

NPCP: A Framework for Streamlining Public Consultations in India

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ABSTRACT:

Public Consultation is a common practice across the globe, as a part of preparing major decisions related to all the strategic sectors which are important for the Nation building in the years to come. This is an essential aspect of governance that should be undertaken periodically in all democratic Nations across the globe. Earlier, this process was conducted through physical means, such as the circulation of printed documents and the collection of written responses. With the penetration of Internet connectivity and the usage of different social media platforms, it gradually evolved into digital formats uploading consultation materials to websites and gathering feedback through email or web/app-based social media platforms. This paper attempts to identify certain issues/gaps/ deficiencies in the public consultation process, presently being adopted in India. To overcome such deficiencies, this paper attempted to evolve a suitable solution framework namely **the National Pubic Consultation Platform (NPCP)**. This NPCP framework aims to streamline and enhance the consultation process, offering a scalable model that can be adopted in India, in general, or by other Nations globally based on their existing systems which are in force. Therefore, the study lays special emphasis on the present practices that are followed, identifying the gaps in the present practices, the need for the new practice, design and proposed structure of the National Public Consultation Platform (NPCP).

KEYWORDS: National Public Consultation Platform (NPCP), User Entity (UE), Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), Bureau of India Standards (BIS), Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), New Consultation (NC).

INTRODUCTION:

Public consultation is a process where governments or organizations seek feedback from citizens, as well as relevant industries, sectors, and stakeholders, on the proposed relevant subjects. It provides an opportunity for individuals, communities, and organizations to share their views, ensuring that decisions reflect a wide range of interests and needs. This inclusive approach enhances transparency, accountability, and leads to more informed, balanced, and effective decision-making, benefiting both the public and key industries. Therefore, the study lays special emphasis on the present practices that are being followed, identifying the gaps in the present practice, the need for the new practice, design and proposed structure of the NPCP.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

1. E-participation platforms create spaces and opportunities for participation and collaboration between

governments and citizens. This will investigate the role of power on *formal e-participation platforms* and digital spaces that are controlled by the governments. It examines citizens' participation on three urban mobility platforms in three major cities. First, contribute to the literature on e-participation by explaining how a relational view of power helps to understand the nature and consequences of citizen participation in public policymaking. Second, integrate the concept of resourcing as both a source and constitutive element of relational power. It proposes a process-based model of resourcing as the power that opens the black box of resourcing through the identification of three distinct phases in time: resourcing IN, resourcing WITHIN, and resourcing OUT. **(Taiane Ritta Coelho, Marlei Pozzebon, Maria Alexandra Cunha, 2021).**

2. In democratic societies, the transparency of public institutions is essential. Increasingly, developed or developing countries recognize that free access to information is fundamental to democracy. Access to information develops citizens' trust in public institutions, enabling citizens to understand public policy decisions and monitor their implementation. The results of the research show that ministries have made progress in ensuring administrative transparency. **(Armenia Androniceanu 2021).**
3. Digital infrastructure increasingly enables the extraction, exploitation, processing, and analysis of personal and behavioral data. A democracy requires that the people adopt the role of the sovereign, in a datafied society this sovereign does not have much knowledge, understanding, or say in how it is treated. Key questions arise: What are avenues for people to participate in decisions about the use of predictive analytics by public institutions? How can they intervene in an increasingly automated state? How can the data-driven society be democratized? **(Hintz, Arne, Dencik, Lina, Redden, Joanna, Trere, Emiliano, Brand, Jess and Warne, Harry 2022).**
4. The study contributes to the literature by offering a characterization of the municipalities and the mechanisms carried out to implement citizen participation and interaction initiatives according to the size of the municipality. It claims that policymakers need to pay attention to the capabilities of e-government tools to better facilitate the e-participation process and provide the necessary channels to get citizens' feedback. **(Francisca Tejedo-Romero, Joaquim Filipe Ferraz Esteves Araujo, Angel Tejada, Yolanda Ramirez 2022).**
5. Public participation in the decision-making process for the government or local authority planning and agenda is crucial and significant, and if not handled systematically will trigger public protest and negative perceptions of the government and lead to the failure of the National or local agenda. In this study, 3 main types of public participation were observed: a) access to information, b) consultation, and c) active participation. **(Azlan Abas, Kadir Arifin, Mohd Azhar, Mohamed Ali, Muhammad Khairil, 2023)**
6. Public management is an effort to deliver public services, programs, and projects that are efficient, effective, and equitable for the community. The planning and decision-making processes of public management are two key aspects in achieving this goal. Traditionally, the planning and decision-making processes of public management are mostly carried out by government officials and internal stakeholders without involving active participation from the community. However, in this increasingly complex and diverse era, community involvement is important and cannot be ignored. The role of the community in public decision-making and its impact on efficiency, effectiveness, and fairness in public service delivery. Community involvement in the planning and decision-making process of public management is a key principle in democratic and participation-based governance. Community

