

OECD Studies on Public Engagement

Focus on Citizens

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT FOR BETTER POLICY
AND SERVICES



Executive Summary

Public engagement is a condition for effective governance

Governments alone cannot deal with complex global and domestic challenges, such as climate change or soaring obesity levels. They face hard trade-offs, such as responding to rising demands for better quality public services despite tight budgets. They need to work with their own citizens and other stakeholders to find solutions.

At the same time, more educated, well-informed and less deferential citizens are judging their governments on their “democratic performance” (the degree to which government decision-making processes live up to democratic principles) and their “policy performance” (their ability to deliver tangible positive outcomes for society).

Open and inclusive policy making is most often promoted as a means of improving democratic performance. For good reason too, as it enhances transparency and accountability, public participation and builds civic capacity.

Yet open and inclusive policy making can do much more. It offers **a way for governments to improve their policy performance** by working with citizens, civil society organisations (CSOs), businesses and other stakeholders to deliver concrete improvements in policy outcomes and the quality of public services.

This report reviews open and inclusive policy making in OECD countries based on survey responses from 25 national governments and 54 CSOs from 14 countries. Fourteen in-depth country case studies illustrate current practice while short opinion pieces from 18 government and civil society practitioners provide rich insights into current challenges. Finally, the report offers a set of ten “Guiding Principles for Open and Inclusive Policy Making” to improve future practice.

Open and inclusive policy making helps improve public policy and services

Open and inclusive policy making is transparent, accessible and responsive to as wide a range of citizens as possible. **Openness** means providing citizens with information and making the policy process accessible and responsive. **Inclusion** means including as wide a variety of citizens’ voices in the policy making process as possible. To be successful, these elements must be applied at all stages of the design and delivery of public policies and services.

OECD member countries' experience indicates that open and inclusive policy making can improve policy performance by helping governments to:

- Better understand people's evolving needs, respond to greater diversity in society and address inequalities of voice and access to both policy making processes and public services.
- Leverage the information, ideas and resources held by businesses, CSOs and citizens as drivers for innovation to tackle complex policy challenges and improve the quality of public services.
- Lower costs and improve policy outcomes by galvanising people to take action in policy areas where success crucially depends upon changes in individuals' behaviour (e.g. public health, climate change).
- Reduce administrative burdens, compliance costs and the risk of conflict or delays during policy implementation and service delivery.

Beyond open, towards inclusive policy making

Openness, while necessary, is not sufficient to ensure inclusive public participation. Inclusion is important for reasons of efficacy and equity. **Efficacy**, because the true value of opening up policy making lies in obtaining a wider range of views (beyond the "usual suspects") as input for evidence-based decision-making. **Equity**, because defining the "public interest" in a democracy requires governments to make extra efforts to reach out to those who are least equipped for public participation (e.g. new citizens, youth).

Granted, there are many good reasons for people not to participate in policy making and public service design and delivery. Two broad groups may be identified:

- **People who are "willing but unable"** to participate for a variety of reasons such as cultural or language barriers, geographical distance, disability or socio-economic status; and
- **People who are "able but unwilling"** to participate because they are not very interested in politics, do not have the time, or do not trust government to make good use of their input.

To engage the "willing but unable", governments must invest in lowering barriers (e.g. by providing multilingual information). For the "able but unwilling", governments must make participation more attractive (e.g. by picking relevant issues, providing multiple channels for participation, including face-to-face, online and mobile options). Above all, governments must expect to "go where people are" when seeking to engage with them, rather than expecting people to come to government.

OECD countries report mixed progress

In 2001, the OECD published a set of ten guiding principles for information, consultation and active participation in policy making, which have since been widely cited and used. They cover: **commitment, rights, clarity, time, objectivity, resources, co-ordination, accountability, evaluation** and **active citizenship** (OECD, 2001a). In 2007, the OECD asked governments which of these guiding principles they had found easiest to apply and which they had found most challenging. A total of 23 OECD member countries, plus the European Commission, Chile and Slovenia, responded and the results were revealing.

