EVALUATING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION EXERCISES – PUMA FINDINGS

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In recent years, government-citizen relations has become a high-profile issue. At the national level, a vocal and active citizenry are increasingly prepared to take to the streets in protest and have adopted new tools—notably Internet—to promote their ideas and influence decision makers. Once confined to the national level, mobilisation by citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs) has recently begun to target international policy-making and the multilateral institutions that implement decisions made by governments.

These events are only the tip of the iceberg in the wider sphere of government-citizen relations. At all levels of government, citizens and their associations are playing a growing role in providing input to decision makers, shaping policies for the future and the delivery of key services. As these new relationships have evolved and matured, governments increasingly recognise their reliance upon the active contribution of citizens in making better decisions and achieving policy objectives. Strengthening government-citizen relations thus may be seen as a sound investment in tapping new sources of policy-relevant ideas, information and resources for implementation.

A programme of work was undertaken under the auspices of the PUMA (Public Management Project) Working Group on Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections during 1999-2000. Two comparative surveys were conducted among 23 OECD member countries and the European Union, and eight in-depth country cases were performed; the results were discussed in five meetings and published as [OECD PUMA, 2001a].

While the benefits of engaging citizens in policy-making may be considerable, governments should not underestimate the risks associated with poorly designed and inadequate measures for information, consultation and active participation. They may seek to inform, consult and encourage active participation by citizens in order to enhance the quality, credibility and legitimacy of their policy decisions. However the opposite effect may be achieved if citizens discover that their efforts to be informed, provide feedback and actively participate are ignored or have no impact at all on the decisions reached. To reduce the risk of rapid disillusionment and further erosion of citizens’ trust, governments must ensure that:

- \textit{Information} is complete, objective, reliable, relevant, easy to find and understand.
- \textit{Consultation} is conducted with clear goals and according to unambiguous rules which clearly state the limits of the exercise and government’s obligation to account for the use made of citizens’ input.

\textsuperscript{17} Prepared by the NEA Secretariat based on topical session notes, OECD PUMA, 2001 and OECD Observer, 2003.
Participation provides sufficient time and flexibility to allow for the emergence of new ideas and proposals on the part of citizens and a mechanism for their integration into government’s policy-making process.

The achievement of any or all of these goals is a matter for evaluation. Yet the comparative study performed by PUMA found that evaluation was often overlooked. There is a striking imbalance between the amount of time, money and energy which OECD Member countries invest in strengthening government-citizen connections and their efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of these measures and their impact on public policy-making. No Member country currently conducts a systematic evaluation of efforts to enhance access to information, citizen feedback, consultation and active participation—although all those participating in the PUMA surveys expressed an interest in improving their capacity for evaluation.

A subproject was therefore undertaken to review experience and identify the major evaluation components that should be taken into consideration when planning a governmental participatory exercise. Project findings can be summarised in the form of a checklist (see Annex 1).

A concrete example was obtained in the area of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) or “online” consultation and engagement of stakeholders. As governments increasing support the development of ICTs like websites offering information and interactive abilities, there is a corresponding need to know whether online engagement meets both citizens’ and governments’ objectives (OECD Observer, 2003). Annex 2 provides a sample set of issues that may be explored in planning and conducting evaluation.

Evaluation may bear on the utility, feasibility, and perceived legitimacy of a participatory approach and should also address legal and ethical questions on the property and use of information gained. Evaluation itself can be participatory, and should be performed and reported very shortly after the completion of the consultation. For a national process, typically three to four weeks are needed for preparation (which may be concurrent with other planning and with the consultation itself), 6-8 weeks for implementation, and 4-5 weeks for analysis in view of report. The estimated costs of governmental public consultations are distributed in this manner: 40% to implementation, 30% to evaluation, and 30% to dissemination of the results of the exercise.

Guiding principles developed for information, consultation and public participation overall (OECD PUMA, 2001b) may be applied to the evaluation phase in particular.

References


Annex I

EVALUATING INFORMATION, CONSULTATION AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: A CHECKLIST OF KEY QUESTIONS DEVELOPED BY OECD/PUMA

What is the **object** of evaluation?
- Information provision
- Consultation
- Public participation
- The use of electronic tools

What is the **purpose** of the evaluation?
- To find out whether objectives were reached? (i.e., control)
- To adjust the process under evaluation? (i.e., management)
- To document experiences? (i.e., learning)

Who **commissions** the evaluation?
- The government service directly concerned
- Other government services (e.g., internal audit unit, evaluation unit)
- External oversight bodies (e.g., parliament, supreme audit institution)
- Others (e.g., civil society organisations, think tanks)

What **methods** are used?
- Surveys
- Interviews
- Observation
- Reviews of documentation

If **participatory evaluation** is used, how is it conducted?
- Participation in formulating questions
- Participation in answering questions
- Participation in using the results
How is the evaluation *organised*?

- How much will the evaluation cost?
- How long will it take?
- Who receives the evaluation results? (e.g., only the commissioning body; the public)

How are evaluation results *communicated and used*?

- Is there a communication strategy?
- Which communication channels can be used?
- How much will it cost to disseminate the results of the evaluation?
- Are the evaluation results used? How?

Does a *policy* on evaluation of citizen engagement exist?

- Do general guidelines for evaluation exist within the government?
- Are specific guidelines for evaluating citizen engagement being developed?
- How is capacity for evaluation being built within government? (e.g., recruitment, training, partnerships)
### Annex 2

**ISSUES FOR THE EVALUATION OF ONLINE ENGAGEMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation issue</th>
<th>How to address the issue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Was the e-consultation process conducted in line with best practice?</td>
<td>Ask stakeholders if they are satisfied with the process.</td>
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<td>Assess whether adequate resources are in place to conduct the consultation.</td>
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<td>Check whether process followed best practice guidelines.</td>
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<td>Assess whether the choice of an online tool was appropriate for the consultation.</td>
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<td>2. Were the consultation objectives and what was expected of the citizens made clear?</td>
<td>Ask stakeholders if they understand what is being asked.</td>
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<td>Assess whether the participants’ contributions are appropriate.</td>
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<td>3. Did the consultation reach the target audience?</td>
<td>Assess the adequacy of the promotion of the e-consultation.</td>
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<td>Identify who and where potential participants are, in terms of demographic and geographic characteristics.</td>
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<td>4. Was the information provided appropriate and relevant?</td>
<td>Assess how easily the participants can access the information.</td>
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<td>Assess whether the participants’ contributions were informed by it.</td>
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<td>5. Were the contributions informed and appropriate?</td>
<td>Assess to what extent the contributions address the consultation issue.</td>
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<td>Assess how easily the participants can access contributions from others.</td>
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<td>Classify contributions according to whether they provide information, ask questions or make suggestions.</td>
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<td>Assess to what depth contributions respond to other contributions.</td>
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<td>6. Was feedback provided both during and after the consultation?</td>
<td>Assess whether questions are answered by government during the consultation.</td>
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<td>Assess the extent to which the government feedback relates to the contributions.</td>
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<td>7. Was there an impact on policy content?</td>
<td>Check to what extent a change of policy is possible given the stage in the decision-making the consultation occurred.</td>
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<td>Assess to what extent contributions are reflected in the revised or newly formulated policy.</td>
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