality of Governance in Iran

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**ABSTRACT** The purpose of this article is to describe the interrelationship between people's participation in local government, civic engagement and good governance. The paper is based on the survey questionnaire carried out among 400 citizens in Torbat-Heydarieh, Iran. The findings revealed that the level of citizen's involvement is at the non-participation level, as well as the rate of civic engagement is low. Therefore, in this case it could be concluded, that people's participation and civic engagement have little contribution to the quality of governance in Iran.

### INTRODUCTION

A number of researchers have highlighted the role of civic engagement towards the quality of governance, and encouraged people's participation in local government matters (Adler and Goggin 2005; Zlatareva 2008; Sharma 2009). Although, participation is affected by civic engagement, it plays a crucial role in developing civic engagement as well as promoting good governance. Through their two-way relationship, civic engagement and people participation reinforce each other and also affect governance. This is basically reflected in the attempts of international agencies to develop civic engagement and enhance people participation. This study attempts to highlight a trilateral relationship between civic engagement as a key component of social capital, participation in local government, and quality of good governance, as well as the contribution of civic engagement and people participation towards the quality of governance.

#### Local Governance and Citizen's Participation

Governance refers to new processes, methods, or ways of governing society (Jolly 2002; Stoker 1998) Local governance caters to the diverse objectives of living, working, and self-governance of the community. It is not just about providing and delivering some local services, but also about supporting the life and liberty of citizens, providing a democratic space

for people participation, and facilitating outcomes that enrich the quality of life of residents. According to Cheema (2005), governance comprises complex mechanisms, processes, relationships, and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their rights and obligations, and mediate their differences. The local governance includes local authorities and public participation. It is about collaboration and participation of various sectors in society and the interrelationship among administrative organs, and civic groups (Park 2003). Local governments are the most important local organ, which through its capacity to enhance citizen participation, promote good governance. Montiel and Barten (1999) point out that the success of involving citizens in governance is related to ability of the local government to establish effective relationships with various organizations of civil society and spread out the networks of civic engagement (Montiel and Barten 1999). Participation plays a crucial role in good governance. According to a published report by Bangladesh government (1996), participation is defined as a process through which people influence and have control over development initiatives. There are obviously no accountability, no development, and no programs without citizen participation (Aref and Marof 2009). Ashley and Roe (1998) describe community participation as a spectrum ranging from passive to active involvement to full local participation, where there is active community participation and venture ownership. Meanwhile,

some scholars such as Pretty (1995), Oakley (1991), and Wandersman et al. (1987), provided a typology of participation, but the most suitable typology that is suitable for urban issues is Arnstein's ladder (Mohammadi et al. 2010). Arnstein's ladder of participation is the most well-known continuum of citizen participation which frames participation in terms of citizen power. According to her, participation is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the politics and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future (Arnstein 1969).

### **Civic Engagement**

Civic engagement is very broad and there is a lack of consensus about its definition (Gibson 2000). Lutaya (2009), argued that citizen engagement is affected by several different factors, such as attitudes, civic awareness, political influence, and feedback mechanisms, each of which could affect the ability of local governments to engage their citizens in participatory governance (Lutaya 2009). Putnam (2000) and Micheal (2004) also defined civic engagement in a broad way, which encompass both formal and informal activities. However, others like Diller (2001) and Hollister (2002) defined civic engagement in limited way, which only include engagement in formal activities. Adler and Goggin (2005), in their study, referred to four definitions of civic engagement which limit the term to a specific realm or type of activity, namely civic engagement as a community service, civic engagement as a collective action, civic engagement as a political involvement, and civic engagement as a social change. According to Diller (2001), civic engagement is any activity where people come together to fulfill their role as citizens. Civic engagement may be defined as the means by which individuals act collectively, and affect the civil society (Richard and Judy 2005). Zlatareva (2008) stated that civic engagement is about participation, partnership, and empowerment. It is about how citizens form and shape their collective actions with other institutions at the national and local levels, and with also non-governmental actors such as NGOs, and public sectors, and how they articulate their priorities and exercise their interests. UNDP (2002) defines civic engagement as a process, not an event that closely involves people in the

economic, social, cultural and political processes that affect their lives. It entails ensuring people's involvement in decision-making, and enhancing their role in promoting good governance.

