

REPORT

*ROUNDTABLE
DISCUSSION*

INSTITUTIONALISING
ONLINE CITIZEN
PARTICIPATION IN
PUBLIC POLICY
MAKING IN INDIA

26 NOVEMBER 2021

5 - 7 PM

PRIA@40
SHAPING OUR TOMORROWS, TODAY

ICNL INTERNATIONAL CENTER
FOR NOT-FOR-PROFIT LAW

Civis



Citizen participation



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- ***Maintaining an enabling environment for participation*** – The state is obligated to maintain a supportive environment for expression, equality and non-discrimination which are important for participation with the same set of guidelines applying to both online and offline participation.
- ***Online participation approached as part of public participation*** – There is a need to prioritise internet access for everyone but there is a bigger need for digital literacy and citizen education so that online participation can be approached as a framework of public participation.
- ***Feedbacks and inputs are important*** – Feedbacks and remedies should be provided when the public participation requirements are not satisfied so that the inputs are processed by the government that leads to a meaningful impact.
- ***Create a platform for civic education*** – It is very important to create and maintain a platform for civic education so that not only governments and policymakers understand their impacts but also people and put in efforts to be aware of it.
- ***Create multiple approaches to reach out to diverse people*** – We need to create a culture of participation to bring people from various diverse backgrounds to ensure collective ownership of the issues.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

- **Ms. AMEYA ASHOK NAIK**, eGovernments Foundation
- **Ms. ANTARAA VASUDEV**, Civis
- **Mr. APAR GUPTA**, Internet Freedom Foundation
- **Mr. ARVIND**, Socrates Foundation
- **Ms. CHARU CHADHA**, Omidyar Foundation
- **Mr. DAVID BROWN**, International Centre for Not-for-Profit-Law
- **Mr. DEVJIT MITTRA**, Socrates Foundation
- **Mr. GAUTAM JOHN**, Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies
- **Mr. GAUTHAM RAVICHANDER**, eGovernments Foundation
- **Mr. 'GBENGA SESAN**, Paradigm initiative
- **Ms. KATHYAYINI CHAMARAJ**, Civic Bangalore
- **Mr. KULDEEP DANTEWADIA**, Reap Benefit India
- **Ms. MAANSI VARMA**, Maadhyam
- **Mr. MATT LEIGHNINGER**, National Conference on Citizenship
- **Mr. MAYANK MANISH**, Civis
- **Ms. MEERA K**, Citizen Matters
- **Mr. NILACHALA ACHARYA**, CBGA India
- **Mr. NIRANJAN SAHOO**, ORF
- **Mr. OSAMA MANZAR**, Digital Empowerment Foundation
- **Ms. RAJIKA SETH**, Centre for Policy Research
- **Mr. ROBERT BJARNASON**, Citizens Foundation
- **Mr. SACHIN MALHAN**, Agami
- **Ms. SARA SINHA**, CitizenOS
- **Ms. VR VACHANA**, Janaagraha
- **Mr. VENKATESH NAYAK**, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative
- **Ms. ZEENAT NIAZI**, Development Alternatives

As Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) completes its 40 years, it recommits to continue institutional strengthening and capacity development support to civil society and non-profits with a special focus on new generation civil society and non-profit groups. Between August and December 2021, PRIA will be convening [PRIA@40 Conversations](#) with communities, partners, associates, supporters, experts, investors and colleagues, drawn from civil society, government, business, media and academia, to share ideas and experiences that can help 're-imagine' PRIA, its interventions and the world in the coming period.

In this context, PRIA convened a virtual roundtable discussion on [Institutionalising Online Citizen Participation in Public Policy Making in India](#) on 26 November 2021 in collaboration with [Civis, India](#) and [The International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law \(ICNL\)](#). The roundtable, attended by 35 participants, was moderated by **Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay** (Director, PRIA).

The roundtable began with a short presentation by **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** about PRIA's 40-year journey. The journey has been about providing support in the form of sharing information and ideas; generating new knowledge, building linkages and relationships; providing intermediation expertise, and at times emotional support. Efforts to mobilise individuals, especially the poor and marginalised sections, but increasingly also the middle class, make them aware of their rights and responsibilities. Thus, fuelling their sense of agency to demand services, inclusion, participation, and knowledge. To know more about the journey, click [here](#).

Next **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** invited **Ms. Shruti Arora** (Senior Programme Officer (Research), PRIA) to share the preliminary findings from the study that PRIA is doing on *Institutionalising Online Citizen Consultations in Public Policymaking in India*.

