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This is the published version of a paper published in *Democratization*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Sofi, D. (2026)

From symbolic inclusion to procedural democratization: public participation and civil society in the Kurdistan region

*Democratization*, : 1-24

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2026.2655198>

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# From symbolic inclusion to procedural democratization: public participation and civil society in the Kurdistan region

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To cite this article: Dana Sofi (22 Apr 2026): From symbolic inclusion to procedural democratization: public participation and civil society in the Kurdistan region, *Democratization*, DOI: [10.1080/13510347.2026.2655198](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2026.2655198)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2026.2655198>



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Published online: 22 Apr 2026.



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# From symbolic inclusion to procedural democratization: public participation and civil society in the Kurdistan region

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of public participation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq between 2016 and 2019, focusing on participatory reforms introduced under the Enhancing Democratization Program (EDP). Drawing on mixed methods – surveys, interviews, focus groups, and institutional documents – it analyses changes in access, trust, and perceived influence. The findings show that the EDP expanded visible participatory spaces and strengthened trust in civil society organizations and provincial councils, but had limited effects on confidence in government and parliament. Elite dominance, weak responsiveness, and selective inclusion constrained participants' influence, leaving most forums consultative rather than transformative. Anchored in Arnstein's distinction between symbolic and substantive participation, the article argues that procedural inclusion can widen participation without redistributing power. The Kurdistan case thus highlights a broader challenge of democratization in hybrid regimes: participation may expand in form while remaining limited in function.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 5 November 2025; Accepted 24 March 2026

**KEYWORDS** Public participation; civil society; Kurdistan region; hybrid regimes; participatory governance; democratization; institutional trust; political inclusion

## Introduction

In contexts of post-conflict recovery and state formation, democratic development is often measured by the existence of institutions such as elections, parliaments, and legal guarantees. However, scholars of hybrid regimes increasingly question the depth of democratization in such settings, pointing to the disconnect between formal procedures and actual power relations.<sup>1</sup> While citizens may formally enjoy political rights, mechanisms of participation often remain weak, symbolic, or selectively activated by ruling elites. This democratic deficit is not confined to post-conflict settings; similar tensions between procedural inclusion and substantive influence have been documented across a wide range of political systems, including consolidated democracies. Research on

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multi-level governance in the European Union shows that formal participatory and representative mechanisms may coexist with weak accountability and limited citizen influence, creating a legitimacy gap between input and output.<sup>2</sup> Recent empirical studies of participatory governance likewise demonstrate that procedural visibility and inclusion often fail to translate into meaningful policy influence or shared authority.<sup>3</sup>

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) exemplifies these dynamics within a distinctive political and historical context. Since the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, the KRI has enjoyed relative stability and autonomy, yet participatory democracy has been uneven. Political power is concentrated in a few dominant parties, public institutions are politicized, and avenues for civic engagement remain limited. Although civil society organizations (CSOs) have proliferated and are legally recognized, their influence on policy and accountability remains constrained by weak institutional frameworks, donor dependence, and limited grassroots legitimacy.<sup>4</sup>

Public participation in the KRI is shaped more by elite-driven initiatives than bottom-up processes. Existing platforms – consultations, public hearings, or civil society forums – often lack transparency, inclusiveness, and real decision-making power. Citizens may feel disempowered or sceptical, perceiving such initiatives as symbolic or performative rather than substantive. This creates a cycle of disengagement, mistrust, and political inertia.<sup>5</sup>

Understanding the conditions under which participation can move from symbolic to substantive forms is thus crucial – not only for democratic consolidation in the KRI but also for broader debates on participatory governance in hybrid and constrained democratic settings. This article examines how targeted strategies – designed to institutionalize participation and strengthen collaboration between CSOs, citizens, and policymakers – may help expand democratic spaces from within.

By analyzing public attitudes, institutional responsiveness, and the functioning of participatory mechanisms over time, the study highlights both the opportunities and constraints of democratization “from below”. It contributes to broader debates on participatory governance, democratization, and institutional change in hybrid political systems, while also offering policy-relevant insights for civil society and governance reform.

This study is primarily anchored in Arnstein’s ladder of participation, which provides the main analytical framework for distinguishing between symbolic and substantive participation. Rowe and Frewer’s criteria are used as a procedural lens for assessing how participatory mechanisms are organized, while Wong’s inclusiveness–contestation distinction is used more selectively to contextualize why broadened participation may coexist with persistent elite control in hybrid regimes.

More broadly, the article speaks to a comparative question in democratization research: under what conditions do participatory reforms in hybrid regimes widen civic inclusion without redistributing political authority? The Kurdistan case suggests that participatory institutions may generate procedural legitimacy, local trust, and new expectations of engagement, while still falling short of meaningful vertical accountability. This makes the case relevant not only as a regional study, but also as an empirical contribution to debates on the limits of democratization under entrenched power asymmetries.

### ***Purpose and research questions***

The purpose of this study is to examine how public participation in the Kurdistan Region evolved between 2016 and 2019 and to assess the effects of specific participatory

strategies on institutional trust, citizen engagement, and the inclusiveness of governance processes. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. In what ways did participatory strategies aimed at increasing citizen engagement – such as platforms for dialogue and cooperation between civil society and public institutions – affect levels of public involvement in governance?
2. How did public perceptions of participation, trust, and influence change between 2016 and 2019?
3. What were the key enabling and constraining factors shaping the quality and depth of participation in the KRI context?

## **Background and context of the study**

### ***Democratization and civil society in the Kurdistan region***

The political development of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) since 2003 has combined institutional growth with entrenched elite control. As a subnational entity with its own parliament and government, the KRI operates within a hybrid regime framework, mixing electoral democracy with informal practices such as patronage networks, a weak judiciary, and limited accountability.<sup>6</sup>

While the KRI has established core democratic structures – including elections, a regional parliament, and a pluralist party system – political competition and separation of powers remain weak. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) dominate political life, while public institutions are marked by politicization and elite-driven governance.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) expanded significantly after 2003, supported by international funding and liberalized NGO laws after 2010. They have become visible in promoting transparency, rights, and public participation. Yet their policy influence remains constrained by legal ambiguity, donor dependence, weak grassroots legitimacy, and limited access to elites.<sup>7</sup>

Public participation in this context often takes place within narrow, controlled spaces. Citizens are invited into consultative processes, but with limited impact on policy outcomes. This reflects global critiques of “invited spaces” that provide voice without power.<sup>8</sup> In the KRI, participation is often instrumental-used by elites to demonstrate legitimacy rather than foster accountability.

Still, participatory reforms are vital in fragile contexts. Inclusive governance can build trust, enhance accountability, and support democratic consolidation. The Kurdistan Region thus offers a critical site for examining how participatory governance evolves under hybrid conditions. Assessing the constraints and opportunities for citizen and CSO engagement informs both local practice and global debates on democratization.

