Public participation is now widely accepted as a norm and a standard of good governance for sustainable development. As a result a more pronounced emphasis on citizen engagement as a means towards instituting critical reforms in attaining inclusive growth has become an oft-stated development goal worthy of any wide institutional support and investment. Building the capacity of any society to do this is part and parcel of the different initiatives on this front. This paper provides an elaboration of the role of informal and formal institutions in citizen engagement.

As a start the paper offers the following description of citizen engagement:

... is manifested citizen action and involvement “...in a wide range of policymaking and program development activities, including the determination of types and levels of service, budget priorities, and the acceptability of infrastructure projects in order to direct government toward responding to community needs, to build public support, and encourage a sense of cohesiveness within and across sectors and neighborhoods. (UN World Public Sector Report 2008)

Citizen engagement is indicative of a people’s belief and practice of citizenship and their growing competency in influencing government and other stakeholders to address issues of public concern. The engagement goes beyond traditional notions of civic participation during elections. It is about participation and involvement in policy-making so that at its most basic it is about playing a direct role in governance processes and decision-making over whom, how, and who will allocate a community’s resources. It is especially linked to the principle of civic engagement that underscores democratic ideals and norms of governing.

More concretely, citizenship is about collective dispositional attributes of the people (attitudes, values, dispositions and skills). Civic and citizen engagement is about the
right of the people to identify the public good, determine the policies by which they will seek the good, and reform or replace institutions that do. Civics relates to the idea, concepts, and framework about the history, traditions, structures and processes of a country; it is about political culture shaping the norms and expectations of the people about being citizens. The appropriate meaning of civics and citizenship are often contested because they are context specific and value forming exercises.

Participation is a foundational in citizen engagement. It is described as a means of individual citizens to work together to make a difference in the life of their communities and in the process develop the combination of skills, knowledge, values, and motivation in order to make that difference. It means promoting a quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes (Ehrlich, Thomas, 2000). It also means it happens and unfolds in formal and formal institutions.

Citizens participating in government decision-making processes demonstrate public trust in state institutions that referee varied interests. This shift in the behavior of citizens of democracies from mere spectators of governance to being active participants in governance is a relatively recent phenomenon. A study of this will necessitate a look into the institutional mechanisms at play when citizen engagement occurs.

Institutions are the social structures that influence the behavior of individuals in a given community. Formal institutions include laws and constitutions that are enforced by the state. Informal institutions include cultural norms and beliefs that are enforced by the members of a community group. Institutions function to set the rules of behavior, and to constitute a social situation in which individuals behave with regularity thus perpetuating the social situation or system.2

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1 Civics is the study of the political beliefs and framework of any given state and/or country, covers its history, traditions, structures and processes; political culture, … the ways any given society is managed, by whom and to what end. (Education Services Australia

This paper aims to offer one way of clarifying the role of formal and informal institutions in the emergence, ongoing practice, and advancement of citizen engagement, with specific application to a few experiences in relation to the agenda of participatory democracy. Likewise considering how citizen engagement plays out and influences formal and informal institutions will be undertaken. This paper also examines situations when citizen engagement becomes an effective vehicle through which public reforms are realized.

How Informal and Formal Institutions Play Out in the Emergence of Citizen Engagement

“Citizen engagement emerges from a growing disquiet with the current practice of democracy.” In this, its emergence is closely associated with activism. Like activism, citizen engagement begins with a feeling of discontent or grievance. Generally, citizens become disenchanted with the current socio-political arrangement. Usually now a days this will be related to the failed hopes about the ideals of democracy-inspired promises where elected leaders dispense power and decisions affecting people’s everyday lives but are held accountable only during elections. Citizen engagement confirms the need for accountability processes and activities that need to be more regularly conducted than elections. Now, the imperative for an involvement of citizens in various government decision-making processes becomes paramount in the discourse of sustainable development and inclusive growth.

Citizen engagement is not about good or bad agenda and interests. Like activism it could serve many purposes and objectives. The boundary between activism via citizen engagement and conventional politics is fuzzy and depends on the actual context and circumstance.

