

Participation Processes in Israeli Local Government: Policy Directions and Recommendations

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This paper outlines recommendations to improve citizen participation in local government, and promote meaningful, effective participation processes that impact local policy and citizens' lives. These recommendations are based on structured discussion sessions focused on creating comprehensive guidance for improving citizen participation in Israeli local governance with political and civil society representatives, academics, advisors to participation initiatives and independent leaders of such.

The **first chapter** provides background on citizen participation at the local level.

The **second chapter** lays out general and specific recommendations and plans of action to improve and stimulate citizen participation processes in local government.

The **first appendix** details the insights garnered from the discussion sessions, and **the second** lists all participants.

Summary

In recent decades, the local political arena has gained renewed attention in academic research and public policy platforms, after long decades of an almost exclusive focus on the state as the most suitable governing institution for advancing policy. The flexible and diverse nature of local authorities is now seen as advantageous for promoting various democratic and economic policies, and linked with values of innovation, choice, economic efficiency and pluralism, justifying the enhancement of local government's power and authorities. This has occurred alongside the initiation and acceleration of democratization processes and an increase in citizens' involvement in local processes. Since local politics are accessible and easy to participate in, and their impact on citizens close and immediate, the connection between local government and participatory processes has grown dominant.

The participatory trend did not bypass the State of Israel, and recent years have seen significant progress in governmental and public perception regarding the importance of promoting participation processes in government decision-making and policy processes. Changes have already been made, including the establishment of the Public Engagement unit in the Prime Minister's Office, the creation of dedicated standards for public participation managers in various government ministries, the inclusion of a public participation component in work plans, and significant improvements in cross-sectoral interfaces in a considerable portion of the ministries.

In the vast majority of local authorities, a wide variety of initiatives for involving residents and stakeholders have been implemented across a range of areas and levels of participation. However, unlike the central government, local government's commitment to participation processes is not anchored in systematic governmental policy but rather subject to the good will of decision-makers, and often undertaken without genuine commitment.

This reality adversely affects local authorities' inclination to participate; the nature of the participatory processes; and decision-makers' commitment to the outcomes of the processes, impeding the realization of the potential inherent specifically in the local arena. Moreover, the fact that public participation policy in local government is not institutionalized contributes to the creation of significant disparities between different local authorities. These gaps affect not only the quality and nature of the participatory processes, but also citizens' equal access to the governmental processes that shape their residential environment.

To address this, Kohelet Policy Forum partnered with The Israeli Civic Leadership Association and Haifa municipality to conduct three open dialogue meetings with over thirty-five participants who are active in the fields of public participation and local government.

The main insights that arose in these meetings were:

- (i) The necessity for: public legitimacy; trust and alignment of expectations; connection to the public; public awareness; transparency; a central body; coordination between all local entities; representation of all relevant elements; ongoing participation mechanisms; tailored and well-planned processes; and attention to the diverse municipalities' disparities and differences;
- (ii) A lack of coherent terminology, expertise and connections to the business sector;
- (iii) The importance of the middle players (the "makers") within organizations.

Recommendations:

1. General:

1.1. **Clear Terminology:** Differentiate between **public participation processes** which are directed at local residents, operated ad-hoc and usually focused on information sharing, consultation and the design of concrete services relating to residents' local, close and immediate living space; and **collaborative governance processes**, aimed at permanent and ongoing involvement of all stakeholders (the business sector, civil society organizations, experts, resident representatives and community managers), focused on strategic decision-making, planning and policy processes. Most of the recent developments in citizen engagement have been of the first sort, and it is important to deepen and broaden the second. Effective participatory governance requires a permanent and ongoing participation policy aimed at the significant involvement of all stakeholders – and on meaningful issues.

1.2 **Professionalization:** Enhance the professionalism of the field of citizen participation, by, among others, knowledge sharing mechanisms, standardization, evaluation systems, training programs, and the formulation of standards of quality.

1.3 **Consciousness:** Take action to change perceptions in Israel – both among the public and among decision-makers – to promote a participatory approach that moves beyond citizen engagement as a tool for gaining legitimacy and building trust, to a recognition of its practical value in creating better, more efficient policies that are responsive to real conditions and actual citizen needs.

2. Specific:

2.1 **The government** should (i) promote a government resolution on public participation in local government (as a follow-up to previous decisions) and either expand existing resolutions to apply also to local authorities, or promulgate a new government resolution that would specifically and formally establish the commitment to develop citizen participation at the local level in Israel; (ii) create a specialized unit within the Ministry of Interior to provide local authorities with coordination and guidance on public participation matters, modeled after the existing unit at the national level in the PMO. The unit's responsibilities should include: setting policy and goals, developing knowledge infrastructure and training, developing technology and tools for review, creating incentives, providing funding, establishing cooperation with local authorities and changing public perception; (iii) grant incentives to develop the field; (iv) broaden the PMO's Public Engagement unit's remit to include the local level; and (v) use existing regional structures to promote knowledge and participation initiatives at the regional or local level.

2.2 Local authorities should (i) internalize participation as a long-term strategic policy; (ii) work to institutionalize and develop participation processes; (iii) incorporate participation processes in annual plans; (iv) create connections between various decision-making forums in local authorities; (v) establish a national network or forum of participation processes leaders – a professional group in which to exchange knowledge and ideas, learn practices, give mutual support etc.; and (vi) harness influential partners in the local arena to advance the field, connecting to bodies such as the Federation of Local Authorities in Israel and the Israel National Lottery (*Mifal HaPayis*).

2.3 Civil society should: (i) work to raise public awareness and perception to fuel initiatives, and join and develop ongoing processes; (ii) foster participatory literacy among the public using social networks and local bodies (such as community centers), (iii) develop training programs and initiate conferences; (iv) cultivate local community leaders or influential figures who can champion and advocate for citizen participation initiatives within their communities; (v) mediate between various parties to participation efforts; (vi) create tailored toolboxes for local authorities; (vii) create regional or broad local advanced support networks; and (viii) formulate and publish a rating system to publicly measure how well local authorities engage in citizen participation, modeled after the existing system used to evaluate transparency in Israeli municipal authorities.

For [the full Hebrew paper](#)