The study period also overlapped with the 2017 independence referendum and the subsequent political and territorial crisis. These developments formed an important backdrop to participatory governance during the latter part of the study period, as political attention shifted toward questions of sovereignty, territorial control, and regime stability. As Watts suggests, democratic development in the Kurdistan Region cannot be separated from broader struggles over self-determination and political survival.<sup>9</sup>

Participation during this period therefore unfolded not only under conditions of institutional reform, but also amid heightened political uncertainty and crisis management.

### ***The enhancing democratization program (EDP)***

The Enhancing Democratization Program (EDP) was launched in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 2016 with support from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) through Norwegian People's Aid (NPA). The program was implemented by the Reform Institute for Development (RID), Al-Amal, and the Public Aid Organization (PAO), with RID responsible for activities in the Kurdistan Region, while Al-Amal and PAO coordinated implementation in other parts of Iraq.<sup>10</sup> This external support is analytically significant. The participatory infrastructure examined in this article did not emerge solely from endogenous institutional reform, but was also enabled by donor-backed organizational and financial support. This matters for interpreting the findings, since externally supported participation may widen access, coordination, and civic visibility without necessarily altering the domestic distribution of political authority.

An establishment conference held in Erbil in November 2016, attended by 109 civil society organizations, initiated the creation of eight local Public Participation Platforms (3Ps) in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, Kirkuk, Halabja, Garman, Raparin, and Koya. Each platform consisted of 7–9 core CSOs and approximately 20–40 affiliated members and was designed to provide a formal structure for interaction between civil society, citizens, and public institutions.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the 3Ps, the EDP introduced joint CSO–MP committees, monthly coordination meetings, regional forums, and annual review conferences, where stakeholders evaluated progress using SWOT analyses and developed new action plans.<sup>12</sup>

The EDP followed an action-oriented and reflexive implementation logic, resembling key principles of participatory action research. As Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon emphasize, action research involves iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in collaboration with stakeholders.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the EDP combined institutional reform with continuous stakeholder feedback and adaptation.

The program can therefore be understood both as a democratization initiative and as an applied governance laboratory. This dual character makes it a relevant empirical setting for examining how participatory reforms operate in hybrid political systems and how institutionalized participation evolves over time.

### **Previous research**

Research on democratization in hybrid regimes highlights contradictions between formal democratic institutions and informal authoritarian practices. Levitsky and Way define hybrid regimes as systems where elections, legislatures, and civil liberties exist on paper but are undermined by elite dominance, limited competition, and weak rule of law.<sup>14</sup> Democratic reforms in such contexts are often cyclical and reversible. Studies of the Kurdistan Region align with this framework, noting the concentration of power among ruling parties, politicization of institutions, and fragile accountability mechanisms.<sup>15</sup>

A second body of literature concerns civil society organizations (CSOs) in democratization, particularly in transitional settings. CSOs may act as watchdogs, advocates, or

service providers, but in hybrid regimes their effectiveness is constrained by limited autonomy, donor dependence, and weak grassroots legitimacy.<sup>16</sup> Studies in Iraq and the Middle East suggest CSOs are tolerated when aligned with state objectives but repressed when pushing systemic change.<sup>17</sup>

A third stream focuses on the quality of participation. Cornwall and Gaventa distinguish between “invited” and “claimed” spaces, stressing that top-down initiatives often offer voice without power. Fung highlights institutional responsiveness as the key factor determining whether participation is symbolic or substantive. Similarly, Rowe and Frewer propose process criteria (transparency, accessibility, interaction) and acceptance criteria (representativeness, early involvement, legitimacy) to evaluate participation quality.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, Wong distinguishes between inclusiveness and contestation as dimensions of democracy.<sup>19</sup> While inclusion may increase participation numerically, it does not shift power relations without mechanisms for accountability. This perspective is particularly relevant in hybrid regimes, where participatory reforms may diffuse opposition but rarely empower citizens.

Together, these literatures underscore the need to evaluate both the design and effects of participatory strategies. In the Kurdistan Region, the interplay of constrained institutions, dependent CSOs, and semi-authoritarian governance creates a complex terrain for participation. This study builds on these insights by analyzing how participatory mechanisms introduced through the EDP were received, implemented, and experienced.

Previous studies on civil society and participation in the Kurdistan Region have documented limited citizen influence and donor-driven engagement, yet few have systematically analysed how participatory mechanisms evolve over time within a hybrid political structure.<sup>20</sup> This study contributes to that gap by combining longitudinal survey data with qualitative evidence to assess both procedural and substantive dimensions of participation.

## Theoretical framework

This study is analytically anchored in Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation, which conceptualizes public participation as a continuum of power redistribution – from manipulation and tokenism to partnership, delegated power, and citizen control.<sup>21</sup> Arnstein’s model provides the normative and diagnostic core of the analysis by defining what constitutes substantive participation: the extent to which citizens actually share decision-making authority with governing institutions.

In hybrid and semi-authoritarian regimes, formal opportunities for participation often coexist with entrenched elite dominance. Arnstein’s ladder is therefore particularly useful for distinguishing between symbolic inclusion – where citizens are invited but powerless – and substantive participation, where authority is genuinely shared. To address the structural constraints that shape how participation operates in such contexts, the study incorporates two complementary perspectives as supporting analytical dimensions, rather than parallel theoretical frameworks.

First, Rowe and Frewer’s process and acceptance criteria are used as a procedural diagnostic layer.<sup>22</sup> Their framework shifts attention from formal power to the *conditions under which participation occurs*, including transparency, accessibility, representativeness, and institutional responsiveness. In this study, Rowe and Frewer do

not redefine participation; instead, they help explain why participatory forums may remain consultative even when access is formally expanded. Their criteria thus diagnose whether the design of participatory mechanisms enables upward movement on Arnstein's ladder – or reproduces symbolic participation through procedural shortcomings.

Second, Wong's distinction between inclusiveness and contestation is used here in a more limited way, as a contextual lens for understanding why broadened participation in hybrid regimes does not necessarily alter underlying power relations.<sup>23</sup> Rather than serving as a parallel analytical framework, it helps interpret why procedural expansion may coexist with weak contestation and persistent elite dominance.

Taken together, the framework is explicitly hierarchical rather than additive. Arnstein provides the principal analytical axis by defining the degree to which participation redistributes power. Rowe and Frewer help evaluate the procedural quality of participatory mechanisms, while Wong helps contextualize why expanded inclusion may remain politically shallow in hybrid settings.

### ***Arnstein-centered analytical model of participation in hybrid regimes***

Building on this structure, the study employs an Arnstein-centered analytical model (see Figure 1) that links process, power, and structure.

