

Contemporary Democracy: Ways of engaging the community in decision making

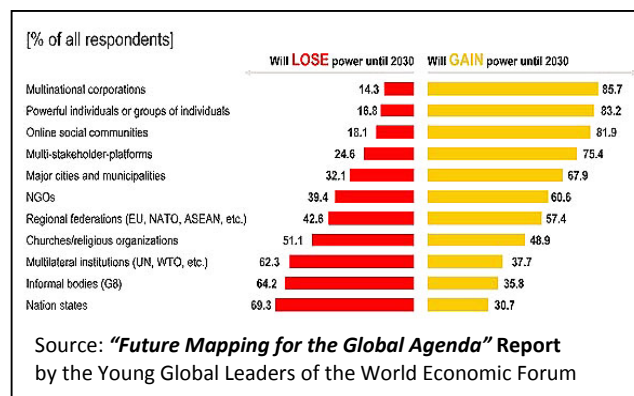
"Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives".

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
Article 21 (1), 10 December 1948

Government bureaucracies have been the main mechanism for supporting government since the late 18th Century and the French Revolution. By virtue of their gatekeeper position between decision makers and the community, public service agencies have wielded significant power in advising government on the development and implementation of policies and services.

Consultation with business, NGOs and citizens has always played a part in developing government initiatives, but the decisions about whether and how to involve the community have been ad hoc, and the bureaucratic hierarchy involved can sometimes make the whole process cumbersome and slow.

Since the early 1990s, the environment in which the government must respond to change has been transformed by the rapid development of the Internet and the accelerating pace of globalisation. Many activities to meet community needs, which were once only within the ambit or capacity of government, have now moved into the domain of people and in many ways have become self-regulatory. Skype, for example, has established a communications network that is totally outside the realm of conventional telecommunications regulation. The phenomenon of Wikipedia is another example of a thriving, community-driven project which has managed to survive through challenges without any government intervention.



This shift in power is reflected in the findings of a recent study conducted by Geneva based Young Global Leaders of the World Economic Forum, published on 14 January 2008.

A staggering 86% of its respondents see multinational corporations and individuals gaining power between now and 2030 at the expense of government and other more conventionally structured and bureaucratically based institutions.

In some cases, the exercise of power independent of government may work well and in the public interest. There are, however, many key areas where the government's involvement is vital, which include removing of barriers inhibiting progress, providing legal security and regulatory mechanisms where the national interest so dictates, and supporting research, education and other areas of common good that require government leadership.

The 'Second Track' Process is a new process through which previously ad hoc mechanisms for stakeholder engagement become the normal method of 'fast tracking' solutions to key issues. The process brings together experts from relevant sectors (including government, NGOs, business and consumer organisations) with a like-minded approach to resolving the issues positively and driving practical outcomes. Working collaboratively, these groups identify problems, initiate discussions, prepare white papers, develop solutions and oversee their implementation.

Global Access Partners (GAP) has pioneered and effectively used the 'Second Track' Process since 2002 in areas of Health and Wellbeing, Knowledge Capital, Political Participation and 'Open Democracy', and Philanthropy and Social Investment. The success of GAP initiatives demonstrates that these new ways of interaction between government, business and the community can be further developed, tested and refined for the public benefit, without putting at risk the core, fundamental machinery of government.