participation helps to create a government that is more transparent, accountable, inclusive, and responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people. (Syamsu Rijal 2023).

BACKGROUND:

Public consultation is a task that includes several stakeholders around the process of consultation as described below.

1. STAKEHOLDERS:

User Entity (UE): Any entity/ Department/ Unit of Governance /Organizations, that needs to do public consultation for the formulation of new policy, strategy, regulation or review of previous practices, adoption of new practices, etc.

Responders: Who responds to the consultation? Responders provide feedback (inputs/comments / counter-comments) to the User Entity in response to the public consultation.

Public: citizens (including Subject Matter Experts) belong to the user entity's Nation or regional Nations or all Nations, based on the scope of the public consultation.

Concerned firms/companies: Related to the subject of the consultation, there may be various sectors, and industries, that will be directly or indirectly connected with the consultation subject.

Forums: Groups of persons who work on the subject of consultation. There may be various advocacy groups/consumer/user groups, and voluntary activists related to the consultation subject.

Academia: Institutions / Colleges, Universities, and Research organizations including students & research scholars.

UEs: An User Entity (UE) may also participate as a respondent in public consultations initiated by other UEs. This collaborative approach reflects the interconnected nature of various sectors, where developments in one domain often have direct implications for another.

By engaging these stakeholders meaningfully, to build consensus, address concerns, and enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of policy or project decisions through public consultation process.

2. General Process of Consultation:

Once after identification of the subject /purpose of consultation, the concerned UE needs to do the following activities as a part of Public Consultation:

- Scheduling Pre-Consultation / Consultation
- Preparing Consultation document/s
- Fixing time frames
- Releasing consultation document for public feedback
- Consolidating /reviewing of feedback
- Conduction of sessions/meetings among stakeholders
- Circulation of recommendations/outcome of consultation

3. Components of Consultation Process:

There are several sub-processes of this process, and they are as follows:

- Preparing pre-consultation or consultation Documents
- Sharing of documents with responders
- Obtaining feedback (from various responders)
- Reviewing/analyzing the feedback
- Arranging sessions/meetings among responders

- Conducting internal sessions within the User Entity
- Sharing the outcome of the consultation process

4. Broadly understand the earlier & present practices of this process as follows:

Before the Internet: Earlier the process of consultation is complex because of the absence of the "Internet".

After the adoption of usage of the Internet: Later all User Entities can complete this process with ease by using soft methods/tools/utilities through the Internet.

Present process (i.e. After the Carona Pandemic time): During the Carona pandemic, online processes were adopted by most of the stakeholders and it became much easier for the User Entities to complete the consultation process.

Table: 1

Consultation Component	Earlier	Present
Preparation of documents	Internal to UE. Physical / Printed documents	Internal to UE. Soft copies
Announcement by UE	Press, Electronic Media (TV)	Website, Press, Electronic Media (TV), Social-Media
Sharing of documents with responders	Printed Documents circulated	Hosting them on UE's websites
Feedback from responders	Written/typed documents are to be sent through post /courier or received in person.	Through e-mail, the Customized Feedback web page provided on UE's website (In addition to earlier)
Meetings	Physical Meetings	Physical, Virtual, Hybrid Meetings
Analysis of Feedback	Internal to UE	Internal to UE
Outcome	Press, Electronic Media (TV)	Website of UE, Press, Electronic Media (TV), and social media of UE
Tracking of process	Internal	Possible through UE's website till they keep the links on their website

