[Dr Imran Syed](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-imran-syed)

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**Participatory governance**

Cities and urban areas are where the majority of the global population now lives. To improve the quality of life of the urban population it is necessary to improve governance in cities.

Urban populations have been increasing steadily since the 1950s; in 2009 the global population in urban areas surpassed the population in rural areas for the first time. The present global urban population is estimated at 3.9 billion people. Most of the urban population lives in cities and some cities have populations that even surpass the populations of many countries.

Tokyo is the largest city in the world and its population of over 37 million people makes it more populous than countries like Saudi Arabia or Malaysia. Pakistan also has its share of large cities and Pakistan’s largest city, Karachi, has an estimated population of over 14 million and its second largest city, Lahore, has a population of over 11 million. According to a recent United Nations Human Settlements Programme report, the population of Pakistan living in urban areas is estimated to be around 77 million and this population is expected to reach close to 100 million by 2030.

Governance in urban areas can be a challenge especially in developing countries. Governance, as defined by the UNDP, is the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority to manage a society’s affairs. Additionally, we need to focus on good governance. The ‘good’ implies effective and responsible governance. The concept of good governance, among other things, involves accountability, transparency, efficiency, inclusiveness and participation.

An important characteristic of good governance is that it should be participatory. The participation of the population in systems of governance is usually thought of in terms of voting to elect representatives. These representatives are then entrusted to take decisions for and on behalf of the people who elected them. Election-focused systems have their weaknesses and strengths. One weakness is that many of the vulnerable and marginalized segments of society may not vote. Another weakness is that the engagement of the population in the political process peaks around the event of elections and then subsides.

Promoting participation focuses on deepening the engagement of the population with the governance structures of decision-making. In terms of city government, this level of decision-making provides many services and benefits that directly impact the quality of life of the urban population. These services can include provision of piped water, sanitation, policing, transportation, schooling, etc.

City governments operate in a system of governance that also includes other levels of government, which may include the regional, provincial and federal. The authority and the responsibility of city governments vary from one country to another but, these differences notwithstanding, one major characteristic of city governments is that they are closer to the population than other levels of government. This proximity means that city governments can provide a more feasible inroad for urban populations to participate and engage more deeply with governance processes.

There are several mechanisms that can promote participation in governance at the city level. These include sharing of information about government policies, making the population aware of their rights, mobilizing involvement by holding of referendums on key policy decisions, involving publics in the evaluation of the quality of public services, and participatory public expenditure and budgeting.

The budgeting process in Porto Alegre, a Brazilian city with a population around 1.5 million, is a good example of participatory governance. The participatory budgeting process started in Port Alegre in the late 1980s and has had a peak participation of around 50,000 residents in a budgeting exercise. Porto Alegre’s participatory governance model has residents giving direct input during the budgeting process and this input is reflected in spending priorities of the city.

One basic way of enhancing participation is conducting a public dialogue. The structuring and encouraging of hearing, speaking and discussing among the population fosters deeper participation and inclusion. One particular kind of public dialogue is multi-stakeholder dialogue.

This dialogue brings different stakeholders together to share information about how an issue affects them. This process of sharing promotes understanding and trust. The understanding can help stakeholders arrive at answers that are acceptable to a diverse collection of stakeholders. To be successful, these dialogues will need to be facilitated by skilled moderators who have some familiarity with the local context.

These sorts of participatory engagements, in addition to promoting trust and understanding, can also increase clarity and transparency around the subsequent steps towards implementation. However, these interactions can sometimes be difficult due to the nature of the problem and history of actions that have preceded the engagement. In difficult or seemingly intractable cases, it is important to take an incremental approach and to build realistic expectations in a sequence of successive steps.

The participatory process also needs to be aided with policies that facilitate access to information and provide freedom of speech. A level of support for participatory processes is also needed from those segments of the population that hold disproportionate power over policymaking. The marginalized segments of the population may be cynical or suspicious of the participatory opportunities and therefore may also need to be encouraged to participate in participatory processes.

Improving governance is essential for improving lives in Pakistan. The city level is very consequential in this regard, especially in view of the increasing trend towards urbanization in Pakistan. Participatory processes, including public dialogue, can significantly help improve the quality of governance in the urban areas of Pakistan.

The writer heads a university-based

policy centre in Islamabad.