

Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy is known to be practiced within civil society organizations. Trade unions as representatives of the interests of workers, aiming to safeguard their rights and improve their working conditions, associate themselves with the democratic principles. These principles are often reflected in the national constitution and international labour standards. Headed the list of the democratic principles, would be citizens' participation and equality. This flows naturally with the features of democracy, that include freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of religion and speech, voting rights and freedom from unwarranted governmental deprivation of the right to life and liberty.

Participatory democracy is about citizens being able to participate individually and directly in political decisions and the formulation of policies that affect their lives, rather than this being done through their elected political representatives. It is correct to state that trade unions are not political organizations, but it is evident that they cannot divorce themselves from being able to influence policy making, political actions and decisions. It is through their ability to lobby that they are able to influence the decision-making process. The positions take directions followed by the trade union leadership, is often guided by the directive of the membership, following being engaged in the process of consultation. The mandate of the membership is generally supported by a majority vote.

The beauty of participatory democracy is that it allows for the trade union membership to through the means of their individual vote, to arrive at a majority decision on a matter, which the leadership is obligated to follow, implement or discharge. In the trade union management structure, the Executive Committee, Board or Council is entrusted with decision making. However, there are limitations imposed, as unilateral decision making can easily be overturned by the membership through the calling of a Special General Meeting, at which the matter is discussed and a directive or mandate is issued by the membership.

It can be argued that participatory democracy is best suited to operations of trade unions. It allows the members to maintain control, rather than surrendering the total decision-making process into the hands of elected officials. When compared with representative democracy, where there is political representation, the

difference comes where the members of a constituency elected an individual to specifically attend to their interest. Red flags can sometimes be raised regarding the level of influence constituents can bring to bear on any decision or representation made on their behalf by their political representative. The comes about as the representative may be challenged to support policy decisions of the government of which he or she is a part, or have to make accommodations as a consequence of pressures brought to bear by external factors or sources.

Whereas some politicians may view participatory democracy as a threat, trade union leaders should welcome and embrace it. The process not only affords an opportunity for persons to directly participate in decision making that effects their lives, but ensures that the will of the people prevails.

From a trade union perspective, participatory democracy must be encouraged as it empowers trade unions and shape workers' rights. It starts with respecting the right of the individual as a member of civil society to join an organization of choice, to vote in elections, to stand for elected office, to attend meetings, be informed of issues, to participate in any debate, discussion and consultation on issues, and to participate in any protest action.

It can be concluded that participatory democracy is necessary for the protection of the society. In order to ensure that the systems to give effect to it work, it is required that attention is paid to promoting the principle of equality, ensuring that there is transparency and accountability, that the rule of law prevails, there is political tolerance, the holding of fair and free elections, control of the abuse of power, and that human rights and economic freedom are observed.