Ms. Arora presented some of the trajectories of online citizen participation and its evolution over time. While speaking of the different approaches, she said, looking at *participation from below* is a way for the excluded to affirm their demands and challenge power through organised groups and social movements. It sees participation as more than a consultation with loosely defined communities. In the 1980s- 90s, promoted by international development agencies and national governments (many a time through local NGOs), participation took the form of 'users' committees, which could help target and deliver services to those who most needed them. It opened up space for peoples' knowledge and involvement in development planning and implementation. This beneficiary approach still often positioned people more passively as 'users and choosers' rather than as 'makers and shapers' of their policies, programmes or futures.

In 1994, the World Bank defined participation '*as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them*'. The narrative of multiple stakeholder participation came into existence which included the private sector as well. PRIA, through its various initiatives, shifted the focus on primary stakeholder's participation. With the 73rd CAA, Panchayati Raj Institutions were given a constitutional status which gave rise to new concepts and discourses of participatory governance and citizenship. It meant that the citizens were not just the beneficiaries, users, voters, or consumers but political right-holders in the local and decentralised governance. We need to promote participation to seek transparency and accountability.

The study revealed the potential of digital and information technology to accelerate citizen participation. This is because there is the ease of remote participation as number of people can access information and can participate in the process. As a result, the outreach is scaled

up. Artificial intelligence-based labelling and sorting can be used for analysis and decision making. However, there are contextual barriers to online citizen participation. There is a huge digital divide because of the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of people. In addition, there are infrastructural challenges that the study revealed such as internet bandwidth, storage on the phone, etc. In order to make technology work for all, it is important that we discuss the digital divide in much greater detail and not just do lip service to this.

The other challenge was that the government staff was not trained, especially at the district and block level, to use the technology. The programmes get developed by the people who are at the higher ranking in the government system and people in the lower ranking do not know how to use the technology. Due to the majoritarian democracy that we live in mostly the views of the majority matters. Hence, the minority gets left out. Polarisation of views is yet another challenge in this context. Internet as a space for citizen participation is not safe because there is a lot of trolling especially when it comes to political discussions.

Multiple collaborations are happening between organisations and there is an offline interface to it, not everything is online. There are face to face meetings sometimes that are equally important strategies for organisations. While the primary purpose of any organisation's digital platform is grievance redressal or informing the citizens for petitioning, it is to recognise that other strategies have also been used to expand outreach and impact of citizen engagement. Information is power and the purpose is to raise awareness about the laws, policies, entitlements and governance systems that are important for the development of the citizens. Unlike traditional ways where information sharing and mobilisation of citizens would happen face to face, digital platforms are being used to simplify the knowledge, raise awareness and create mass space of informed citizens. Multiple types of platforms are being used for disseminating information, which includes participatory mobile platforms, mobile phone applications and organisational websites. The focus is on simplifying the information, making information accessible and contextual for a wider audience and in multiple languages/ local dialects.

Discussing the recommendations to promote online citizens participation, **Ms. Arora** emphasised on the importance of contextualising the information according to the demography. We need to ensure that technology is used to leverage the process of contextualising the information. Similarly, homogeneity in mobilisation of the excluded groups is important to be considered. Technological platforms need to reach out in a way that marginalised communities use it. Investing in building the capacities of the homogeneous community for citizen participation is important such that they are considered equal and primary stakeholders. There is a need to create a space for intermediaries to ensure that neutrality is maintained in summarising the legal texts while adopting technology-based solutions. There are privacy concerns with technology. Citizens need to be informed on how their data is being used. Giving out sensitive information of technology users to powerful institutions was an ethical concern that the study revealed. The purpose of this space is to consult the citizens for decision-making during the process of policy planning. It is important to understand who, what, why and how are we consulting?

It is crucial that we reach out to the excluded groups and identify a pathway for the caste, gender, religion, location, literacy, language ability or disability-based minority groups, to ensure that we do not do a disservice to these communities. In turn, enable them to participate equally. Meaningful citizen participation happens incrementally. There are different degrees of citizen participation along the scale of tokenistic participation to meaningful participation. This change needs to be seen more incrementally. It is not a leap jump as participation is a learning process.