Citizen engagement is about getting citizens more actively involved in governance and government decision-making. It is about reframing and amplifying societal issues and causes and challenging prevailing approaches and conventional politics. In turn, the practice of citizen engagement within the framework of good governance including the call for transparency and accountability fundamentally reaffirms the basic agenda and importance of existing democratic structures. It is aimed at change in order to

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4 Martin, B described activism as action on behalf of a cause; action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine (especially conventional politics, typically being more energetic, passionate, innovative, and committed). In Gary L. Anderson and Kathryn G. Herr (eds.), Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), pp. 19-27
strengthen the practice and infrastructure of the democratic ideals upon which existing policies are founded and institutions operate even while it carries a reform agenda.

Citizen engagement as an activity is often driven by dissatisfaction and criticisms against existing democratic practices and system’s deficiencies. Ultimately however, it defers and depends on participatory processes to resolve these deficiencies. Citizen engagement is the self-enforcing element of democracy, where democratic deficits are repaired through participatory principles and platforms of engagement. The formal and informal institutions that allow this are key to the achievement of the reform objectives.

In its emergence, citizen engagement straddles on both informal and formal institutional spaces. The awakened activism of citizens that compels them to act out their discontent is born out of their social encounters through their experience and sense of ‘injustice’ framed by institutions like media and their own communities. The informal but public spaces, where media and communities thrive, propel the natural force (sympathy and empathy) for individuals to come together and engage in deliberations and debates based on a shared ‘social trauma’ experience each one considers as slight or transgression of hard held values and beliefs about public life and about governance in general.

When citizens act on their discontentment, they subject themselves to formal institutional mechanisms of democracy. To maintain the nurturing effects of citizen engagement to democracy, it is important that formal institutions provide relief and victories, even if partial and temporary. These ensure the public’s continued trust in the democratic system and more importantly, it binds citizen activism to be acted out within the boundaries of legitimate spaces thus reinforcing democratic beliefs and practices.

The Philippine Case of the Million People March

Informal and formal institutions reinforce each other and this could be gleaned from the recent Million People March that led to the abolition of the Priority Development Assistance Fund and the ongoing discussions on the pork barrel issue.

The Million People March is a protest gathering of Filipinos who shared disgust in a systemic corruption that involved legislators of the country and top government officials. The protest gathering was organized by “netizens”, mainly through social

media like Facebook and Twitter. The gatherings were simultaneously held in key cities in the Philippines and a few abroad on August 26, 2013, with Manila Luneta Park as the centerpiece.

The people were outraged by the orchestrated misuse of the Priority Development Assistance Fund, known as the pork barrel of legislators. Involved were fake non-government organizations and top executive officers of frontline agencies, who created ghost and sub-standard projects and through which, government funds were funneled. The expose began when a top inside operator blew the whistle and sought help from the National Bureau of Investigation to rescue him from being illegally detained by a key player in the scam, Janet Lim-Napoles.

Mainstream media unpacked the story of the whistle blower and uncovered a deeper corruption issue of national scale. Social media served as a platform for individual citizens to share their thoughts and feelings about the issue. The shared experience of people in social media easily pulled them together to participate in the protest gathering in August. Social media was the informal space where the ‘feeling together’ happened, the starting point of mass action.

Then followed the filing of a petition by citizens groups at the Supreme Court, questioning the constitutionality of the legislator’s pork barrel fund or the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF). The PDAF is embedded in the government’s budget law and is under the control of legislators. After months of deliberation, the Supreme Court finally decided that the PDAF is unconstitutional.

The formal institution of judicial deliberation governed the process in which citizens engaged to resolve the issue of the pork barrel funds. This formal public space has harnessed ongoing conversations on how power lines within government will be redrawn. The institutions of ‘separation of powers’ and ‘checks and balances’ are currently under close scrutiny and may eventually be redrafted.

**Incoherent Institutions and the Role of Citizen Engagement**

Formal institutions are explicit expressions of informally accepted and operating value systems. For instance, democratic systems and arrangements are expressions of democratic values and freedoms embraced by the people. The pork barrel system is also the institutionalization of a patronage-oriented culture practiced in traditional Filipino leadership relations.

