

Abuja, Nigeria

Citizens reclaim their rights to be informed

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Summary

Citizen participation in local governance is rare in Nigeria, but civil society groups and leaders and champions working inside government have managed to influence some parts of the government to take the needs and wants of citizens more seriously. This case study describes how new democratic spaces were created in the city of Abuja to facilitate dialogue between political leaders in local government and citizens. Through the use of public meetings and a range of media, decision-making processes became more transparent and the scope for trust and mutual respect improved. Amina Salihu is former Senior Special Assistant on Information and Strategy for the Minister of Abuja.

Background

Since gaining independence in 1960 Nigeria has mostly been governed under military rule with only short periods of civilian rule between 1960-66 and 1979-1983. As a result the prevalent culture that permeates society is militaristic; based on a command structure where the constitution is frequently suspended and rule is by decree. Citizen participation is largely coerced by those in power and citizens are expected to assume, whether there are elections or power is seized, that the leadership knows best.

While not recognised formally, there is still an enduring culture of communality and consultation at a community level. A growing number of civil society groups and leaders have been influential in lobbying the government for a more rights based approach to development which would take into account the needs and wishes of the community. But those in power are reluctant to recognise that ordinary people should have a say in policy. Wherever change has occurred it is usually due to the direct influence of a civil society organisation or the presence of persons from such cultures in government.

Initially the el-Rufai administration, elected in 2003 in Abuja, was no different from other regional governments, implementing their policies without consulting or sharing with the citizens they were affecting. The Minister¹ was appointed by the President on a 10 point mandate to clean up Abuja and make it a safe, clean and healthy place for citizens in terms of sanitation, access to land and education. He proceeded to advance these plans without broad-based citizen consultation and began shaping policies in a very revolutionary manner. The administration set about returning the city to its original building and infrastructure plans of the 1980s, with planned space for parks, schools, hospitals, railway and roads. But as a result, citizens who had bought land through non-legal means, thinking they would have lifelong impunity, had their buildings removed and the land returned to its original purpose. In the beginning, the administration did not fully anticipate the need to share their strategy with citizens or to encourage discussion and feedback in a structured process. There was not enough support for these reforms to change Abuja and instead the process generated conflict, mistrust and misunderstanding. It created a real need to establish a dialogue between the citizens and government.



Participants take turns asking the minister and his team questions at Bwari Town Hall.
1. The Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) has the status of a governor of a state.

What happened and why was it significant?

At this time I was working as a Special Assistant Social Sector for the Minister of Abuja. I led a small team that had been lobbying for greater participation in the political process and for the involvement of all communities. This crisis meant that the arguments we had been putting forward suddenly made sense to our Principals. My portfolio was subsequently redesigned as Senior Special Assistant on information and strategy and I was asked to set up and coordinate a system for participation and feedback. This began in 2005 with the introduction of the town hall meetings (THMs).

THMs were regular quarterly forums where all residents of Abuja could meet with the Minister and his team and raise matters of interest in a 'no holds barred' encounter. The THM was broadcast on radio and via a 30 minute television documentary afterwards.

Over 1000 people attended the third THM, held in a suburb of the City Bwari. Many people in the community were formally invited to this event, some heard through word of mouth and others through advertisements on the radio. The participation of all six suburbs of Abuja was coordinated through the Area Council Chairpersons who helped organise the events and encouraged different categories of people to participate. My team also drew on people from the community who were already involved in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Economic and Empowerment Development Strategy (FEEDS). They had good links with their communities and were already in a position to articulate their needs to those in power.

The outcome of every THMs is documented by our team and formally adopted by the FCT Executive Committee as action points before the next THM. The Executive Committee was made up of Ministers and Secretaries (equivalent of Commissioners) who met weekly to look at the outcome of the meeting. In addition to this, other communication initiatives were subsequently set up to strengthen the process and give feedback on the outcomes from the town hall meetings.

