MISSION KARAMYOGI

CONSULTATION AND CONSENSUS BUILDING

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Consultation and Consensus Building

Introduction

Consultation and Consensus Building forms the backbone of contemporary citizen centric governance necessitated by the complexities of the state's functions in relation to its citizens along with interdependent organizational, global economic and political system. Kettl (2015). It is imperative that an able public administrator has the ability to identify the stakeholders/influencers, establish trusting relationships, consult them through formal and informal channels, build consensus through dialogue, persuasion and effect reconciliation of diverse views/interests for common good. Though similar, the terms consultation and consensus building are not synonymous.

Conceptual Background

Consultation is intended for eliciting opinions aimed at policy formulation and implementation. There are two types of consultative or advisory bodies that can be constituted, namely, expert committees based on specialized knowledge or experience and representatives committee based on their representative character. The importance of consultation in governance in the large Indian democratic framework cannot be over emphasized as illustrated by Dutt (1958). Successful outcome of consultation process would depend on the experience, maturity, understanding and spirit in which opinion of consultative bodies is sought by the concerned authorities. However, due caution must be exercised by the administrators to guard against biased opinions emanating from parochial and vested interests of committee members.

Consensus building involves a good-faith effort to meet the interests of all stakeholders and generally seeks a unanimous agreement. Administrators that focus on making decisions through consensus building tend to implement the policies in more pragmatic and acceptable manner. Consensus-building is a emergent process that allows a diverse section of citizens to participate in decision-making process and avoid dissent, protests and hindering decision implementation subsequently. The consensus-building process helps stakeholders to establish a common understanding and framework for arriving at mutually acceptable solution. Consensus implies majority support as a result of both informed debate and the opportunity for divergent views, interests and values to be heard and understood. Consensus is thus the result of an effective process which is both fair and competent. There is increased usage of consensus-building processes at the international level to resolve conflicts involving multiple issues, objections and stakeholders.

Globalization has enhanced interdependence among nations, societies, multinational corporations, governments and non-governmental organizations. A global issue today has local impact and vice-versa as evident from issues of global warming, sustainable development, trade, human rights and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The Montreal Protocol, to protect the Earth's stratospheric ozone layer, is a case in point of what can be accomplished by using consensus building on an international scale.

Burgess & Spangler (2003) have highlighted the **Characteristics** of issues that may be effectively addressed with a consensus-building approach, these are:

- Ill defined problems.

- Multiple, interdependent stakeholders with vested interests.

- Disparity of power and/or resources for dealing with the problems among the stakeholders.

- Stakeholders may have different levels of expertise and different access to information about the problems.

- Problems characterized by technical complexities.

- Differing perspectives on the problems leading to adversarial relationships among the stakeholders.

- Incremental or unilateral efforts to deal with the problems producing sub-optimal solutions.

- Existing processes for resolving the issues have proven unsatisfactory and may even aggravate them.

Stages/ Levels of Consensus Building

Stages of consensus building vary depending on the issue at hand wherein different levels can be distinct or merged with other stages, Burgess & Spangler (2003). Suggested steps are:

- **Problem identification:** This is the very initial stage where a problem is identified and consensus building as a resolution process is considered.

- **Participant identification and inclusion of ideal candidates**: Problems necessitating consensus building have multiple stakeholders who will be affected by a

decision. Thus, it is necessary to take time to assess and include representatives who have a intimate knowledge, understanding and maturity to arrive at consensus decision.

- **Convening** to include identifying location (preferably neutral), **setting** ground rules choosing a convener or facilitator, **assigning roles and responsibilities** that will direct the consensus building effort.

- **Process Design:** This would involve *agenda setting* with *reasonable timetable*. People should neither feel rushed to make a decision nor feel that a decision will not be reached in a timely manner. The stakeholders can initially build consensus over non-contentious issues and then address more controversial issues.

- **Problem definition, analysis and re-defining.** This step is distinct from the problem identification of step one as in this stage all the issues are identified holistically by the stakeholders and *re-defining or reframing* of the problem carried out as per requirement.

- **Group problem solving, identification and evaluation of alternative solutions.** Stakeholders should be encouraged to brainstorm to develop innovative options and possible solutions.

- **Decision making and reaching agreement:** A decision with regards to the consensus decision is made as opposed to vote based majority rule decision making. It is imperative to maintain effective communication and build strong relationships while arriving at an agreement.

- **Approval of the agreement:** Stakeholders may be able to help each other develop strategies for making the agreement acceptable to all the citizens on the merit of the agreement.

- **Implementation and Monitoring:** This is the final phase of consensus building requiring careful attention. *Hold people to their commitments* as hindrances are inevitable; implementation often become the most difficult stage in any consensus decision. The consensus building members should be involved in implementation to ensure that the agreement is being carried out as envisioned. *Monitoring* group ideally should comprise of representatives of the entire stakeholders.

Effective Consensus Building: Considerations and Guidelines

- **Be open to consultation and consensus building :-**

  ✓ Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner while demonstrating respect for them.