The inconsistencies in these two systems are battled out in the ways citizens interact with, respond to, and define these systems. Informal institutions like democratic culture and patronage carry with them values that will need to be sorted out in the lives of citizens – are individual freedoms more important than being cared for by a patron?
These struggles are carried over in the battle of opposing formal institutions like separation of powers and PDAF

With reference to the Million People March, at the heart of the corruption issue is ‘patronage,’ an informal system of power relations embedded in the cultural ways of Filipinos and has found expressions in formal institutional practices, like the Priority Development Assistance Fund. Patronage distorts the democratic power balance. It works to reorganize and consolidate power around money. In this, politicians harness a dependency relationship with voters and government instruments to override democratic mechanisms like accountability, separation of powers, checks and balance, etc.

Patronage and the democratic culture are in constant tug-of-war in the political development of the Philippines. These two informal institutions reinforce and at the same time undermine each other in more ways than one. The recent Million People March demonstrates how the democratic culture of ‘people power’ finally confronts a deeply embedded practice of patronage that has been institutionalized in the PDAF or pork barrel system.

In the early years of Philippine democracy, leader-constituent relations are largely described as patronage-based and thus often seen in terms of patron-client. After more than two decades of democratic practice, the democratic culture has slowly seeped into the Filipino public consciousness, gradually amplifying the problem of patronage. The growing middle class and the global and instant interconnection allowing for constant flow of information and exchange poses a serious threat to traditional elites and their power base sustained by the practice of patronage.

Citizen engagement becomes the formal expression of the informal democratic culture of accountability. It is also self-enforcing and binding in that citizen engagement does not only express the accountability of government to the people but also vice-versa, the responsibility and thus accountability of citizens to government. It demands that citizens play an active role in ‘governance’ to reform ‘governance.’ More importantly, it demands that citizens avail of formal democratic institutions in effecting the change desired. In subscribing to formal democratic institutions, citizen engagement strengthens democracy and reinforces citizens’ claims to democracy. It is the self-perpetuating driver that creates the impetus for citizens to engage with democratic institutions and reform them to become more responsive to citizens.
Box Story

**INC Bloc Voting and Democracy**

The Iglesia Ni Cristo (INC) is a tight Christian group established in the Philippines in 1914 and has membership reaching nine million worldwide. Based on 2010 National Statistics Office data, INC members in the Philippines comprise 2.3% of the population, making it the third largest religious denomination in the country, following the Roman Catholic Church and Islam.

INC is known for its strong political influence, primarily demonstrated through practices like bloc voting. INC members vote as one following its leaders’ decisions. With about 60% voter turnout during elections or more than one million members showing up during elections, INC is able to flex its political muscle vis-à-vis government. Because of this well-known practice, politicians seek out the INC leaders’ endorsement during elections and even during legislative lobby action, for widely debated policy initiatives such as the Reproductive Health bill.

Through the informal institutional practice of bloc voting, does INC undermine democratic institutions like elections? Do these practices deepen the clutches of patronage? Or has it been the other way around – were these practices established as a response to a patronage-based governance system?

If the ongoing debates on the pork barrel will lead to the eventual diminution of patronage, INC’s bloc voting practices may also trigger other forms of unconventional actions against government especially when one looks at citizen activism. It is after all an act aimed to influence and shape government decisions. This is demonstrated in many ways from protest action, citizens’ monitoring government activities (contract monitoring of road projects, community service provision, budget deliberations, etc.)

Government needs to create spaces for citizen activism to be fully expressed non violently and for citizen engagement to be maximized towards identifying, deliberating, and raising awareness about possible inadequacies, internal inconsistencies,

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contradictions and possibilities for improving governance in both the informal and formal institutions. This is one way by which political stability could be improved.

The informal institutional spaces are where government should be manifestly absent, however. In being “absent”, government would be able to help strengthen these spaces and shape people’s attitudes towards contestation and conflict resolution.

Government could set up mechanisms that foster deliberation that appreciates positions from a wide spectrum of thought, where critical opinions are not censored and people that hold these opinions are not persecuted. When informal institutions are able to harness the autonomy of individual citizens, government could then provide for a built-in remedy for abuse and even rejection of the formal system.

Meanwhile, government should be able to set up as many formal institutional spaces in which citizen engagement thrives, leaving little room for ‘external expressions’ of dissatisfaction or those that radically work outside democratic structures causing instability and threatening safety of the public. These plurality of institutions should be able to provide as many reliefs as possible to disenchanted citizens, discouraging citizens to resort to undemocratic systems of redress. In these, government promotes democratic political stability and more importantly, government continues to become centrally relevant to people’s issues.