#### ***Linking theory and method***

This Arnstein-centered model structured the empirical design and guided the interpretation of data. The analysis of the Enhancing Democratization Program (EDP) is organized around three analytically ordered dimensions:

1. Visibility and Access – assessed through *process quality* (Rowe and Frewer);
2. Influence and Representativeness – analyses through *power and influence* (Arnstein);

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Key Focus</b>	<b>Core Question</b>	<b>Analytical Function</b>
<i>Process Quality</i> (Rowe and Frewer)	Transparency, accessibility, responsiveness	How are participatory mechanisms designed and implemented?	Diagnoses whether procedures enable movement up Arnstein's ladder
<i>Power and Influence</i> (Arnstein)	Distribution of decision-making authority	Who holds power and whose voice matters?	Defines whether participation is symbolic or substantive
<i>Structural Transformation</i> (Wong)	Inclusiveness and contestation	Does participation challenge or reinforce existing hierarchies?	Explains why participation remains constrained in hybrid regimes

**Figure 1.** Arnstein-centered Analytical Model of Participation in Hybrid Regimes Note. The model is anchored in Arnstein's ladder of participation as the primary analytical axis. Rowe and Frewer's criteria are used to assess the procedural quality of participatory mechanisms. Wong's inclusiveness–contestation distinction is used contextually to interpret why broadened participation may remain politically constrained in hybrid regimes (Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," 216–24; Rowe and Frewer, "Public Participation Methods," 3–29; Wong, "Democracy, Hybrid Regimes, and Inequality," 105606.)

3. Power Relations and Institutional Constraints – interpreted primarily through Arnstein, with Wong used contextually to explain why broadened inclusion does not necessarily produce contestation.

By organizing both survey indicators and qualitative material around these dimensions, the model ensures coherence between theory and data. It enables a multi-level interpretation: linking procedural change (how participation is organized), to positional change (who influences decisions), and finally to structural conditions (why authority remains concentrated). The framework thus provides a unified analytical logic that preserves conceptual depth while ensuring theoretical coherence across levels of analysis

## **Methodology**

### ***From framework to design***

The analytical framework outlined above shaped both the structure and logic of this study's empirical design. By combining process quality, power and influence, and structural transformation, the model provided a roadmap for collecting and interpreting data on participation in the Kurdistan Region.

Each of these dimensions informed specific methodological choices: process quality guided the examination of visibility and access; power and influence shaped the assessment of representativeness and impact; and structural transformation directed attention to inclusiveness, contestation, and systemic change.

Accordingly, a mixed-methods approach was employed to capture both broad patterns and in-depth perspectives, integrating survey data with qualitative insights from interviews, focus groups, and institutional documentation.

### ***Methodological approach***

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach informed by participatory action research (PAR). As Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon note, action research involves iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting with stakeholder participation.<sup>24</sup> While not an action research project per se, the data derive from the Enhancing Democratization Program (EDP), which operated through an action-oriented, reflective structure. PAR thus provides a useful lens for understanding how participatory strategies were designed, implemented, and experienced over time.

The mixed-methods design enabled both breadth and depth of insight:<sup>25</sup> surveys offered generalizable patterns of change in public attitudes, while qualitative data provided contextualized understanding of mechanisms, perceptions, and barriers to participation.

### ***Data collection and sources***

The analysis draws on two regional surveys conducted in 2016 (baseline, N = 550, 40 questions) and 2019 (endline, N = 508, 15 questions) across all governorates of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The two surveys were designed to be methodologically comparable, but they do not constitute a panel study: the same individuals were not systematically re-interviewed.

The surveys included both closed and open-ended items measuring awareness of participatory mechanisms, trust in institutions, perceived influence on decision-making, and the roles of civil society organizations (CSOs). Identical wording and response categories were used for all comparative indicators.

In both waves, respondents were recruited through the KRG NGO Department's registries of active civil society organizations, supplemented by open invitations disseminated via CSO networks and local coordinators. These organizations had engaged in EDP activities, including joint committees, 3P platforms, and public forums. Individuals affected by CSO initiatives were also included. This strategy intentionally targeted a participation-aware population, rather than a nationally representative sample, since the EDP did not operate uniformly across all localities and participatory mechanisms were most visible where CSOs were active.

Based on organizational identifiers and demographic cross-checks, approximately 15–25% of respondents are estimated to have participated in both survey waves, meaning that most respondents differed between 2016 and 2019. Stratified procedures ensured variation across gender, age, residence, profession, and governorate. Although random sampling was constrained by weak population registers and security restrictions, efforts were made to maximize demographic and geographic diversity.

Surveys were distributed in person by trained research assistants, who remained present during completion to ensure clarity and consistency. Both internal and external non-response rates were below 5%, as incomplete questionnaires were followed up directly by the field team.

The qualitative component targeted key informants with diverse roles, including CSO leaders, Members of Parliament, local officials, journalists, academics, and community stakeholders. Six focus groups and 20 semi-structured consultation interviews were conducted. Because data collection took place in conjunction with ongoing EDP activities and within a politically sensitive environment, sessions were not audio-recorded; instead, detailed contemporaneous notes were taken.

Additional material included participant observation in regional forums and annual conferences, as well as internal RID documents (proposals, progress reports, SWOT analyses, stakeholder feedback, 2016–2022). Only documents verified and archived by RID's central office were included. Together, these sources enabled triangulation and strengthened the internal validity of the study.

Because the surveys are repeated cross-sections rather than a panel, observed differences between 2016 and 2019 must be interpreted as population-level shifts among participation-aware respondents, not as individual-level causal effects. A further limitation concerns positive selection bias: since many respondents were affiliated with or connected to CSOs, the sample likely over-represents individuals with favourable views of civic participation and civil society. This limitation is explicitly acknowledged and addressed through triangulation with qualitative interviews, observations, and institutional documentation, which include critical perspectives from public officials, journalists, and unaffiliated citizens.

The purpose of the surveys is therefore not to estimate national attitudes, but to trace changes in perceptions, access, and trust within the institutional ecosystem most directly exposed to the EDP. Within this bounded population, the two surveys provide a meaningful basis for comparative interpretation.

## Data analysis

Survey responses were coded and analysed using descriptive and comparative statistics to map patterns and changes between 2016 and 2019. No inferential statistics were applied, as the aim was descriptive mapping of trends rather than hypothesis testing, following Bryman's distinction between exploratory and explanatory designs.<sup>26</sup> Indicators were disaggregated by gender, governorate, age, and education to capture socio-demographic variation, consistent with Creswell and Plano Clark's guidance for mixed-methods integration.<sup>27</sup> Comparative descriptive analysis also examined cross-governorate variation in participation and trust, though inferential testing was not applied due to sample constraints.