### ***Civic Engagement and Participation in Local Government***

There is a trilateral relationship between people participation in local government, civic engagement and good governance. All these concepts are interrelated with each other. Civic engagement and people participation in local government reinforce each other and also contribute towards promoting the quality of governance. Civic engagement creates a safe space for participation by playing the role of a mediator between citizens and local authorities, by motivating and creating suitable environment for people to participate at the local level, and by identifying the necessary changes required for local governments (Zlatareva 2008). Putnam (2000) states that the more the people are engaged in social activities the more likely they are to participate in local government activities. This is because, civic engagement as a main component of social capital, enables participants to work together more effectively to pursue shared objectives at the local level. Although, people participation is affected by civic engagement, but people participation also plays a crucial role in promoting civic engagement, as well as in development of local government. Zlatareva (2008) believes civic engagement is being fostered by enhancing citizen's involvement in public dialogues and decision-making and by strengthening the participation of the poorest groups in policy processes. Pedersen (2006) identify the effective role of participation of poorest social sectors, women, youth, and indigenous people. Mobilizing civic engagement among these groups is a basic foundation for strengthening their voice in the policy-making process. On the other hand, there is two-way relationship between local governance and civic engagement. Zlatareva (2008) believe, local governance is a focal point for activating civic engagement. Based to UNICEH (2008) while there are frequent factors influencing civic engagement, a critical success factor is good governance. When governance is established, civic engagement programs often empower people to change their societies

and their own lives positively as well as civic engagement with creating new social networks influence upon local governance. Putnam (1993) asserts that civic engagement and good governance become locked together in a ‘virtuous circle’. As Maloney et al. (2000) put it, “the governance of an area is affected by social capital, but is itself an influence on social capital”. This approach supports the view of Putnam. If local governments are capable of affecting the advancement of social capital, it may as well be possible to promote the ‘virtuous’ form of civic engagement and good governance. They may also influence the degree of civic engagement – as the main element of social capital – through their own competence and achievements.

Local governments are the key actors in civic engagement as they can mobilize people and be the facilitators, catalysts and policy advocates in execution of good governance. Local governments shape the conditions in which civic engagement and social networks thrive, and they play an essential role in determining the level of influence that citizens have upon all policies (Lowndes and Wilson 2001). They have a significant effect on the development of civic engagement, seeing that it is an institution easily accessible to citizens, and is able to mobilize a large number of participants. By reviewing the literature, it is revealed that, there is a multilateral relationship between people participation in local government, civic engagement, and good governance. Each one of these concepts affects each other, while these concepts can be affected from each other reversely.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was carried out in Torbat Heydariyeh, during the period June to July 2009. Torbat Heydariyeh is located in the north-east of Iran in Khorasan Razavi province. In some big cities in Iran, local governments have established neighborhood councils as a social network to connect with citizens and provide interaction opportunities. Neighborhood councils are a subset of local government, which provide the channel for citizens to voice their views and become involved in community affairs. In Iran, Torbat Hedariyeh was the first, among the cities with a population of less than 200,000, to establish a neighborhood council, to increase public participation and utilize people’s potential. The

study used survey design, where a questionnaire was used to collect the data. The questionnaire was structured around a Likert scale. The respondents answered each statement based on five scales. The value of each response for these items on the questionnaire is as follows: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = not sure, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree. The respondents were 400 citizens, where each citizen was chosen based on cluster sampling. The population of this research was all residents, including men and women, above 18 years of age, who live in Torbat Hedariyeh. Based on literature review, 21 and 7 questions were developed, to evaluate the level of people’s participation, and civic engagement, respectively. The respondents were asked to answer these questions which were constructed to gauge their level of participation in local government and their rate of civic engagement in civil activities. The questionnaire was pilot tested to have its contents validated. Statements for civic engagement were tested for their validity using Cronbach’s alpha. Descriptive analysis was employed to determine the level of people participation and the rate of civic engagement.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study to determine the level of participation and the rate of civic engagement used descriptive statistics. Table 1 reveals the mean score of eight dimensions of the participation ladder (the maximum mean is 5 and the lowest is 1). Table 1 reveals the findings of the analysis, which show the differences between dimensions of levels’ of participation. Using the mean of the total score as a standard indicator, it was found that generally participation levels in tokenism and citizen-power was low, whereas in non-participation was high.