The Case of the Global Occupy Movement

In 2011, the Occupy social movements spread like a contagion from one developed country to another, in at least 951 cities. The social protests showed the people’s dissatisfaction with the way development has widened the divide between the rich and the poor. The protests targeted large corporations and the global financial system that abetted corporate greed. The current global governance system is under attack. The situation begs the question “where is government in all of these?” It screams of the inadequacy of democratic institutions and government’s irresponsiveness to these deficits.

The Occupy movements are a testament to government’s obvious absence in shaping development policies, specifically in terms of ensuring redistributive justice. Within this narrative, the ability of democratic structures to provide remedy to structurally embedded injustices become questionable and therefore makes citizen engagement a

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poor option for recourse. It is no surprise that many of these gatherings have also staged anti-government protests, as in the case of South Korea, Mexico, Nigeria, Turkey, among others.

A Framework for Citizen Engagement in the Department of Social Welfare and Development

Citizen engagement in the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) is anchored on a commitment to poverty reduction and people empowerment. A memorandum order was issued in 2012 (Memorandum Circular 7 s. 2012) that provided the framework for expanded participation through four types of partnership called Gabay, Tulay, Kaagapay, and Bantay.

Bantay is a partnership type between DSWD and organizations on projects and activities geared towards improving the department’s transparency and accountability. This includes the citizens monitoring activities related to the Department’s implementation of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino program and KALAHI-CIDSS.

Gabay is a partnership between DSWD and individuals and organizations that provide technical assistance to the department in improving its processes and systems. This would include developing new social technologies such as micro-credit practices by micro-finance groups.

Kaagapay is a partnership with individuals and organizations that co-implement poverty reduction and capacity building programs with DSWD. This includes activities such as Family Development Sessions of Pantawid Pamilya beneficiaries and those under Sustainable Livelihood Program and Disaster Risk Reduction Management (DRRM), such as job generation activities facilitated by the Philippine Business for Social Progress (PBSP), Association of Foundations (AF), Chamber of Commerce, Leage of Corporate Foundations, and the Rotary Club for the SLP; relief operations, distribution of relief packs, stress debriefing, psycho-social services that involve civil society groups and individual volunteers.

Tulay is a partnership with organizations that facilitates public consultation and feedback on the different services and programs of DSWD. An example of this is the CSO Caravan that toured the regions to inform the public on the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program and its convergence with other related DSWD programs.

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8 Report on “Civil Society Organizations Participation in DSWD”
The four partnership types are currently being redesigned to expand institutional spaces for citizen engagement through greater synergetic relations. Also the partnership relations are redefined to bring more focus on the department’s relations with the public under a social accountability lens (see Figure 1).

The DSWD relates to the public through its dispensation of policies and services. The policies include among others rules, regulations, guidelines, procedures, and technologies that define how the department and its partners deliver social welfare services to the public. The department’s experience in the delivery of services and how the public reacts to these generate

Figure 1: Social Accountability and Engagement Framework

information that are fed back towards the revision of policies or formulation of new ones.

The department’s engagement with partners helps strengthen the department’s accountability to the public through the convergence of Bantay-Gabay-Tulay-Kaagapay functions. The synergies of these roles lends a holistic review of the department’s services and policies.

Under the partnership typologies prescribed under the memorandum on partnership with CSOs, the Bantay, Kaagapay, and Tulay partners provide feedback about the department’s social welfare programs and services. Information on the department’s programs and services could translate up to policy and technology changes through Tulay partners and carried out by DSWD with Gabay partners.

This model of engagement creates opportunities for partners to have their voices heard on all levels of social welfare and development work thus helping nourish people’s
empowerment. The spaces for participation maximizes citizen’s engagement and should be able to provide different opportunities for relief.

Supporting these formally established institutions for citizen engagement are the department’s internal efforts to build a culture that embraces citizen engagement. “Citizen Engagement” learning sessions are organized to develop a deeper, personalized understanding of the democratic values that support citizen engagement among the department’s staff.

In conclusion, it must be underscored that formal and informal institutions are greatly shaped by patterns of citizens and government action in policy making and decision making. In turn these actions are shaped jointly by the constraints, incentives, and resources provided by the very same formal and informal institutions, which can be more or less compatible with each other.

Citizen engagement is greatly shaped by the interaction of synergistic and substitutive effects of formal and informal institutions.