The consultation process needs to set the norms or ground rules on the platform to encourage participation acknowledge feedback received, encourage respondents to keep

the conversation relevant and provide the option of making the submissions anonymously. It is easier to collect data and hold consultations but difficult to analyse and consolidate the collected data. Technology needs to provide solutions to understand the data in a disaggregated manner. Technology must ensure transparency, especially to the citizens who are part of the consultation process. They need to know what technology was used to consolidate their feedback and what results have emerged from it. However, maintaining the confidentiality of data is also important. The social accountability approach must be used especially while submitting the report to the government. Social accountability is national framework that obligates the state to encourage meaningful citizen participation.

Yet another important phase is where the government shows that it cares and is invested in the process of citizen participation. An exchange between the citizens and governments is important for a meaningful dialogue. A feedback loop is an important aspect of this dialogue. This would mean having a communication exchange, giving feedback to the citizens to see what was important, what decision was taken, what was the rationale for the decision taken and explaining how the inputs were used to close the feedback loop. This communication exchange thus becomes very important. The government officials need to be trained to do this too. We often see that government official higher up in the ranking who envisioned the digital programmes, know about the programmes but in the lower rankings they are not trained in using the technology and hence there are implementation gaps. The government needs to communicate to citizens how their inputs will be used in policymaking. The cycle of participation is a learning process for everybody.

Next, **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** invited **Mr. Apar Gupta (Executive Director, Internet Freedom Foundation, India)** and **Dr. Rajesh Tandon (Founder- President, PRIA)** to set the stage for the discussion.

In his introductory remarks, **Mr. Gupta** echoed **Ms. Arora's** comment that the fundamental challenge in online citizen participation is access and inclusivity. Even though access and inclusivity have been an issue that has been worked upon in India, it continues to remain a challenge in many parts of the country thereby preventing citizen participation through digital modes. Quite often the beneficiaries of government schemes and programmes are the ones that are economically and socially privileged. Therefore, we need to design the participation tools using a combination of online as well as offline modes.

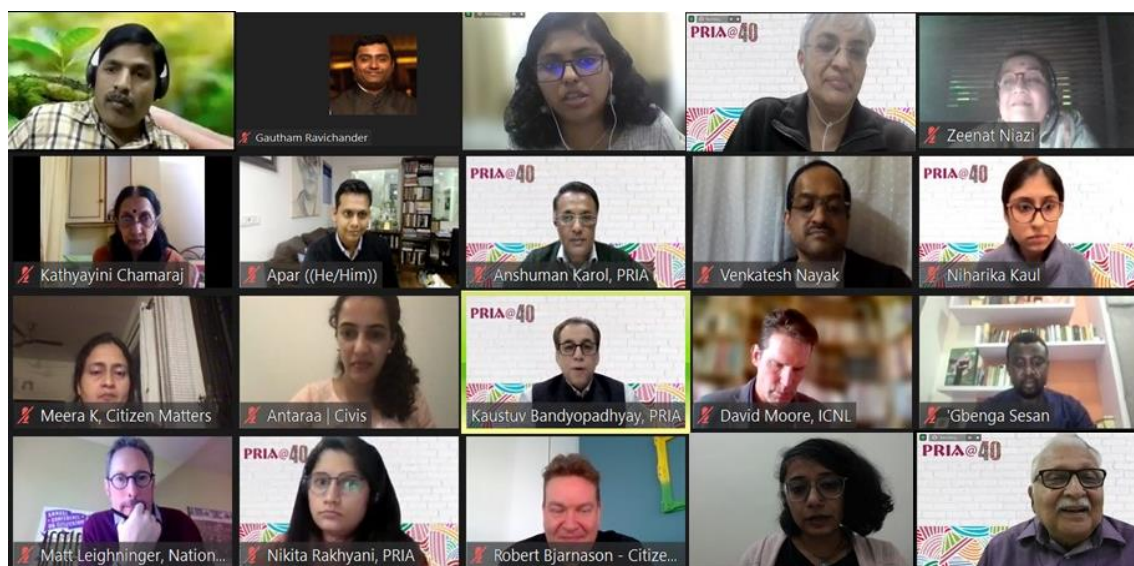
As per the data of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, in cities like Delhi and Bangalore, there are 2 internet connections for one person because that's the level of density of these cities. However, some reports also state that for all the remote learning objectives which were intended over the last two years, close to 25% of children in India didn't have internet access during the pandemic. We must account for this in the larger policy prescriptions beyond participation itself. Having said that, it is important to note that there are limits to online participation.