Symbolic versus substantive participation was operationalized through indicators such as perceived influence on decisions, frequency of consultation attendance, and institutional responsiveness. These variables were complemented by qualitative assessments of participant narratives regarding power-sharing and feedback mechanisms, aligned with Arnstein's conceptualization of participation ladders and Fung's distinction between procedural and substantive engagement.<sup>28</sup>

Self-reported data were triangulated with RID's internal documentation, including minutes of joint committee meetings, policy outcome matrices, and project evaluations, to validate whether participatory inputs resulted in institutional actions or policy responses. This triangulation followed Creswell and Plano Clark's recommendation for methodological corroboration across quantitative and qualitative sources.<sup>29</sup>

Qualitative material was analysed thematically, combining inductive coding (emerging from participants' accounts) with deductive categories drawn from the theoretical framework, as outlined by Braun and Clarke and further developed by Kvale and Brinkmann.<sup>30</sup> Key dimensions included accessibility, legitimacy, institutional responsiveness, and power asymmetry. Data from interviews, focus groups, and observation notes were read repeatedly, coded, and clustered into themes. Coding was conducted iteratively by the researcher and reviewed by a second team member for consistency, in line with Berger's and Chavez's emphasis on reflexivity and inter-coder reliability in insider research.<sup>31</sup> Missing survey data were minimal (<5%) and handled through case-wise deletion.

This combination of descriptive statistical mapping and thematic qualitative analysis produced a layered understanding of participation, capturing both overall trends and the lived experiences of citizens and CSOs. Key concepts such as visibility, influence, and inclusiveness were operationalized through survey indicators (e.g. awareness of participatory mechanisms, perceived ability to influence decisions, and trust in institutions) and thematic categories derived from qualitative data. This allowed for systematic comparison between procedural (access and transparency) and substantive (power and responsiveness) dimensions of participation, following the analytical logic of Rowe and Frewer's participation evaluation framework.<sup>32</sup>

## Researcher positionality

The researcher also served as program coordinator for the EDP at RID, creating a dual role as practitioner and analyst. This insider position provided privileged access to documents, networks, and context, but also raised concerns about bias.<sup>33</sup>

Berglund describes such embedded roles as "true insider" research, where organizational responsibility blurs the line between practice and scholarship.<sup>34</sup> Insider status

can foster trust and richer data, but requires reflexivity and transparency to ensure analytical distance.<sup>35</sup>

To mitigate bias, triangulation of sources, external validation, and transparent documentation were applied. While proximity may introduce subjectivity, it also enabled nuanced insights into participatory dynamics in a politically constrained setting.

### **Ethical considerations**

All participants were fully informed about the study's aims, scope, and intended use of data. Written or verbal consent was obtained prior to participation, and involvement was entirely voluntary. Interviews and focus groups conducted within program activities were not audio-recorded; instead, anonymized notes were taken to ensure both participant comfort and confidentiality. While many respondents expressed a wish to be identified as part of their civic activism, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured to protect participants from potential risks in a politically sensitive environment.

The study followed RID's internal ethical framework and received clearance from its project board. It also adhered to general research ethics principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, and respect for participants' autonomy.<sup>36</sup> Reflexivity was central throughout, given the researcher's insider role, with attention paid to how this positioning may have influenced data interpretation. By combining strict ethical safeguards with recognition of participants' agency, the study balanced protection with respect for their self-understanding as active political actors.

### **Results and analysis**

This section presents a comparative analysis of public participation in the Kurdistan Region before and after the implementation of the Enhancing Democratization Program (EDP). Drawing on survey data from 2016 and 2019, complemented by qualitative interviews and RID's internal documentation, the analysis examines not only whether participation increased, but how and with what effects.

The section begins by introducing the 3P platforms as the primary participatory arenas created under the EDP. It then traces baseline conditions, followed by changes in visibility and access, patterns of influence and representativeness, shifts in institutional trust, and finally the relationship between inclusiveness and power relations. Together, these steps allow an assessment of whether participation evolved primarily as procedural inclusion or moved toward substantive empowerment.

Overall, the findings reveal a consistent pattern: The EDP expanded the visibility and geographic reach of participatory forums and normalized dialogue between citizens, CSOs, and public institutions. However, the depth of influence and institutional responsiveness remained limited. Trust in civil society organizations increased – particularly at the local level – while confidence in government and parliament largely stagnated. Participation thus became more structured and inclusive, yet power relations were not fundamentally altered, confirming the persistence of symbolic rather than substantive participation.

#### ***The 3P platforms as participatory spaces***

The Public Participation Platforms (3Ps) constituted the central participatory arenas of the Enhancing Democratization Program (EDP). While formally framed as multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms, in practice they functioned as hybrid civic–

political spaces where citizens, civil society actors, and public officials encountered one another face-to-face.<sup>37</sup>

Meetings were usually held in municipal halls, NGO offices, or provincial council buildings and brought together CSO representatives, ordinary citizens, local council staff, Members of Parliament (MPs), and invited government officials. Although the platforms were designed around a standardized format developed by RID, the structure remained flexible and adapted to local political and institutional conditions.<sup>38</sup>

A typical 3P meeting lasted two to three hours and followed four stages:

1. Opening and agenda-setting. Meetings began with facilitation by RID staff or a rotating CSO coordinator. Although participants could propose issues, agenda-setting was often pre-negotiated between CSO coordinators and institutional actors, revealing asymmetries in control over discussion topics.<sup>39</sup>
2. Issue presentation and citizen testimony. Citizens and CSO representatives presented concrete local concerns – ranging from poor service delivery and youth unemployment to administrative corruption and exclusion.<sup>40</sup> These contributions were framed through everyday experience rather than formal policy language.
3. Institutional response. MPs and public officials responded, often acknowledging the concerns but referring them to committees or higher authorities, reflecting the limited decision-making authority embedded in the platform.<sup>41</sup>
4. Documentation and follow-up. Each meeting concluded with a set of written recommendations circulated among stakeholders. However, no binding mechanisms required institutions to act on these proposals, reinforcing the consultative character of the forums.<sup>42</sup>

Participation was formally open but socially unequal. While women, youth, and rural citizens increasingly attended – particularly in Halabja, Garmyan, and Raparin – speaking time was frequently dominated by established CSO leaders and politically connected actors.<sup>43</sup> Ordinary citizens often required encouragement from facilitators to speak.

Despite these constraints, the 3Ps created new public spaces for political interaction that had not previously existed in many localities.<sup>44</sup> As one participant explained: “Before, we only complained in our homes. Now we can say these things in front of officials, even if nothing changes immediately”. In this sense, the platforms normalized public dialogue and symbolically redefined who could address authority, even as substantive influence remained limited.

### ***Baseline conditions and emerging change***

The introduction of the 3P platforms described above responded to a political environment in which public participation was widely perceived as both important and largely inaccessible. The 2016 baseline study revealed significant barriers to citizen engagement. A large majority of respondents (76%) reported that governmental institutions, including the Kurdistan Parliament, did not involve CSOs or citizens in decision-making. Only 9% confirmed any institutional inclusion, while 71% stated that citizens had no meaningful participation. The absence of a legal framework, weak institutional communication, and limited trust between citizens and authorities fostered a

fragmented political environment characterized by symbolic rather than substantive participation.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, the baseline pointed to latent democratic demand: more than half of respondents expressed willingness to participate if meaningful mechanisms were provided.<sup>46</sup> This tension between aspiration and exclusion was captured by one focus group participant in Erbil: “People really want to be involved in decisions that affect their lives, but they often don’t know how or where to participate”.