These included:

- **Dateline Abuja** – an interactive phone-in and text-in radio programme run every fortnight on a Saturday morning on prime time national radio.
- **A Helpline system** – a series of public complaint phone numbers to process public complaints and provide feedback to the source. A team of energetic and passionate young people coordinated the helpline system. Some of them were fresh from University either on the mandatory one year of national service or fresh from service.
- **A fact sheet** of what worked well or otherwise according to feedback was circulated and taken as an integral part of memoranda to FCT executive committee. The FCT Executive Committee is the highest body responsible for policy decisions.
- **Abuja Journal** publication – an easy to read bi-monthly magazine for citizens with information about spending and policies and human interest stories.
- **Intergenerational dialogues** – with a focus on giving voice to children of primary and secondary school age. Boys and girls meet with the Minister of FCT and engage on policy matters in an informal interactive atmosphere.

The process of ensuring that better dialogue leads to better policy has not been perfect but it has led to better understanding of the pains required to enjoy the gains of effective policy-making and focused leadership. There are now better road networks, the city is cleaner and there is improved access for citizens to public spaces and education. Perhaps the most significant effect of this work is that, despite the culmination of the tenure of the el-Rufai administration, the new government is continuing this process. The Minister was also voted the best Minister of the year in 2006 and nominated in 2007 even though he spent only 5 months of the year before the end of the administration on this participatory work. Even opponents agree that this work is valuable.

These initiatives are significant as the outcome was a shift of policy that created a concentric circle linking a technical team, service providers and citizens. This circle of people created and monitored the implementation of the FCT strategy on economic empowerment (FEEDS) ultimately leading to the THMs. The initiatives came at an important time as many residents of Abuja were angry at being forced to remove informal housing without prior consultation. The THM processes allowed residents to reclaim their right to be informed and consulted on city management issues. The communication initiatives helped to reinforce the government's commitment to listen and respond to feedback.

What were the challenges?

1. Creating political alliances within government to support the THM idea.

There were many groups and individuals, both inside and outside the political structure campaigning for greater citizen participation. However there was little progress until decision-makers felt there was a real need. It depended on building the right alliances within the system to lend the weight necessary to support this idea.

2. Accurate planning to address citizens' needs.

The process required not merely setting up THMs to give voice to those citizens who felt they were not heard, but also setting up mechanisms for further feedback and accountability. The challenge was to manage the whole process not just the THMs.

3. Communicating the process to political elites

It was essential to have a team committed to the ideals of dialogue and community participation and who could communicate the principles of participation to others. It was a politically sensitive project which had never been attempted before and demanded the participation at each THM of Minister of Abuja Mallam el-Rufai and his entire cabinet. Getting agreement on this required a strong team, good interpersonal skills, lobbying and persuasion.

What were the lessons?

1. A dialogue forum does not replace the process of decision-making.

The THM's principal strength lies in its capacity to transform conflict by acting as mediator between citizens and decision-makers. However there will always be the need to deepen engagement through discussions and ideas that go beyond what is possible via the THM's. These meetings cannot replace formal policy-making processes.

2. Citizen engagement strengthens the policy-making process.

Often a greater sense of consensus is produced once people are involved in

consultation and decision-making. There appears to be less contestation as to whose right it is to make policies when there is a conviction that decisions are for the greater good.

3. THMs raise expectations which need to be delivered.

Citizens often equate the capacity to engage with the capacity to deliver. This does not necessarily follow. Alongside the THMs there need to be credible mechanisms for getting things done that also establish internal and external accountabilities for specific policies.

4. Government needs to listen to the people affected by their policies.

A partnership between the policy-

makers and the people whose lives the policy affects is essential in terms of creating better and more appropriate policies. Having the THM allows for feedback on policy and can create better decision-making by drawing on the lived reality of people concerned.

5. Communicate radical social change policies.

For social change to occur it is not enough for decision-makers to merely identify an issue and then act. The need for change must be communicated with citizens and then action agreed upon together. Without including and listening to citizens the policy will not be realised successfully.