

Promoting Participatory Planning Institutions to Reduce Conflict

LESSONS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE GLOBAL FRAGILITY ACT

Stable states require a “chain of sovereignty” between local communities and the governments who allocate resources and design policies. The Global Fragility Act (GFA) and U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS) recognize **local participatory governance** as a key tool for repairing this chain—by creating an inclusive and democratic interface where local and marginalized voices are empowered to make decisions regarding their communities. Mercy Corps has recently conducted in-depth studies of participatory planning programs in conflict-affected contexts in Kenya and Afghanistan. This brief provides key takeaways from this research about how participatory planning can meaningfully lead to empowerment and localization—and in doing so, contribute to reducing conflict.

Participatory institutions provide a meaningful and direct democratic interface between state and society at the local level.

The SPCPS can engage existing participatory institutions to foster local ownership in planning and monitoring, while also cultivating participatory institutions through investment. Investing in this interface is most valuable when there is low trust in existing institutions, due to their inability to provide public services, enable democratic representation, or protect basic rights. High quality participatory processes can also increase the capacity for collective action, especially among marginalized communities and social groups. This allows for better public goods provision and greater governance satisfaction, while also promoting social cohesion by engendering civic engagement, trust, and intergroup collaboration.



Participatory Planning Institutions enable the direct and formal involvement of citizens in a public process of both identifying public policy problems and proposing projects to address these issues. Though they can take many forms, two common examples are Community Driven Development (CDD) and Participatory Budgeting.

Participatory planning is a 4-step cycle:



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Realizing the potential of participatory planning requires contextually responsive design and local adaptation.

No static model of participatory planning can achieve legitimacy across all contexts. Rather, participatory planning can accommodate a wide degree of design features, and optimal program design depends on contextual factors. For example, the value of direct versus delegated participatory representation hinges on the strength of civil society and risk of elite co-option. Matching design features to context requires shifting from a common focus on scaling static “best practices,” towards contextually contingent, ‘best fit’ program design.

Beyond matching design to context, as a complex, institutional intervention, participatory planning is qualitatively different from delivering aid or investing in infrastructure. No matter how well-designed these institutions are, local implementers wield substantial discretion in how they are deployed at the community level. Rather than increasing the specificity of program elements, donors and

NGOs should lean into this difference and deepen their commitment to adaptive management while allowing for navigation by judgment.

Participatory planning should complement (not compete with) pre-existing civic or informal government structures.

True governance vacuums are rare, and participatory programs may fail if they ignore or supplant existing governance or civic structures that provide genuine, and often overlapping, services. This is especially dangerous with respect to non-state informal or traditional governance structures, which are far less visible, yet may be more legitimate and operational than the formal state. Participatory planning should seek to carefully draw on and involve pre-existing structures during implementation.

Monitoring and evaluating participation requires both qualitative and quantitative measures.

Participation requires people to show up for meetings. However, the empowerment and deliberation envisioned by participatory planning interventions is difficult to measure quantitatively. Effective monitoring of these interventions must capture the qualitative nature of the institutions being implemented. Key to this is investing in and empowering local implementers who are best able to monitor and ensure the qualitative functions of participation.

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Participatory institutions can act as mediators, defusing local conflict.

Institutional legitimacy is critical for addressing intergroup conflict. Due to their local nature and inclusive and public selection processes, participatory institutions can act as legitimate intermediaries when conflicts arise between local groups, mobilizing quickly to break cycles of escalation early on. For this, GFA implementors should seek out and engage high-quality participatory institutions where they exist, or foster them where needed, and integrate them into strategic planning and program design.

