CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Citizenship Reclaimed

From Private Survival to Public Membership

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The meeting began with a complaint about water. For several months, supply had been irregular. Some households received water for a few unpredictable hours; others depended almost entirely upon vendors. Families with storage tanks managed better. Poorer households purchased smaller amounts at higher cost and spent more time collecting them.

At first, people responded privately. Those who could afford containers bought them. Some paid young men to transport water. Others called relatives in better-served areas or negotiated access to private boreholes. The community was adapting. The public failure remained.

A local group eventually invited residents to meet. People described hardship, blamed officials, compared governments, and argued about which party had neglected the area more. Then an older woman interrupted. “We have said who we blame,” she said. “Now tell me who is responsible.”

She wanted the institution legally responsible for supply, the office managing distribution, the budget available for repair, the location of damaged infrastructure, and the person authorised to explain the failure. No one knew all the answers. The group decided to find them. One person would identify the agency. Another would document the days and hours when water arrived. Households would privately record what they spent. A teacher would help prepare a written request, a religious leader would offer meeting space, and a young person would record every question and response.

Residents did not stop buying water. Survival could not wait. But the problem changed. It was no longer only a private burden managed by isolated households. It became a public claim organised by citizens.

Who Is Missing from the Meeting?

The first test of the group is not how loudly it speaks for the community. It is how it knows whom it represents. Residents with storage tanks and residents buying water in a container at a time share a problem but do not carry the same burden. A meeting attended by the most available or confident people may miss those most affected.

The group should therefore ask who could not come, who did not hear about the meeting, and who would find it difficult to speak there. A tenant may fear contradicting a landlord. A worker may be unable to leave a shift. A woman responsible for collecting water may lack the time to attend the meeting about it. A young person may be present but expected only to manage the digital group. These are possible barriers to examine, not assumptions about every participant.

Citizenship with standing means that the public claim does not depend on performing importance. Participation should be possible through several routes: a conversation, a short written account, an oral contribution recorded with consent, or a representative who reports back. A group should not mistake fluency in formal English or confidence at a microphone for a stronger entitlement to be heard.

The unknown citizen remains the test. Does the group preserve the interests of households that cannot pay a contribution, attend regularly, or claim a relationship with its leaders? If it reproduces the hierarchy of access it criticises, organising has created another private entrance rather than a public claim.

Participation That People Can Sustain

An invitation is not enough when attending carries a cost. Meeting times, travel, care responsibilities, accessibility, and the price of communication shape who can participate. These practical details determine whether membership is real or merely announced.

The water group could begin by agreeing on a manageable rhythm rather than calling everyone together whenever frustration rises. Some residents might record supply on their own street. Others might help compare bills, contact the agency, or check the accuracy of a summary. No one needs to perform every task. The work should fit the lives of people already managing the failure.

A person’s inability to contribute money should not become an inability to vote on the group’s position. Where expenses must be shared, the amounts, purpose, and method of accounting should be clear. Contributions should not purchase greater authority. Otherwise, the best-resourced members will gradually become patrons of the campaign.

Rest should also be possible. An organisation that depends on a few people remaining permanently available will eventually confuse exhaustion with disloyalty. The group should share responsibilities, keep records understandable to more than one person, and accept temporary absence without making someone’s commitment suspect.

Sustainable participation is not a lesser form of citizenship. It is the condition under which citizenship can continue after the first meeting.

Belonging Without Ownership

Political identity does not disappear when residents organise around water. Supporters of different parties may disagree about the history of neglect, the fairness of national priorities, and the competence of particular leaders. Agreement on the immediate public obligation need not settle those disagreements.

The group needs a common standard narrower than a common political identity. Reliable information about the service, fair distribution, and a reasoned response should matter regardless of which party governs. Members can retain their affiliations while agreeing that no household should have to demonstrate loyalty to receive attention.

The standard must also hold when an ally responds. A useful explanation deserves recognition; an empty assurance is not sufficient just because it comes from someone the group admires. Conversely, a sound response from an opponent should not be dismissed because acknowledging it is politically inconvenient.

A shared claim does not require permanent agreement. Members may differ about the first demand, the appropriate deadline, or whether publicity would help. The organisation should decide how to hear and resolve such differences. Minority concerns, especially about exposure or exclusion, should not vanish from the record merely because a majority wants to move faster.

The group practises citizenship internally before demanding it from the agency.

Leadership That Can Be Replaced

Someone must convene meetings, organise information, and speak to officials. Leadership is necessary. Ownership of the issue is not. The group should be able to explain who authorised its representatives, what they may agree to, and which decisions require consultation.