The sequential steps of any general CP are tabulated in Table 2

Table: 2

Steps	UE Internal	Linked with responders
1	Preparing CP, Timelines	
2		Circulating CP
3		Inviting Responses
4		Receiving responses
5	Storing responses	
6	Analyzing Responses	
7	Fixing Meeting schedules	

8		Meeting invitation
9	Recording meeting deliberations	
10		Inviting ancillary inputs
11	Conducting Internal Reviews	
12	Preparing, and finalizing feedback reports, Recommendations /Outcome	
13		Circulating Recommendations /Outcome
14		Inviting Post CP feedback

UE needs to perform all the above steps. A few steps are purely internal work of the UE, but a few steps are interlinked with the responders / general public.

5. Evaluation of New System for Public Consultation:

As a part of this study, observations made on public consultations made for the past 5 years (i.e. 2019-2024), across various Central /State Government Units of various Ministries (UEs) in India (Refer Table-3)

Table: 3

Number* of Public Consultations Had in India During last 5 years			
Year	Ministries/departments / Units of		
	Central Government	State Government	Total
2019	21	6	27
2020	20	10	30
2021	21	11	32
2022	21	9	30
2023	18	13	31
2024	29	19	48
Total	130	68	198

**As checked through various websites of the above entities and got details through an internet search. The actual figures may vary.*

It has been observed that there is no standardized or uniform procedure for conducting public consultations across the reviewed entities. These public consultations were made through the respective UE's websites. In most cases, feedback submitted by various respondents is not publicly displayed. Additionally, accessing historical consultation documents, contributions, or feedback proves to be challenging. Many UEs have updated their websites with new interfaces and revised menu structures, which has further complicated the retrieval of earlier public consultation records and related documents. Whereas, few UEs such as TRAI, BIS, MeitY, etc., have their specific pattern of conduction of public consultation / wide circulation.

Despite advancements in technology, there remains a significant gap at the National level—neither the administration nor citizens currently have a centralized or transparent mechanism to track the number of

public consultations that are presently “open” or to ascertain the status of those that have been “closed” across all UEs.

6. Analyzing the present system:

- UEs announce their new public consultation schedule through their websites/media / social accounts.
- Connected documents will be made available on UE’s website.
- Responders need to check the respective website download the document and provide their feedback through an e-mail ID as mentioned in those documents. Some UEs provide feedback upload provisions on their website.
- Feedback collected via e-mail is typically stored in a designated folder on individual PCs until the process is complete. However, retrieving this information at a later stage can be challenging, as the responsible personnel may have been transferred or replaced, and the PCs may have been changed or formatted due to maintenance or repairs.
- Later, a few UEs list the feedback received from various responders on their website for obtaining counter-comments on feedback received. As well as display such counter-comments on their website. But many times, responders do not know what happened to their feedback. However, UEs not displaying feedback received from various responders.
- Few UEs conduct open discussions through physical/virtual meetings. Many do internal reviews/analyses of the feedback.
- Later some periods UE may release the outcome of the consultation through their website/media /social accounts. The period of releasing the outcome is not fixed or not known to stakeholders.

Table: 4

Parameter	Importance	Status in the present system
Publicity, awareness about Consultations	Needed for better reach among responders	Reach measurement is not possible with the present system. Awareness creation phenomenon is not considered as a priority.
Acknowledgment to the responders	Provides accountability to responders	This is absent in the present system
Display of feedback	Improves Transparency	Few UEs do this.
Meeting sessions among stakeholders	Opportunity to argue their stand and express their view on other responses	Few UEs do this.
Feedback Report on Responses	Gives an overall view about acceptance or rejection of feedback leads to opaqueness of the process	Might done internally, but the majority of UEs do not provide this.
The outcome of the consultation	After completion, releasing the outcome gives a smooth end to the consultation process.	No timelines for the release of the outcome. May release after

a long gap. No time frame exists for this.
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7. Gaps found in the present system:

- There is a possibility that respondents may miss the scheduled public consultation. As a result, participation may be limited to only interested or available groups, which can lead to a partial consultation process and potentially biased outcomes.
- Respondents often feel discouraged due to the lack of acknowledgment or confirmation of receipt for the feedback they submit to the U.E.
- The accountability for receiving and maintaining records of feedback largely depends on the individual managing the designated e-mail ID. As this e-mail ID is often used for general contact, correspondence, and various communications within the unit, there is a risk that some feedback responses may be overlooked or lost amidst other incoming messages.
- Non-disclosure of feedback responses diminishes the transparency of the process. This may create the perception that the outcome was predetermined and that the consultation is merely a formality.
- Many UEs conduct physical consultation meetings at their head offices, which often results in limited participation due to the travel and accommodation costs that respondents must bear. This financial barrier can discourage broader stakeholder involvement. Conversely, if such meetings are not conducted or appropriately scheduled, it may lead to unbalanced or biased outcomes due to the lack of diverse representation.
- Respondents are currently unable to track the status or outcomes of the public consultations they participate in, which leads to a sense of disengagement and discouragement. This lack of transparency can reduce their willingness to contribute to future consultations conducted by the same or other UEs.
- Language barriers pose a significant challenge, as there is currently no provision to access the consultation content in regional languages. Given India's linguistic diversity across various states, the absence of multilingual support limits the inclusivity and accessibility of the consultation process.

Based on the findings of the above, gaps were identified. From that, it is evident that there is a pressing need to enhance and modernize the current public consultation processes across the country.

8. Objectives for an idle Public Consultation Process across all UEs in the Nation:

- Standard formats & time frames for Public Consultations.
- Responders are not to miss any public consultation of any UE.
- During/after the consultation process, all the concerned documents and feedback responses (comments, inputs, feedback, counter comments, etc.) are to be easily accessible.
- Increase the transparency of public consultation.
- Need to have more language options to view consultation documents /content.
- Easy accessibility regarding the history of previous consultations and, the schedule of future consultations needs for the interested respondents.
- For a single consultation event all the related documents, schedules/timelines, responses, related communications, feedback reports, recommendations/outcomes, etc., are to be in one place.
- Measurability of the reach of each New Consultation (NC) to be achieved.

In any Nation, it is required to have a framework that defines the uniform method of conducting of public consultation on various domains (viz., general policies, technical, standards, regulations, laws, etc.) focusing on the following parameters:

- Format of the consultation documents/communications
- Fixation of timelines
- Method of Obtaining Public Responses
- Disclosure of feedbacks
- Analyzing Responses
- Conduction of workshops /meetings with stakeholders (Physical / Virtual)
- Adoption of multiple languages
- Wide publicity (through traditional media & social media)
- Providing feedback report on the responses with due credits
- Releasing the outcome of each consultation
- Keeping all related documents in one place
- Permanent storage of every NC
- Reach measurement of each NC
- Establishing a Centralized Common Platform for public consultations for all UEs

Public consultation practices must be enhanced to improve process transparency, maximize stakeholder participation, ensure accountability for feedback responses, and eliminate practices that contribute to biased outcomes or limited engagement.

Practices in other countries are presented in Table: 5

Table: 5

Consultation Platforms – In other countries		
Country	Centralized Platform	Features
EU	Have Your Say	Regulatory rigor, multilingual support
US	Regulations.gov	Handles massive input across the federal government
Finland	Otakantaa.fi	Emphasis on co-creation and local projects
Estonia	Rahvaalgatus.ee	e-ID integration verified petitioning
Spain	Decidim / CONSUL	Community-driven, open-source, inclusive
Taiwan	Join.gov.tw	Transparency + government accountability

Given India's distinct operational landscape and the increasing adoption of digital platforms, there is a compelling need to modernize, centralize, and standardize the consultation processes implemented by various User Entities (UEs) across the country.

To support a smooth transition from fragmented existing practices to a more cohesive and efficient system, a centralized digital framework has been envisioned. This platform is designed to meet the varied needs of User Entities (UEs) across the country, providing a unified structure for managing public consultations. As an initial phase, the framework focuses on streamlining public consultation processes, laying a strong foundation for comprehensive improvements in the broader consultation landscape over time.