There are communities that do not have traditions of individual participation. The sense of community quite often comes through collective in-person participation. There are innovative ways of using technology to ensure that people located in different cities or villages can communicate with each other without necessarily having to do away with in-person meetings. Public consultation needs to be done at the municipal and ground levels. But the standard-setting and good practices need to involve the federal level and the central level ministries because they are the most powerful and have the greatest degree of influence. He concluded, '*things are good, but things are also bad in certain respects and things can always be better when I say this*'.

'Participation is a natural human tendency, it's like the water you remove the obstacles, it will find its path', said **Dr. Tandon**. The most difficult part in promoting participation for the subaltern/ excluded/ vulnerable groups, which **Dr. Gupta** also hinted at, is that it is not just individual participation but collective participation. The purpose of developing a collective agency is to create the capacity to influence relations of power. Unfortunately, modern technology in its current manifestation is reinforcing greater authoritarian and top-down tendencies as opposed to liberating the potential of technology to empower people with not only access to authentic information but the capacity to collectivise to make that contribution towards the policy framework.

In the past, civil society realised that things could be done through representatives, after all, democracy works through representatives. But representative participation per se has its limits as it does not necessarily voice the needs of the most marginal and excluded. How do we ensure that they participate? Exclusion happens in representative participation as well. If technology can be used to create collective consultative processes in a hybrid mode – offline and online, to discuss the preferences and options, it would enable direct participation.

Meet the participants...



[L to R: Mr. Nilachala Acharya, Mr. Gautham Ravichander, Ms. Vachana V. R., Ms. Sumitra Srinivasan, Ms. Zeenat Niazi, Ms. Kathyayini Chamaraj, Dr. Apar Gupta, Mr. Anshuman Karol, Mr. Venkatesh Nayak, Ms. Niharika Kaul, Ms. Meera K., Ms. Antaraa Vasudev, Dr. Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay, Mr. David Moore, Mr. Gbenga Sesan, Mr. Matt Leighninger, Ms. Nikita Rakhyani, Mr. Robert Bjarnason, Ms. Shruti Arora and Dr. Rajesh Tandon]

To take the discussion forward, the participants were divided into 3 breakout groups. In the breakout sessions, the participants deliberated on the following questions:

- What are the current online mechanisms and practices for consulting citizens in making laws and policies by the governments? What lessons can be drawn from the national and international experiences?
- How have the non-governmental organisations attempted to influence the policymaking using online citizen participation?

- What principles can be suggested in making online citizen consultations reliable, inclusive, and continuous?

Here is a brief account of the discussions from the breakout groups.

Breakout Group 1

Moderator: Dr. Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay (Director, PRIA, India)

Rapporteur: Ms. Nikita Rakhyani (Youth Trainer, PRIA, India)

Kick-off Discussants: Dr. Matt Leighninger (Head of Democracy Innovation, National Conference on Citizenship, USA) and Ms. Antaraa Vasudev (Founder, Civis, India)

Discussants: Mr. Niranjana Sahoo (ORF), Ms. Maansi Varma (Maadhyam), Mr. Devjit Mitra (Socrates Foundation), Mr. Kuldeep Dantewadia (Reap Benefit India), Ms. Meera K (Citizen Matters), Mr. Sachin Malhan (Agami) and Ms. Neha S Chaudhry (Research Consultant, PRIA, India).

Ms. Nikita Rakhyani (Youth Trainer, PRIA) presented the key discussion points from breakout group 1:

- (i) Conventional form of participation is where the government is at the top and the citizens are at the bottom. Usually, these consultations do not take place online; as a result, citizen participation is difficult.
- (ii) There is a subconscious use of technology because a lot of data is being consumed by the citizen. We need to be aware of how technology is being used.
- (iii) We need to understand the responsiveness of the government not just on policy but also on the culture of participation.
- (iv) We need to enable representation in a way that it is easy to reach out to diverse stakeholders thereby ensuring inclusivity. There must be a collective understanding and collective ownership of the issue to enable greater participation.
- (v) In the context of online engagement, we need to be mindful of the issue of misinformation which leads to the polarisation of views. We need to explore if there can be a technological platform where both representative participation and direct participation can complement each other.
- (vi) There is very limited scope for citizens representatives to have conversations with each other because the government is doing a lot of consultations, but they are not transparent. There is no formal platform or mechanism for citizen representatives to have a say in the policies that are being framed and implemented.
- (vii) Civic education is significant to make people realize that the consultative processes will have an impact on their lives. We need to invest in civic education.
- (viii) We need to create multiple approaches for reaching out to diverse people, given that India is a diverse country, not just in terms of language but also cultural backgrounds. We also need to think and reflect on leveraging the local strength of multiple intermediaries –elected representatives, caste base organisation, and others.
- (ix) We need to create sustainable and continuous platforms or infrastructure and not occasional platforms. We need to use multiple channel strategies that can blend virtual, and in-person use of technology i.e., a hybrid mode of participation.