Governments now need to invest in improving performance

The value of open and inclusive policy making is now widely accepted among OECD countries. Translating that commitment into practice remains a challenge. Governments now need to:

- **Mainstream public engagement to improve policy performance.** Real investments are needed to embed open and inclusive policy making as part of government's "core business", build skills among civil servants and establish a supportive political and administrative culture.
- **Develop effective evaluation tools.** Evaluating the quality of open and inclusive policy making processes and their impacts is a new frontier for most governments. Countries need to pool their efforts to develop appropriate evaluation frameworks, tools and training.
- **Leverage technology and the participative web.** Blogs, wikis and social media (also known as Web 2.0) do not automatically deliver public engagement. The conceptual models underpinning the participative web (i.e. horizontal vs. vertical; iterative vs. sequential; open vs. proprietary; multiple vs. binary) may be more powerful, and of wider application, than the tools themselves.
- **Adopt sound principles to support practice.** "One size fits all" is not an option. To be effective, open and inclusive policy making must be appropriately designed and context-specific for a given country, level of government and policy field. Yet a robust set of principles can guide practitioners when designing, implementing and evaluating their initiatives.

Survey responses from both governments and CSOs have confirmed the enduring validity of the original 2001 guiding principles. Based on discussions among OECD member countries, this report adds a new principle on "inclusion", subsumes the principle on "objectivity" under other headings and offers the updated set of ten "**Guiding Principles for Open and Inclusive Policy Making**" as a common basis on which to adapt practice to each country's context (see Box 0.1).

Whatever their starting point, governments in all countries are at a crossroads. To successfully meet the policy challenges they face requires a shift from "government-as-usual" to a broader governance perspective. One which builds on the twin pillars of openness and inclusion to deliver better policy outcomes and high quality public services not only for, but with, their citizens.

Box 0.1. GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR OPEN AND INCLUSIVE POLICY MAKING

OECD countries recognise that open and inclusive policy making increases government accountability, broadens citizens' influence on decisions and builds civic capacity. At the same time, it improves the evidence base for policy making, reduces implementation costs and taps wider networks for innovation in policy making and service delivery.

These Guiding Principles are designed to help governments strengthen open and inclusive policy making as a means to improving their policy performance and service delivery.

1. **Commitment:** Leadership and strong commitment to open and inclusive policy making is needed at all levels – politicians, senior managers and public officials.
2. **Rights:** Citizens' rights to information, consultation and public participation in policy making and service delivery must be firmly grounded in law or policy. Government obligations to respond to citizens must be clearly stated. Independent oversight arrangements are essential to enforcing these rights.
3. **Clarity:** Objectives for, and limits to, information, consultation and public participation should be well defined from the outset. The roles and responsibilities of all parties must be clear. Government information should be complete, objective, reliable, relevant, easy to find and understand.
4. **Time:** Public engagement should be undertaken as early in the policy process as possible to allow a greater range of solutions and to raise the chances of successful implementation. Adequate time must be available for consultation and participation to be effective.
5. **Inclusion:** All citizens should have equal opportunities and multiple channels to access information, be consulted and participate. Every reasonable effort should be made to engage with as wide a variety of people as possible.
6. **Resources:** Adequate financial, human and technical resources are needed for effective public information, consultation and participation. Government officials must have access to appropriate skills, guidance and training as well as an organisational culture that supports both traditional and online tools.
7. **Co-ordination:** Initiatives to inform, consult and engage civil society should be co-ordinated within and across levels of government to ensure policy coherence, avoid duplication and reduce the risk of "consultation fatigue." Co-ordination efforts should not stifle initiative and innovation but should leverage the power of knowledge networks and communities of practice within and beyond government.
8. **Accountability:** Governments have an obligation to inform participants how they use inputs received through public consultation and participation. Measures to ensure that the policy-making process is open, transparent and amenable to external scrutiny can help increase accountability of, and trust in, government.
9. **Evaluation:** Governments need to evaluate their own performance. To do so effectively will require efforts to build the demand, capacity, culture and tools for evaluating public participation.
10. **Active citizenship:** Societies benefit from dynamic civil society, and governments can facilitate access to information, encourage participation, raise awareness, strengthen citizens' civic education and skills, as well as to support capacity-building among civil society organisations. Governments need to explore new roles to effectively support autonomous problem-solving by citizens, CSOs and businesses.