To enable comparison across the two survey years, responses were recoded into a binary index (positive/negative, with a small “uncertain” category). The results demonstrate a clear shift between 2016 and 2019.<sup>47</sup> As shown in [Table 1](#), the proportion of respondents stating that institutions involve CSOs and citizens rose from 9% to 31%, while those believing that citizens’ views were taken into account increased from 8% to 41%. Similarly, reported participation in consultations or forums increased from 7% to 24%. Together, these changes indicate a gradual normalization of participatory practices during the EDP period.

Several CSO leaders emphasized that prior to the EDP, engagement was “sporadic and informal”, while by 2019 structured forums, joint committees, and local 3P platforms had become recognizable features of the governance landscape. Citizens in rural governorates noted that “for the first time, meetings were announced publicly, and ordinary people could attend”, illustrating how the program contributed to the normalization of participation.

These baseline constraints and early signs of change shaped the EDP’s emphasis on creating visible and routinized participatory spaces. The next section examines how these spaces altered visibility and access across the Kurdistan Region.

### **Visibility and access to participation (Process quality)**

One of the clearest improvements observed in 2019 concerned the visibility, formalization, and geographic reach of participatory spaces. Compared to 2016, a significantly

**Table 1.** Comparison of key survey indicators (2016 vs. 2019).

Question / Indicator	2016	2019
Government, Parliament, and institutions involve CSOs and citizens	No 76% / Yes 9%	No 65% / Yes 31%
Legal/policy framework for participation exists	No 49% / Yes 13%	No 52% / Yes 39%
Citizens’ views taken into account in decision-making	No 74% / Yes 8%	No 57% / Yes 41%
Institutions trust CSOs’ and citizens’ capacity	No 60% / Yes 12%	No 52% / Yes 42%
General level of citizen participation	No 71% / Yes 17%	No 52% / Yes 40%
Citizens who have attended consultation or forum	7%	24%
Belief that institutions pay attention to citizens	8%	25% (fully), 19% (partially)
Who pays most attention to citizens’ concerns?	–	CSOs 43%, Media 21%, Parliament 6%, Government 2%
Dominant view on low participation	–	51%: Gov. blocks participation; 34%: Citizens don’t care; 4%: Participation is high

Source: Reform Institute for Development, Public Participation Baseline Study; Reform Institute for Development, Public Participation Impact Assessment 2019.

higher proportion of respondents reported awareness of, or direct engagement in, participatory activities. Mechanisms such as joint committees, 3P platforms, and regional stakeholder meetings were no longer ad hoc experiments; they had become recognizable and increasingly routinized features of the governance landscape.

This development aligns closely with Rowe and Frewer's process criteria, particularly accessibility, transparency, and structured decision procedures. By creating predictable and accessible platforms for dialogue between CSOs, citizens, and public officials, the EDP addressed one of the key deficits identified in the baseline study: the absence of institutionalized participatory mechanisms.<sup>48</sup>

According to RID's internal documentation, by the end of 2019 the program had supported the creation or revitalization of nine local 3P platforms across all governorates. In addition, more than 60 stakeholder forums and thematic public meetings were organized between 2016 and 2019, many in previously underserved areas such as Raparin and Garman.<sup>49</sup> Meetings were publicly announced, increasingly supported by digital invitations, and scheduled on a regular basis.

Survey data confirmed this shift. Awareness of participatory mechanisms rose by more than 20 percentage points in several rural districts between 2016 and 2019, and attendance in forums increased from 7% to 24%. These quantitative improvements were echoed in qualitative material. As one CSO representative noted that "for the first time, people in rural towns could attend a meeting that mattered".

The design of the platforms also reflected principles of participatory action research, embedding rotating participation and continuous feedback mechanisms into its design. RID's Log Frame emphasized open invitations and participatory calendars – features confirmed in 2019 monitoring reports, where digital platforms were shown to improve outreach and transparency.<sup>50</sup>

Visibility was further amplified through media coverage. RID's annual reports indicate that 3P activities were regularly featured on major television outlets such as Rudaw, Kurdsat News, and NRT, as well as through regional radio and digital platforms.<sup>51</sup> Media exposure not only raised awareness but also helped normalize civic engagement as a legitimate component of governance in the Kurdistan Region.

These developments suggest that the EDP succeeded in institutionalizing participation as a visible and accessible practice across the region. Yet increased visibility did not automatically translate into influence, raising questions about representativeness and institutional responsiveness, which are examined in the following section.

### ***Influence and representativeness (Acceptance criteria)***

While the EDP achieved clear improvements in visibility and access, concerns about the depth of influence and the representativeness of actors remained persistent in 2019. Both the survey and qualitative interviews revealed that many citizens – especially outside Erbil and Sulaymaniyah – felt their participation in forums and committees had limited effect on actual decisions. Respondents frequently emphasized that although they were "heard", their contributions rarely translated into tangible policy changes or institutional reforms.<sup>52</sup> From the perspective of Arnstein's ladder, participation thus remained largely within the consultative rungs rather than moving toward partnership or delegated power.<sup>53</sup>

This distinction mirrors Rowe and Frewer's acceptance criteria, which emphasize that legitimacy in participation depends not only on open access but also on

whether the process is perceived as fair, inclusive, and impactful.<sup>54</sup> Two interrelated challenges were particularly evident: elite dominance within CSO representation and weak institutional responsiveness.

### **Elite dominance**

RID's *Annual Review 2019* observed that "some joint platforms lacked renewal mechanisms, and the same organizations retained influence across cycles", restricting diversity of input and reinforcing perceptions of closed networks.<sup>55</sup> Several joint committees – particularly in politically active regions – were dominated by established CSOs, many with close affiliations to local authorities or strong donor ties.<sup>56</sup> This concentration of influence reduced opportunities for emerging or critical voices.

These dynamics were also articulated by participants in terms of party-centered decision-making. As one focus group participant in Sulaimani noted: "Political parties claim to represent the people, but often decisions are made behind closed doors by party leaders without consulting members".