Breakout Group 2

Moderator: Ms. Sumitra Srinivasan (Consultant, Knowledge Management, PRIA, India)

Rapporteur: Ms. Shruti Arora (Senior Programme Officer (Research), PRIA, India)

Kick-off Discussants: Mr. Róbert Bjarnason (President and CEO, Citizens Foundation, Iceland) and Ms. Charu Chadha (Principal, Governance and Citizen Engagement, Omidyar Network, India)

Discussants: Ms. Kathyayini Chamaraj (Civic Bangalore), Ms. Nilachala Acharya (CBGA), Ms. Zeenat Niazi (Development Alternatives), Dr. Rajesh Tandon (Founder- President, PRIA, India), S. Ram Aravind (Senior Program Officer, PRIA, India) and Linu Rachel Chacko (Research Consultant, PRIA, India)

Ms. Shruti Arora (Senior Program Officer, PRIA) presented the key discussion points from breakout group 2:

- (i) **Mr. Robert Bjarnason** spoke about how in his country (Iceland) they encourage citizens to put down their ideas and have mediated discussion. They also encourage participatory budgets, and they work towards it with the government.
- (ii) On social media platforms, information is very fragmented whereas the information about participation needs to be systematised. There are different ways of doing that such as WhatsApp groups – a WhatsApp group makes people feel a personalised connection with others. Groups could be a strategy that might work for citizen participation.
- (iii) In terms of the digital infrastructure, **Ms. Charu Chadha** said that a lot of times we choose English as our language because it is easier and convenient. We must challenge these default settings to be inclusive. We must encourage participation in local dialects and multiple languages.
- (iv) There is the issue of accessibility of websites because in India a lot of people use mobile phones and not all websites are accessible on phones.
- (v) We also need to create a safe space and ensure anonymity because people may not want to share their vulnerability on an online platform.
- (vi) We need to make the digital platform more reliable in terms of authentic information.

Breakout Group 3

Moderator: Dr. Anshuman Karol (Lead Local Governance, PRIA, India)

Rapporteur: Ms. Niharika Kaul (Research Associate, PRIA, India)

Kick-off Discussants: Mr. Gbenga Sesan (Executive Director, Paradigm Initiative, Nigeria) and Mr. Venkatesh Nayak (Programme Head, Access to Information, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, India)

Discussants: Mr. Arvind (Socrates Foundation), Mr. Mayank Manish (Civis), Ms. Vachana V.R. (Janaagraha), Mr. Gautham Ravichander (eGovernments Foundations) and Ms. Rajika Seth (Centre for Policy Research) and Mr. David Moore (Vice President, Legal Affairs, ICNL, USA)

Ms. Niharika Kaul (Research Associate, PRIA) presented the key discussion points from breakout group 3:

- A hybrid mode might be a plausible way of going about citizen participation. Technology can be leveraged to see the impact of the responses that people give in these consultations. The question at hand is whether the government is committed to incorporating the opinions. The intention of hosting a consultation is very important.
- Often the process of citizen participation is tokenistic as a result these consultations are tokenistic. A lot of countries are still dependent on physical hearings. But many a time,

the physical hearings have their problems such as the cost of travel, stay, etc. This in turn reduces participation.

- There is a need to lay down a framework to consult people while making these decisions instead of having a post-facto discussion after the policies are framed.
- Secondary participation was another way of promoting citizen participation where the physical consultation is recorded and then these recordings were played for people to hear the consultations. We, as civil society, need to become active in taking steps to become middlemen to get through that level of participation for policies.
- Young people today are well versed with technologies so their potential and capacities should be harnessed in the process of promoting participation.
- There needs to be adequate access to infrastructure and also the ability to use that infrastructure. Citizen participation is at a nascent stage but there needs to be more activism around it. Even though there are numbers it doesn't guarantee meaningful participation.

After the presentation of the rapporteurs from the breakout sessions, **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** invited **Mr. David Moore** (Vice President, Legal Affairs, ICNL, USA) to share his closing reflections from the discussion.