Design inputs for the new System:

To achieve the objectives, a new system is to be in place as proposed below:

The **National Public Consultation Platform (NPCP)** is envisioned as a unified digital gateway for all User Entities (UEs) in the Nation to announce and manage their public consultations. It offers a streamlined, user-friendly interface that allows stakeholders to easily access information on past, ongoing, and upcoming consultations in one place. To ensure transparency, accountability, and long-term accessibility, the platform will serve as a permanent repository for all related documents, communications, stakeholder responses, meeting recordings, and other relevant materials.

1. The architecture of the NPCP:

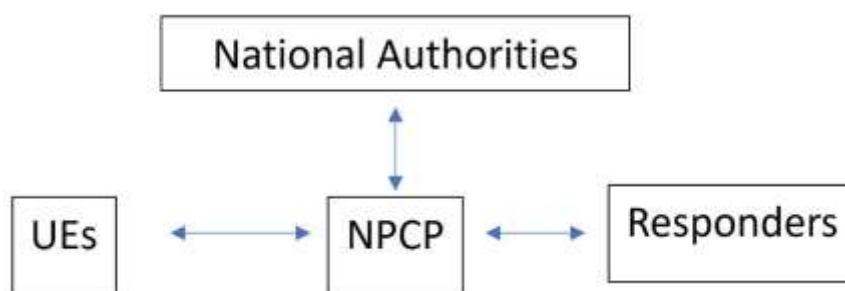


Fig.1

2. General Provision to UEs:

- One-time registration on NPCP
- Schedule New Consultation (NC)
- Can upload related documents /communications against respective NC
- Download feedback responses received from various responders
- Upload the recommendations /feedback report/outcome of every NC

3. General Provisions for Responders:

- Can register on NPCP
- Able to view all the schedules of all the NCs of all the UEs
- Able to get notifications (Ex: on new NCs in general or preferred subjects)
- Able to download concerned documents /communications
- Able to submit responses
- View the responses of all the responders as per the timelines
- Able to view the previous consultations and forthcoming NCs of all UEs
- View the outcome of the NC
- View the feedback-report
- Track the progress of NCs
- Get Notifications

To effectively achieve the objectives, there must be “**One Centralized National Platform**”, ensuring that all respondents consistently refer to and engage through this single platform only. Regarding the ownership of the platform, it may be managed by a third party (other than UEs) to ensure greater

transparency. Alternatively, a hybrid model could be adopted—funded by the Government of India and maintained by a neutral, independent body.

This approach mirrors the centralized e-tendering system adopted for public procurement in India, with the key distinction that, in this case, the focus is on consolidating and standardizing the public consultation process at the National level.

National Public Consultation Platform (NPCP) for Public Consultation:

1. Methodology for the Implementation of NPCP:

- Develop a user-centric platform with advanced features and analytics.
- Establish a neutral and transparent governance model.
- Ensure seamless integration with existing UE websites and systems.
- Provide training and support for UEs and responders.

2. Key Features in NPCP:

1. **Centralized Platform:** A single, unified platform for all public consultations across User Entities (UEs) in India.
2. **Transparency and Neutrality:** Managed by a third party or a hybrid model (funded by the Government of India and maintained by a neutral body).
3. **Mandatory Release of New Consultations:** All new consultations must be released through the NPCP, with optional publication on individual UE websites.
4. **User-Friendly Interface:** Easy access and navigation for all users, with dedicated activities for UEs, responders, and National authorities.
5. **Status Tracking and Dashboards:** Real-time tracking of consultation progress, individual dashboards for each consultation, and a general dashboard on the homepage.
6. **Advanced Analytics and AI Integration:** AI-powered tools for deeper insights, real-time tracking, and intelligent analysis of citizen participation and feedback, as well as categorize and summarize large volumes of input and capable of providing relevant reports/statistics.
7. **Promotion and Outreach:** Integrated capabilities to increase public awareness and participation, ensuring broader engagement across diverse stakeholder groups
8. **Virtual Meeting Feature:** Real-time discussions and stakeholder engagement, with recording capabilities for transparency and inclusivity.

3. Benefits of NPCP:

- Enhanced Transparency and Accountability
- Increased Citizen Participation and Engagement
- Improved Data-Driven Decision-Making
- Streamlined Consultation Process
- Better Oversight and Monitoring

By implementing the NPCP, India can create a robust and inclusive public consultation ecosystem that promotes citizen engagement, transparency, and accountability in governance.