RID's internal assessments further noted uneven CSO capacity to represent grassroots constituencies. Some organizations lacked internal democracy or regular consultation with their members, undermining their legitimacy as intermediaries.<sup>57</sup> Recognizing this, the EDP Project Proposal 2022 recommended new rotation rules and internal bylaws for joint committees to counteract elite capture and strengthen accountability.<sup>58</sup>

### **Responsiveness**

A related weakness concerned limited responsiveness from public institutions. While officials often attended meetings, they had no formal obligation to act on recommendations. RID's *Policy Outcome Matrix* recorded that of 38 recommendations issued by joint platforms between 2017 and 2019, only 11 received official responses and just 4 were fully adopted by local authorities.<sup>59</sup> This low follow-through generated frustration and reinforced perceptions of symbolic participation, echoing Fung's warning that engagement without responsiveness risks fostering disillusionment rather than empowerment.<sup>60</sup>

Experientially, this gap was expressed in everyday terms. One focus group participant described attempts to engage local institutions as follows: "I've tried to attend council meetings, but they are not really open to the public. Even if you go, no one listens". Another recurring theme was the weakness of implementation even where formal rules existed. As one participant in a Kirkuk focus group remarked: "Laws exist on paper, but enforcement is patchy, and many officials are not motivated to involve citizens".

### **Triangulated findings**

Despite these limitations, some procedural improvements were measurable. Between 2016 and 2019, RID documented more than 60 regular coordination meetings between CSOs and MPs, with minutes and outcomes systematically shared among stakeholders.<sup>61</sup> Several regional platforms also introduced feedback loops – providing citizens with updates on the use of their input – an innovation rarely seen before the EDP.<sup>62</sup>

Table 2 summarizes survey-based indicators of role understanding and information-sharing, demonstrating that while awareness of CSO roles improved

**Table 2.** Perceptions of role understanding and information-sharing (2016 vs. 2019).

Indicator	2016	2019
CSOs understand their role	Positive 12% / Negative 75% / Don't know 13%	Positive 69% / Negative 25% / Don't know 6%
Public institutions understand CSOs' role	Positive 18% / Negative 74% / Don't know 8%	Positive 56% / Negative 39% / Don't know 5%
Citizens understand CSOs' role	Positive 21% / Negative 68% / Don't know 11%	Positive 51% / Negative 44% / Don't know 5%
Institutions inform CSOs and citizens	Positive 14% / Negative 78% / Don't know 8%	Positive 21% / Negative 71% / Don't know 8%

Source: Reform Institute for Development, Public Participation Baseline Study; Reform Institute for Development, Public Participation Impact Assessment 2019.

dramatically between 2016 and 2019, institutional communication and feedback remained weak.

Survey results also show that perceived influence rose moderately: by 2019, 26% of respondents believed they could affect decision-making (up from 15% in 2016); 43% expressed confidence in CSOs' representational role (up from 28%); and 24% reported attending consultations or forums (up from 7%).<sup>63</sup> These quantitative shifts were supported by focus-group narratives describing new opportunities for voice, even if decision outcomes remained unchanged.

Nevertheless, perceptions remained uneven across regions. In rural governorates with irregular forum activity, citizens expressed disappointment at limited follow-up and feedback. Focus group participants reported frustration at “never knowing what happened after the meetings”, reinforcing perceptions of symbolic inclusion. RID's SWOT Analysis corroborated these concerns, identifying delayed follow-up, weak enforcement capacity, and inconsistent communication as critical risks to sustaining trust.<sup>64</sup>

Overall, the findings point to a core tension: procedural participation expanded, but institutional responsiveness and representational diversity remained constrained. In Rowe and Frewer's terms, process quality improved, but acceptance and legitimacy remained partial; in Arnstein's terms, participation seldom moved beyond consultation toward shared authority.<sup>65</sup> These limits to influence are reflected in broader patterns of institutional trust and perceived legitimacy, examined in the next section.

### **Trust and legitimacy**

Alongside changes in participation and institutional engagement, the EDP also influenced patterns of trust and perceived legitimacy across governance institutions. In this study, trust is understood as citizens' expressed confidence in institutions' integrity, responsiveness, and fairness, while legitimacy refers to whether institutions are perceived as appropriate representatives of the public interest. These dimensions were measured through identical survey items in 2016 and 2019 and triangulated with interview and documentary material.<sup>66</sup>

Survey results show that while trust in government and parliament remained low, positive perceptions of civil society organizations (CSOs) and provincial councils increased substantially. Table 3 summarizes these trends, indicating that central state institutions continued to face a legitimacy deficit, whereas non-state and subnational actors gained credibility as intermediaries.<sup>67</sup>

**Table 3.** Trust in key institutions (2016 vs. 2019).

Institution	2016	2019
Trust in CSOs	64% Negative / 24% Positive	42% Negative / 53% Positive
Trust in Parliament	63% Negative / 24% Positive	61% Negative / 31% Positive
Trust in Government	66% Negative / 26% Positive	64% Negative / 28% Positive
Trust in Provincial Council	65% Negative / 25% Positive	53% Negative / 35% Positive

Source: Reform Institute for Development, *Public Participation Baseline Study* (Erbil, 2016); Reform Institute for Development, *Public Participation Impact Assessment 2019* (Erbil, 2019).

These patterns suggest that while participatory reforms helped strengthen horizontal trust – between citizens, CSOs, and local councils – they had limited impact on vertical trust toward central political institutions. This divergence reflects the constrained responsiveness documented in the previous section. Qualitative material supports this interpretation. Respondents frequently described CSOs as “closer to citizens” and more responsive than government agencies, particularly in regions where 3P platforms and joint committees were active. At the same time, several interviewees expressed ambivalence about CSO independence. As one participant noted: “CSOs try to fill gaps left by the government, but they need more independence and clearer roles to have real influence”.

In areas with weak or irregular participatory activity, skepticism toward both CSOs and government institutions remained pronounced. RID’s SWOT Analysis similarly identified partisan influence and limited institutional follow-up as recurring risks to sustaining public trust.<sup>68</sup>

From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with Rowe and Frewer’s insight that procedural openness alone does not generate legitimacy unless accompanied by responsiveness and fairness.<sup>69</sup> Arnstein’s ladder further suggests that trust can deepen only when citizens move beyond consultation toward partnership and shared authority.<sup>70</sup> At a structural level, the pattern also reflects Wong’s observation that inclusiveness without contestation produces “broad but shallow” legitimacy.<sup>71</sup>

In sum, the EDP strengthened trust in community-level and intermediary actors, yet failed to transform perceptions of the central political order. Without institutionalized feedback mechanisms and accountability, participatory reforms remain vulnerable to disillusionment. These limits point toward the broader question of whether inclusiveness under the EDP translated into shifts in power relations, examined in the final section.