**Table 1: Total scores of the level of participation**

<i>Levels</i>	<i>Dimensions</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Non-participation <i>Mean=4.02</i>	Manipulation	4.03
	Therapy	4.08
Tokenism <i>Mean=2.43</i>	Informing	2.37
	Consultation	2.66
	Placation	2.26
Citizen-power <i>Mean=1.76</i>	Partnership	1.83
	Delegated power	1.62
	Citizen control	1.82

Table 1 showed the differences in the levels of participation (non-participation, tokenism,

and citizen- power). Using the mean it was found that participation level in non-participation dimension was higher than tokenism and citizen-power (4.05, 2.43 and 1, 76 respectively). Levels of participation in tokenism and citizen-power dimensions, which are genuine participations, have low scores as compared to non-participation level. It shows citizens cannot cooperate with the local government and have not been empowered to influence policies and expand their opportunities in governance. Generally, the findings reveal that the level of people's participation in local government is low and people are mostly involved in the non-participation stage. This means that most citizens are not involved in the decision-making process, and do not attempt to voice their views and hold the local government accountable. Table 2 shows citizen engagement in civil activities. Based on the mean measures of the engagement item, the civil activities, which the citizens are engaged in are as follows: "attend public meetings" (1.92), "membership in neighborhood councils" (1.63), "membership in NGOs" (1.91), "interact with local authorities" (2.1), and "membership in political parties" (1.75) As shown in Table 2, all these suggest that the respondents have rather low engagement in civic and social activities. Meanwhile differences among respondents were also observed. Most of 6- items had the max range from the minimum (1point) to maximum (5 points), indicating a variation of individual respondents' perceptions towards participation.

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics of citizens' engagement in civic activities**

<i>Items</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std.D</i>
Attendance in public meetings	1.92	0.80
Calling for follow up on affairs	2.37	0.97
Relationship with councilors	2.10	0.99
Membership in NGOs	1.91	1.11
Membership in neighborhood councils	1.63	0.90
Membership in political groups	1.75	0.93

In the literature review, it is more often mentioned that for civic engagement to be effective in governance, active citizenship and collective actions are required (Zlatareva 2008). In other words, to promote good governance, citizens should be involved in high levels of participation, share power in policy formulations and be active participants rather than mere recipients.

For citizens to be effective in local governance, they should come together and interact with governing bodies collectively. In fact, civic engagement is not related to the interaction of an individual citizen with the local government but rather the interaction of a group of individuals. Citizens should be more involved in community actions and influence decision-making processes that affect their lives, their communities, and their societies. They need to interact with the local government and foster active relationship with local councilors. However, based on descriptive results of the level of participation, it was revealed that the level of people's participation in local government affairs and also the rate of civic engagement in civil activities in this study is not high. Due to the socio-cultural situation of the case study, the people are more interested in participating in non-civil rather than civil activities. Motee and Namazi (2000) argued, however, that participation in the form of cooperation, collaboration and synergy is a very common among Iranians. However, people are more interested to participate in religious charity, sports and non-civil activities than in civil activities, such as in local governments, NGOs, political groups, etc. As Putnam stated the term 'civic engagement' is related to participation of people in civil activities (Putnam 2000). Indeed the meaning and mechanism of good governance is articulated through effective people's participation in civil activities (Waheduzzaman 2008). On the other hand, strong civil societies generate civic engagement and social capital, and connect citizens with government. Civil society implies that citizens of different backgrounds work together to express their needs exercise their rights and improve their communities through dialogue and cooperation with the state. Therefore, based on the mean scores of civic engagement in civil activities, as well as the mean scores of dimensions of level of participation, it could be concluded that in this study they have insignificant contribution towards promoting good governance. As mentioned, civic engagement and good governance have been locked together in a "virtuous circle" (Putnam 2000). A good quality of governance is expected when civic engagement of people in civil activities is at a high level. However in this case, as the rate of civic engagement is low, it has a secondary role in reinforcing good governance. In fact, this rate of civic engagement is

inadequate to ensure good governance. Moreover, in terms of the level of participation in local government matters, the dimension of non-participation is at a high level, and its mean score is ( $M = 4.05$ ). Since the objective of this dimension is not involving people in the decision-making process, its contribution is not enough for good governance. As a result, the quality of good governance, based on the level of citizen's participation in local government and rate of civic engagement in community and civic activities, is not at a desirable stage.

### CONCLUSION

In this study, the level of people's participation and the rate of civic engagement were examined. The basic argument was that effective citizen participation in local government and engagement in civic activities play a crucial role in promoting the quality of local governance. Civic engagement is considered as an instrument for local governance and a foundation for empowerment of people, which engage citizens in local affairs. In addition, participation in local government is essential for governance, as it strengthens the relationship between citizens and local government and provides the space for their partnership. From the findings of this study, it is noted that the level of participation in local government and also the rate of engagement in civic activities is low. In other words, people do not participate at the decision-making level, are not able to interact with councilors and they are not interested to engage in civic activities. Hence, it could be concluded that they have limited contribution towards deepening of governance.

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