Transparency Controls in National Public Consultation Platform (NPCP):

In light of the current scenario and to ensure accountability across all dimensions, the following features need to be incorporated into the centralized system to enhance transparency:

1. Key Features in Implementing Transparency:

- 1. Restricted Privileges:** User Entities (UEs) have limited access to schedule, reschedule, and manage New Consultations, while respondents can submit feedback and view documents.
- 2. Immutable Documents and Feedback:** UEs cannot modify or delete uploaded documents or submitted feedback, ensuring the integrity of the consultation process.
- 3. Confidentiality:** Feedback remains confidential until the scheduled deadline, and all stakeholders can access feedback only after the deadline has passed.
- 4. System-Generated Acknowledgement:** Respondents receive a unique acknowledgment number for each submission, enabling them to track and resolve issues.
- 5. Permanent Storage:** All content related to public consultations is permanently stored and retained, allowing users to access and review previously published materials.

2. Benefits of Transparency:

- 1. Enhanced Transparency:** The NPCP platform ensures transparency in the consultation process, promoting trust and accountability.
- 2. Improved Integrity:** Immutable documents and feedback ensure the integrity of the consultation process, preventing tampering or manipulation.
- 3. Informed Participation:** Respondents can review feedback submitted by others, enabling them to assess their contributions timely and engage meaningfully in the consultation process.
- 4. Efficient Role Management:** The NPCP platform enables UEs and responders to perform their respective roles efficiently, streamlining the consultation process.

3. Expected Outcomes in Transparency Implementation:

- 1. Constructive Dialogue:** The NPCP platform promotes constructive dialogue and supports the sustainable development and growth of industries Nationwide.
- 2. Informed Decision-Making:** The platform enables informed participation, ensuring that stakeholders are well-prepared timely for physical or virtual meetings and can engage meaningfully in the consultation process.

4. Required Monitoring During Implementation of Transparency:

- 1. Progress Tracking:** UEs can track the progress of New Consultations and monitor adherence to prescribed timelines.
- 2. Activity Oversight:** National authorities can oversee activities and generate reports to monitor the consultation process.

Findings & Recommendations:**1. Findings:**

- 2. Limited Adoption of Best Practices:** User Entities (UEs) are aware of shortcomings in current public consultation practices but struggle to adopt new methods.
- 3. Lack of Dedicated Resources:** Public consultation activities are often managed alongside routine duties without dedicated resources or focused attention.
- 4. Procedural Formality:** Public consultation is commonly viewed as a procedural formality rather than a meaningful engagement with stakeholders.
- 5. Limited Accessibility:** Public consultations are often perceived as being intended only for educated individuals or high-level entities, rather than the common citizen.

2. Recommendations:

1. **Establish a Centralized Platform:** Develop a National Public Consultation Platform (NPCP) to standardize and streamline public consultation practices.
2. **Collaborative Effort:** In India, for example, NITI Aayog typically leads the introduction of new National practices, while the National Informatics Centre (NIC) provides digital infrastructure for key governance initiatives. NITI Aayog and the National Informatics Centre (NIC) could collaborate to establish and manage the NPCP, with the necessary funding allocation.
3. **Targeted Training:** Provide comprehensive training to employees involved in public consultation to ensure they effectively fulfill their responsibilities.
4. **Inclusive Participation:** Ensure consultation materials, communications, and outreach efforts are accessible in regional languages and presented in a clear, relatable manner.
5. **Promote Public Consultations:** Foster inclusive participation by promoting public consultations in a way that emphasizes their relevance to all segments of society.

CONCLUSION:

This paper presents observations from public consultations conducted over five years in India. The analysis identified several gaps in the existing processes, leading to the development of a proposed solution: the National Public Consultation Platform (NPCP). This centralized and unified platform aims to facilitate meaningful public consultations by enabling all stakeholders to actively participate and fulfill their roles transparently and collaboratively across all user entities Nationwide. It is recommended to provide training for employees involved in the public consultation process and to enhance public awareness to encourage greater participation.

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