### **Power relations under expanded participation**

The expansion of participatory spaces under the EDP did not substantially alter underlying power relations. While more CSOs and citizens gained access to forums and consultations, these arenas remained largely consultative and peripheral to formal decision-making. Participation widened horizontally, but authority remained vertically concentrated.<sup>72</sup>

RID’s internal reporting and qualitative material point to the same pattern. Although the 3P platforms expanded the number and diversity of participants, their role remained primarily consultative. Agenda-setting largely stayed with MPs and government officials, and participants were often invited into meetings without meaningful influence over priorities or follow-up.<sup>73</sup> As one local official noted, “All decisions

are made in Erbil. Even when we propose something locally, they say: ‘Wait for approval from the center.’” In this sense, the participatory spaces created under the EDP resembled what Cornwall describes as invited spaces: arenas in which participation is permitted, but tightly structured by dominant institutions.<sup>74</sup>

These limits were reinforced by broader structural constraints. RID’s SWOT Analysis identified weak enforcement mechanisms, restricted space for independent voices, and political gatekeeping by party-affiliated actors as key barriers. Even where CSOs were active and well organized, these conditions curtailed their ability to influence outcomes or engage contentious policy questions.<sup>75</sup>

Taken together, these findings suggest that the EDP broadened participation without redistributing authority. More actors became visible within governance processes, but the rules of engagement and the underlying hierarchy of decision-making remained largely unchanged. In Arnstein’s terms, the reforms moved participation toward consultation and placation, but only rarely toward partnership or delegated power. Expanded inclusion therefore did not translate into structural empowerment.<sup>76</sup>

## Discussion and synthesis

### *Empirical patterns and their meaning*

The evidence from 2016–2019 reveals a clear duality: the Enhancing Democratization Program (EDP) advanced *procedural democratization* through visible and accessible participatory structures, yet achieved only limited transformation of institutional power and responsiveness. The program institutionalized 3P platforms, joint committees, and regional forums across all governorates, shifting participation from ad hoc consultation to structured and legitimate practice. Citizens and CSOs could “enter the room”, but decision-making largely remained beyond their reach.

Survey data reinforce this trend. Awareness of participatory mechanisms rose from 9% to 31%, and participation in consultations increased from 7% to 24%. Trust in CSOs and provincial councils improved significantly, while confidence in government and parliament stagnated.<sup>77</sup> These findings demonstrate a widening of participation horizontally – across actors and regions – but not vertically, toward redistribution of authority. In short, participation became more *visible* but not necessarily more *influential*.

Qualitative evidence provides depth to these patterns. Participants described forums as inclusive but not decisive – spaces where citizens were “heard but not heeded”. Officials’ engagement often lent legitimacy to dialogue without requiring action. The EDP’s greatest accomplishment was therefore not structural reform, but the normalization of participatory dialogue as a legitimate part of governance. Visibility and access improved substantially, but power remained centralized. To understand why these patterns emerged, the following section interprets the findings through the theoretical lenses introduced earlier.

These patterns must also be read in light of the broader political context. The 2017 referendum and its aftermath likely redirected political attention toward high-level strategic and existential concerns, reducing the incentive for institutions to prioritize citizens’ everyday demands even where participatory forums formally expanded. As Watts suggests, questions of self-determination and political survival have long

shaped democratic dynamics in the Kurdistan Region.<sup>78</sup> This context helps explain why procedural inclusion could advance without a corresponding increase in institutional responsiveness.

### ***Interpreting participation under hybrid regimes***

Viewed through Arnstein's ladder,<sup>79</sup> participation under the EDP advanced to the mid-level stages of *consultation* and *placation*, but rarely achieved *partnership* or *delegated power*. This reflects the hybrid nature of Kurdistan's political system, where openness to dialogue coexists with entrenched elite control.

Rowe and Frewer's process and acceptance criteria further clarify the distinction between procedural and substantive participation.<sup>80</sup> The EDP succeeded in meeting *process criteria* – transparency, accessibility, and continuity – through structured forums and regularized engagement. Yet *acceptance criteria* – representativeness, legitimacy, and responsiveness – remained only partially fulfilled. Some CSOs dominated platforms due to political or donor ties, while institutional responsiveness was minimal.

Wong's inclusiveness–contestation model provides the structural key to this asymmetry. The EDP widened inclusiveness but failed to strengthen contestation – the ability of citizens to challenge and reshape decision outcomes. This created *broad but shallow participation*, where access expanded but authority remained fixed. Nonetheless, such procedural progress should not be underestimated. In hybrid regimes, even modest institutionalization of participatory practices can cultivate civic confidence and open new spaces for engagement. If participation under the EDP expanded procedurally but remained structurally constrained, the question becomes how such reforms might move toward substantive empowerment.

The externally supported character of the EDP is also important in this regard. Donor-backed initiatives can help create participatory forums, strengthen coordination, and build civic and organizational capacity, especially where domestic institutions are weak or politically reluctant. At the same time, external support cannot by itself transform entrenched power hierarchies or create responsiveness where institutional incentives to share authority remain limited. The Kurdistan case therefore illustrates both the possibilities and the limits of externally supported participatory reform.<sup>81</sup>

### ***Implications for democratization in hybrid regimes***

The Kurdistan case highlights a central tension in hybrid regimes: participatory reforms may increase visibility, access, and local legitimacy without altering the institutional distribution of power. In this sense, the study shows that procedural democratization and substantive democratization do not necessarily advance in tandem.<sup>82</sup> Participation may become routinized and publicly valued while remaining confined to consultation rather than partnership or delegated authority. This helps explain why trust and civic engagement can increase even where state responsiveness remains limited.

The findings also suggest that the democratic effects of participation depend on institutional embedding. Without binding feedback mechanisms, wider inclusion risks remaining performative. Similarly, when the same organizations repeatedly

dominate participatory spaces, representativeness weakens even where access formally expands. More meaningful participation therefore requires not only open forums, but also clearer accountability rules, rotation mechanisms, and stronger incorporation of citizen input into subnational decision-making processes.

Theoretically, the findings refine core models of participatory governance. Arnstein's ladder remains a valuable diagnostic tool, but the Kurdistan case shows that procedural gains can occur without a corresponding transfer of power. Rowe and Frewer's distinction between process and acceptance criteria helps explain why fair and accessible procedures may build local legitimacy even when responsiveness remains weak. More selectively, Wong's inclusiveness–contestation distinction helps clarify why widened access without institutional contestation produces only partial democratization.<sup>83</sup>

In synthesis, the Kurdistan case illustrates how participation can evolve in form without yet transforming in function. Procedural democratization is not a substitute for substantive empowerment, but it may create institutional routines, civic expectations, and openings that make deeper democratization more conceivable over time. While the empirical focus of this study is the Kurdistan Region, the findings speak to a broader democratic dilemma: the expansion of participatory procedures without a corresponding redistribution of power. Similar patterns have been observed in a wide range of political systems, suggesting that the challenge of symbolic participation is not confined to hybrid regimes but reflects a structural tension within contemporary participatory governance.

## Conclusion

This study examined the evolution of public participation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq between 2016 and 2019, focusing on the participatory reforms implemented under the Enhancing Democratization Program (EDP).