These limits matter during negotiation. An official may invite only the chairperson to a meeting or offer an arrangement that benefits a few visible members. A representative should not have to improvise the group’s authority on their own. An agreed mandate can distinguish a conversation from a settlement.

Material support creates another test. A politician, businessperson, or diaspora donor may offer money, transport, or technical assistance. The help may be useful. Disclose its purpose and any conditions, and do not let assistance give the donor control of the group’s position. A campaign against dependence should not quietly finance itself through a new form of dependence.

Leadership changes should be possible without destroying the work. Shared records, understandable accounts, named responsibilities, and an agreed way to replace a representative make the organisation less vulnerable to pressure or exhaustion. They also protect a leader who needs to step back for personal reasons.

The test is simple: if the most visible person leaves tomorrow, can the members still find the correspondence, explain the demand, and choose who acts next? If not, the campaign has mistaken a person for an institution.

Making Unequal Knowledge Useful

The residents know what unreliable supply does to their lives. They may not know the engineering problem, the budget, or the allocation of responsibility inside the agency. Technical knowledge can strengthen their claim, but it should not displace their experience.

A teacher may help prepare a letter without deciding what the residents need. An engineer may explain possible causes without pretending to know what an inspection has not established. A lawyer may clarify a route for review without making promises about the result. Each contribution should make the issue easier for members to understand and judge.

Information should return to the people who supplied it. A household that records spending should be able to see how the group used the figures. A person who reports an interruption should know whether the group included it accurately. Summaries should distinguish what the group has verified from what it is still asking the agency to explain.

Averages can hide differences. A few well-served streets should not make the whole area appear adequately supplied; a severe problem in one section should not be presented as identical everywhere. The group’s credibility depends on making the unequal experience visible rather than manufacturing a simpler story.

The same discipline applies to disagreement with experts. Residents need not accept a technical explanation merely because it is difficult to question. They can ask what evidence supports it, what remains uncertain, and what would distinguish it from another explanation. Public understanding is part of accountability.

Alliances Without Surrender

Existing institutions can help distribute the burden. Religious communities may provide trusted meeting space. Professional associations may contribute knowledge. Journalists may investigate a documented discrepancy. Community leaders may open a route to an otherwise inaccessible office.

Cooperation should preserve the distinction between access and outcome. A chief or religious leader who arranges a meeting has helped the group reach the institution. The group should still obtain an answer through a process that others can record and use. The relationship should open the public route, not become the only route.

Alliances may also expose members to risks they did not anticipate. A public campaign can attract partisan interpretations; a donor can seek visibility; an intermediary can claim credit or authority beyond the agreed role. The group should review these relationships as the work develops rather than treating the first agreement as permanent.

Not every alliance must include everyone. A narrow coalition may be appropriate for a specific request, provided it does not claim to represent people who have not authorised it. Honesty about the limits of representation is stronger than a large name with uncertain membership.

When the Group and the Institution Meet

A well organised community cannot provide the agency with resources it lacks or remove political interference by itself. Organisation does something more limited: it makes the claim clearer, less dependent on one person, and harder to dissolve through a private conversation.

The institution retains the duty to respond. A resident who never attends a meeting remains entitled to whatever the service owes. Civic participation should improve the public relationship, not add another qualification for people already excluded from it.

That is why a campaign should judge both the immediate response and its reach. Does the answer benefit only those who signed, or does it clarify the service for the wider area? Can other residents use the information? Has a procedural improvement become available to the next unknown person?

The group need not achieve full restoration before recognising a limited gain. But it should not turn a limited gain into a personal debt to the official who delivered it.

Citizenship as Repeated Practice

Return to the water meeting. The group identified the responsible agency, documented interruptions, and submitted a written request. The first response referred vaguely to “operational challenges.” Residents replied: Which challenge? What had failed? What repair was planned? What timetable applied? The second response contained details. Full supply did not return immediately, but silence had become explanation, and explanation created a standard against which progress could be measured.

Citizenship did not depend upon instant victory. It depended upon refusing to let a public failure remain entirely private. The residents continued buying water because life required it, but they also recorded costs, monitored supply, and requested updates. They adapted without surrendering the public claim.

The illustrative water campaign does not prove that this method will always work. It shows the distinction the book has been developing: residents can keep buying water while preserving a common claim, sharing its labour, and refusing to let private relief become the end of public responsibility.

The next test belongs to the agency. A civic organisation should not have to begin again with every new official or keep the whole burden of memory outside the institution. Chapter Twenty-Two examines how answering can become a durable part of public work.