In his closing remarks, **Mr. Moore** emphasised on the importance of law. In 2018, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights issued guidelines on the effective implementation of Article 25 on the effect of the implementation of the *Right to Participate*. These guidelines flowed from global consultations, and they addressed participation both in the electoral and non-electoral context at the national and international level. The state is obligated to maintain an enabling environment for association, expression, assembly, equality and non-discrimination- all of which are imperative for participation.

Online participation should be approached as part of a broader framework of public participation. As a result of the digital divide, online participation has become a double-edged sword. While on the one hand, it can lead to much greater inclusivity for those who have reliable internet connections. On the other hand, it can also lead to greater exclusion of those without the internet. In this context, the reliability on electricity is significant. He also emphasised on digital literacy and civic education as a tool for promoting online citizen participation.

In the context of online consultation, the inputs and feedbacks provided by the citizens must be processed by the government to ensure meaningful impact. It is important to monitor the performance of the government and even when the political will may be weak, there must be some means of redressal. This will ensure accountability of not only the citizen but also the public officials.

Summing up the discussion, **Dr. Bandyopadhyay** emphasised on the diversity of the channels of participation. The common perception is that technology itself could intermediate participation of citizens in policy making. But this technological intermediation would require some amount of human intermediation as well. They have to go hand in hand. The quality of information and civic education will determine the quality of input in the policy-making process. Lastly, he emphasised on the importance of accountability. Accountability must be demonstrated not only through citizens' behaviour but also through the public officials' behaviour.

The roundtable discussion ended with a vote of thanks by **Dr. Kaustuv Bandyopadhyay** (Director, PRIA).

5.00 pm to 5.15 pm

Welcome and Introduction to PRIA@40 Programmes and Conversation

Moderator: Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Founder-President, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India

5.10 pm to 5.25 pm

Institutionalising Online Citizen Consultations in Public Policymaking in India – Preliminary Findings from the Research Study

Ms. Shruti Arora, Senior Programme Officer (Research), Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India

5:25 pm to 5.45 pm

Use of Technology to Strengthen Citizen Participation in Policymaking – Pitfalls and Pathways?

- Mr. Apar Gupta, Executive Director, Internet Freedom Foundation, India
- Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Founder President, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India

5.45 pm to 6.30 pm

Breakout Sessions and Key Discussion Questions

- What are the current online mechanisms and practices for consulting citizens in making laws and policies by the governments? What lessons can be drawn from the national and international experiences?
 - How have the non-governmental organisations attempted to influence the policymaking using online citizen participation?
 - What principles can be suggested in making online citizen consultations reliable, inclusive, and continuous?

6.30 pm to 6.50 pm

Reporting back from the Breakout Sessions

- Ms. Nikita Rakhyani, Breakout Group 1
- Ms. Shruti Arora, Breakout Group 2
- Ms. Niharika Kaul, Breakout Group 3

Closing Reflection

Mr. David Moore, Vice President, Legal Affairs, International Centre for Non-profit Law (ICNL), USA

6.50 pm to 7.00 pm

Key Takeaways, Vote of Thanks and Closure -

Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, Director, Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), India

DATE	TITLE	THEME
12 August 2021	Youth Participation and Active Citizenship	Citizen Participation
20 August 2021	Planning for Urban Informalities	Sustainable Urban Future
31 August 2021	Accelerating Capacities in Civil Society and Non-Profits	Empowering Civil Society
2 September 2021	Nurturing Civil Society Partnerships in Uncertain Times	Empowering Civil Society
15 September 2021	Redesigning Civil Society Ecosystem: From Local to Global	Empowering Civil Society
28 September 2021	Unlearning Patriarchy: Expanding Impacts of Gender Training	Making the Gender Leap
30 September 2021	Investing in Civil Society Innovations	Empowering Civil Society
01 October 2021	Community-led Adaptations: Water is Life	Decentralised Community Governance
06 October 2021	Inspiring Leadership of Mayors and Councillors for Inclusive Urbanisation	Sustainable Urban Future
12 October 2021	Trajectories of Participation: From Development to Governance	Citizen Participation
20 October 2021	Scaling up Citizen Engagement for Inclusive Urban Governance	Sustainable Urban Future
01 November 2021	Gender Transformational Organisational Renewal: Towards Gender Equality	Making the Gender Leap
17 November 2021	Participation, Representation & Accountability: Strengthening the Movement	Decentralised Community Governance
23 November 2021	Making a difference: Adapting Impact Measurement	Empowering Civil Society
25 November 2021	Young Scientists Learning Open Sciences	Knowledge Democracy
26 November 2021	Institutionalising Online Citizen Participation in Public Policymaking in India	Citizen Participation