The findings show that the EDP achieved measurable progress in visibility, accessibility, and localized trust, while leaving underlying power relations largely unchanged. Participation expanded horizontally – across actors and regions – but failed to deepen vertically toward shared authority. Trust in CSOs and provincial councils increased, yet confidence in government and parliament remained low. The data thus confirm that hybrid regimes can facilitate procedural democratization without redistributing power. Beyond the Kurdistan context, the findings suggest that democratization in hybrid regimes may proceed through uneven sequencing: procedural inclusion may expand before institutions become meaningfully responsive. Such reforms may therefore deepen civic expectations and local legitimacy without yet transforming the underlying structure of authority.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that procedural reforms are not meaningless. By normalizing civic interaction, fostering new expectations of engagement, and building institutional routines, participatory platforms can generate incremental democratic change. Procedural inclusion and institutional responsiveness need not emerge simultaneously; the former can pave the way for the latter by normalizing participatory norms and building civic competence.

For policymakers and practitioners, the Kurdistan case highlights the importance of institutional feedback mechanisms, diversified participation beyond established elites, and locally anchored governance structures. Participation becomes meaningful not

when citizens are merely invited to speak, but when institutions are compelled to listen.

Ultimately, the EDP illustrates that democratization in hybrid regimes is gradual, uneven, and contested, yet not without consequence. By creating predictable and legitimate spaces for participation, even within constrained political systems, procedural democratization can sow the seeds of substantive change. The future of participatory governance in the Kurdistan Region will depend on whether these foundations can evolve from symbolic inclusion to genuine power-sharing – a transition from voice to influence, and from visibility to authority.

## Notes

1. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Wong, “Democracy, Hybrid Regimes, and Inequality.”
2. Scharpf, “Legitimacy in the Multilevel European Polity.”
3. Moysan and Ródenas-Rigla, “The Participatory Processes in Public Policy-Making.”
4. Sofi, *Interetnisk Konflikt eller Samförstånd*; Hakeem, “The Reality of Civil Society in Kurdistan Region.”
5. Sofi, *Public and Civil Society Organizations’ Participation in Decision-Making Process*; Isakhan, “Civil Society in Hybrid Regimes.”
6. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*; Bogaards, “How to Classify Hybrid Regimes?”; Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan*; Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending*.
7. Sofi, *Interetnisk Konflikt eller Samförstånd*; Sofi, *Public and Civil Society Organizations’ Participation in Decision-Making Process*; Ameen Hussein and Moniruzzaman, “Civil Society Organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan.”
8. Cornwall, “Spaces for Transformation?”; Gaventa, “Finding the Spaces for Change.”
9. Watts, “Democracy and Self-Determination in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.”
10. Reform Institute for Development, *Annual EDP Reports*.
11. Reform Institute for Development, *EDP Log Frame*.
12. Reform Institute for Development, *Annual EDP Work Plan*; Reform Institute for Development, *EDP Project Proposal 2016–2019*.
13. Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon, *The Action Research Planner*.
14. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.
15. Yildiz and Taysi, *The Kurds in Iraq*; Sofi, *Interetnisk Konflikt eller Samförstånd*; Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State*.
16. Belloni, *State Building and International Intervention in Bosnia*; Carothers and Brechenmacher, *Accountability, Transparency, Participation, and Inclusion*.
17. Yom, “Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World.”; Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*.
18. Cornwall, “Spaces for Transformation?” 75–91; Gaventa, “Finding the Spaces for Change,” 23–33; Fung, “Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance”; Rowe and Frewer, “Public Participation Methods.”
19. Wong, “Democracy, Hybrid Regimes, and Inequality,” 105606.
20. Hakeem, “The Reality of Civil Society in Kurdistan Region”; Hussein and Moniruzzaman, “Civil Society Organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan,” 225–42.
21. R. Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation.”
22. Rowe and Frewer, “Public Participation Methods.”
23. Wong, “Democracy, Hybrid Regimes, and Inequality,” 105606.
24. Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon, *The Action Research Planner*.
25. Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*; Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*.
26. Bryman, *Social Research Methods*.
27. Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*.
28. Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” 216–24; Fung, “Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance,” 66–75.

29. Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*.
30. Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology"; Kvale and Brinkmann, *InterViews*.
31. Berger, "Now I See It, Now I Don't"; Chavez, "Conceptualizing from the Inside."
32. Rowe and Frewer, "Public Participation Methods," 3–29.
33. Berger, "Now I See It, Now I Don't," 219–34.
34. Berglund, "Going In or Going Out—Practicing Embedded Research as a True Insider."
35. Chavez, "Conceptualizing from the Inside," 474–94; Berger, "Now I See It, Now I Don't," 219–34.
36. Israel and Hay, *Research Ethics for Social Scientists*.
37. Reform Institute for Development, *EDP Log Frame*; Reform Institute for Development, *Public Participation Impact Assessment 2019*.
38. Reform Institute for Development, *Annual EDP Reports*; Reform Institute for Development, *Internal Monitoring and Evaluation Reports, 2016–2019*.
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48. Rowe and Frewer, "Public Participation Methods," 3–29; Reform Institute for Development, *Public Participation Baseline Study*.
49. Reform Institute for Development, *EDP Project Proposal 2022*; Reform Institute for Development, *EDP Project Proposal 2016–2019*; Reform Institute for Development, *EDP Project Proposal 2022*.
50. Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon, *The Action Research Planner*; Flora Cornish et al., "Participatory Action Research"; Reform Institute for Development, *EDP Log Frame*; Reform Institute for Development, *Internal Monitoring and Evaluation Reports, 2016–2019*.
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57. Reform Institute for Development, *Enhancing Democratization Program (EDP): Internal Impact Assessment Summary*; Reform Institute for Development, *SWOT Analysis*.
58. Reform Institute for Development, *EDP Project Proposal 2022*, 8.
59. Reform Institute for Development, *Policy Outcome Matrix*.
60. Fung, "Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance," 66–75.
61. Reform Institute for Development, *Internal Monitoring and Evaluation Reports, 2016–2019*.
62. Reform Institute for Development, *Internal Monitoring and Evaluation Reports, 2016–2019*; Reform Institute for Development, *Enhancing Democratization Program (EDP): Internal Impact Assessment Summary*.
63. Reform Institute for Development, *EDP Project Proposal 2022*, Annex II; Reform Institute for Development, *EDP Log Frame*.
64. Reform Institute for Development, *SWOT Analysis*.

65. Rowe and Frewer, "Public Participation Methods," 3–29; Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," 216–24; Cornwall, "Spaces for Transformation?" 75–91; Fung, "Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance," 66–75.
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## Acknowledgments

The fieldwork and data collection were conducted within the Enhancing Democratization Program (EDP) in Iraq, funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD) in cooperation with Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) (Project name: Improving Democratization and Human Rights in Iraq, IRQ610RID180). The author gratefully acknowledges the Reform Institute for Development (RID) and Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) for their support.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data availability statement

The data supporting this study are held by the Reform Institute for Development (RID) and Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), which received the reports produced by RID. Access may be granted upon reasonable request and with permission from these institutions.

## Ethical considerations

The study followed institutional ethical guidelines. All participants provided informed consent, participation was voluntary, and data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

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