  ✓ Demonstrate openness to consult others by involving the community and all stakeholders early in decision making and implementation process.

  ✓ Co-ordinate and collaborate with other credible sources.

  ✓ Plan carefully, begin with clear objectives and evaluate effort.

  ✓ Display sincerity of effort by presenting your view in a in a clear, concise and constructive manner supported by data**.**

  ✓ Reach out within and outside the organisation, with those who can provide work-related information.

  ✓ Invite others' views and opinions.

  ✓ Communicate the pros and cons of an initiative including benefits for the public.

- **Consult and take multiple actions to persuade others:-**

  ✓ Develop links with the experts and relevant information sources, propose good solutions to benefit the public.

  ✓ Develop and nurture key contacts as a source of information, keeping in mind the end goal of providing qualitative citizen centric services.

  ✓ Leverage colleagues experience for synergy and convergence.

  ✓ Understand the target groups' views and customise the communication to convince them.

- **Proactively look for opportunities to promote convergence:-**

  ✓ Continuously seize opportunities to partner and transfer knowledge.

  ✓ Take initiative to engage with stakeholders to create innovative ideas and solutions.

  ✓ Proactively shares knowledge and information for capacity building and convergence.

  ✓ Keep stakeholders informed about various initiatives and engage with them regarding new initiatives.

  ✓ Gain insight into divergent motives and use this insight to tailor consensus building communications.

✓ Contingency planning to cater for opposition, reactions and visualising the implications of the proposal on the larger public.

- **Help to align diverse interests to a common goal :-**

✓ Explore innovative ways to converge different opinions in consonance with end goal.

✓ Creatively use the knowledge of the experts in order to address diverse interests of the stakeholders.

✓ Listen to people's concerns, identify with the audience, recognise people's emotions and hidden agendas.

✓ Communicate clearly with conviction, using simple non-technical language.

✓ Discuss actions that are under way or can be taken while clearly enunciating what cannot be done and promise only what you can do.

- **Promote consultation, consensus building and convergence:-**

✓ Create forums where people can interact with each other on the larger goal and move away from a 'silo' mindset.

✓ Identify opportunities to build relationships with external partner and larger communities with the purpose of serving larger public interest.

✓ Demonstrate willingness to trade-off immediate gain with long-term benefits.

✓ Take long-term perspective of development in synch with public good.

✓ Inspire others to consult, keeping the greater good in mind, before arriving at any critical decisions.

- **Transparent conduct of entire process while keeping all concerned informed :-**

✓ All stakeholders should be kept adequately informed by preparing and providing background material.

✓ Meet the needs of the media by being open and accessible to reporters while respecting deadlines.

✓ Provide risk information tailored to media needs

✓ Establish long-term media relationships for factual reporting and avoiding rumour mongering.

Success or Failure ??

International experience of the practical implementation of these different dialogue-based involvement models in decision making namely consultation and consensus building Eun (2016) contend contend that *success or failure is dependent upon* **:-**

- • **Time limits** - providing for an adequate amount of time for discussion before a decision is required;

- • **Flexibility** - not precluding discussion by taking the decision before discourse is commenced.

- • **Equal opportunity**- ensuring that all the parties taking part have equal access to information and are in an equal position to participate.

- • **Consensus-based discussion** - willingness from all those taking part to learn and if necessary, amend or adapt proposals and opinions.

- • **Inclusiveness** - all interests (including minority) in the issue having an opportunity to be involved /represented.

- • **Respect for Diverse Interests** - recognition and acceptance of the diverse values, interests and knowledge of those involved.

- • **Self design** - those taking part design the process and agree the objectives.

- • **Implementation** - commitment to implementation and effective monitoring are essential parts of any agreement.

Payoffs of Consultation and Consensus Building

Envisaged benefits of employing consultation and consensus-building processes to resolve complex issues are:

- • It enhances the quality of solutions based on a comprehensive analysis of the problem, innovative solutions and minimizes chances of deadlock.
- • Stakeholders have ownership of the outcome of consensus-building processes.

- The ability to participate in the problem-solving process enhances acceptance of the solution and willingness to implement it among the affected population.
- The participatory process assists in strengthening the relationships between stakeholders.
- Consensus building saves time and resources besides developing mechanisms for dealing with related problems in the future.

Conclusion

Governance is assuming an increasingly citizen centric, collaborative and participative hue leveraging technology and online platforms to engage the public in government policy formulation and implementation. Consensus building is a non-adversarial approach to decision-making which goes beyond the traditional consultative processes. The latter rely primarily on decision makers, proponents and/or experts defining a problem and the preferred solutions, and then seeking public comment on their proposals. Consultation is a top-down process which often displays the decision making characteristics of the initiating body. By contrast, consensus building is a primarily bottom-up process where stakeholders are enlisted into the drawing up of initial proposals as well as the consideration of the preferred proposals or solutions. Consensus building processes provide forums for exchange of information, predictions, opinions, interests and values. Those initiating the process have to be open to the potential need for change and to be prepared to work with different interests to develop plans or to amend or even drop existing proposals.

References

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