

PART III

*Chapter 21*

**Why Should Governments Engage  
Citizens in Service Delivery  
and Policy Making?**

by

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\* This contribution is based on a keynote presentation by Hon. Jocelyne Bourgon to the OECD Public Governance Committee Symposium on “Open and inclusive policy making” held on 16 October 2007 at the OECD Paris.

## Citizen engagement at the forefront of future public service reform

The Public Governance Committee and the OECD Secretariat have launched some very important projects on citizens' engagement as a result of the Ministerial meeting in Rotterdam in November 2005. Personally, I believe that citizen engagement in Government will be at the forefront of future public service reform in many countries, and as a result of the work of your committee, the OECD will be well positioned to assist member countries.

Over the past 25 years we have acquired a vast experience of public sector reforms. In the mid-1980s some reforms were driven by the need to restore the fiscal health of governments; others were aimed at rebalancing the role of government in society after a long period of expansion that started in the early 1950s. Various measures were introduced to improve the quality of service, performance and productivity. All governments introduced modern communication and information technologies in support of public service missions. These initiatives took on many names and many shapes including, E-government for services provided on-line; integrated service delivery among departments and among governments; single windows providing a range of integrated services based on citizens' life cycle or targeting specific target groups. Finally, all OECD countries introduced measures to promote openness and improve transparency and accountability.

All these initiatives have laid the basis from which public reforms will take shape in the future.

During this period, important changes have taken place in the world. We have witnessed an unprecedented process of convergence toward a governance model that includes market economy and democracy, or at least some democratic principles. This model has emerged as the most efficient way of ensuring a simultaneously high standard of living and high quality of life.

We learned about the importance of good governance and understood better the interconnected roles of the private sector, public sector and civil society. In effect we came to understand the importance of shared governance (Bourgon, 2003). In our global societies, no one has all the power or controls all the levers to bring about complex and durable results. To serve the collective interest in the 21st century requires an effective public sector, an efficient private sector, a dynamic civil society and an active citizenry.

Past public sector reforms have focused on performance, efficiency, and productivity. Future public service reforms will focus on citizenship, democracy, responsiveness and public accountability. These reforms will prove no less challenging than the ones we have managed in the past.

Past public policy reforms focused on fiscal and taxation reforms, regulatory reforms and various measures aimed at creating an enabling environment for wealth creation in an expanding global market economy. Future public policies are likely to give greater attention to people as economic, social and political agents. They will focus on productivity through

innovation, which means people's capacity to innovate and to transform ideas into new assets. They will explore new forms of global solidarity to ensure a more equitable dispersion of benefits and the broadest possible participation in the global economy. They will pay greater attention to the role of citizens as "agent" in shaping and implementing public policies which depend more on a collective change of behavior than on the legislative authority of the State.

Public sector reforms and public policy reforms over the coming years may very well converge; both will focus on people. The countries which will be most successful will be those able to create a culture supportive of innovation and reasonable risk taking; to develop new forms of social solidarity to harness human and social capital; to ensure the active participation of citizens in the workplace, in the community and in society.

### Why should government engage citizens in service delivery and policy making?

The question that the organisers of this Symposium have put to me is: "Why should government engage citizens in service delivery and policy-making?" The OECD Secretariat has circulated as a room document an article entitled: *Responsive, Responsible and Respected Government* it can be used as a reference document for many of the questions we will not have time to address today (Bourgon, 2007).

To address the theme of the Symposium, I have decided to use some of the arguments most frequently raised "against" citizen engagement, or if you prefer I will start from the case against in order to make the case in favour. This will allow me to reframe some of the arguments in favour of citizen engagement without overstating the benefits which would run the risk of undermining the credibility of a promising avenue for future public service reforms.

I would like first to propose a definition. Citizen engagement includes:

All measures and/or institutional arrangements that link citizens more directly into the decision-making process of a State as to enable them to influence the public policies and programmes in a manner that impact positively on their economic and social lives (UNDESA, 2007).

### Does citizen engagement conflict with representative democracy?

One concern that has been raised about citizen engagement relates to the role of Ministers in representative democracy. Put simply, it is questioning whether citizen engagement is compatible with our system of representative democracy or if it leads over time to some form of direct democracy with all the dangers that this entails.

A related argument is that once Ministers are elected every four or five years, they are free to determine the public interest and their decisions amount to serving the public good. Therefore, according to this view there is no need and no role for citizen engagement. It would simply delay decisions, create expectations that the government may not be able to fulfill or reduce Ministers flexibility for action.

Taken to the limits, this view is reductive of the role of Ministers, government, citizens and democracy. It also fails to take into account the changing nature of public policies and public sector services over the last quarter century.

Citizen engagement can only take place in the context of the legal and constitutional laws in place in a country. In that sense, it cannot be in conflict with representative

democracy. It does not diminish the political will, nor does it change the doctrine of Ministerial responsibility. Some countries have introduced in their constitution some measures of direct democracy. It is for instance the case of Switzerland that must hold referendums on various questions. These measures do not constitute a commitment to citizen engagement per se.

The important point to remember is that **having a vote** is different from **having a say**. Democratic societies guarantee citizens' right to vote to select their representatives. This right does not imply that people are **given a voice** on matters that interest them most or that they have a role in the decisions that affect them most directly.

Today public policies are increasingly complex and require increasingly complex interactions inside and outside government to get the best available information; marshal the best evidence; to understand the impact of alternative options; and to reduce the risk of unforeseen consequences. Furthermore, an increasing number of public policies require the active role of citizen as "agent" in implanting public policies, in particular when issues require a change of societal behavior or where the legislative authority of the State is insufficient to bring about a desired outcome. It is the case for issues such as global warming, environmental protection, disease prevention (obesity, diabetes) and so on.

A previous century gave us the principle of "no taxation without representation", a modern version may be "no commitment to actions without participation". At a minimum level, citizens should be **given a voice** in the matters where they are expected to play an active role as "agent" of public policies.

Ministers decide which initiatives will be most deserving of public support. They alone can decide how the political capital that they have earned through a democratic electoral process will be invested to serve public interest. That being said, there is more to the role of Ministers than the affirmation of political will. Ministers set the agenda for change; forge broad base consensus in support of the Government agenda; bring key players and stakeholders to the table; forge strong partnerships to ensure the harmonious functioning of the private sector, the public sector and civil society.

Citizen engagement opens the prospects of modernising and enriching the practice of representative democracy. In my experience, Ministers generally take comfort in citizen participation because, when it is done well, it broadens the base of support and reduces the political risks associated to ambitious new initiatives.

Citizen engagement is not a panacea. It is not in conflict with representative democracy and it is no substitute for political will. An active and dynamic citizenry will be increasingly needed not because Ministers are somewhat lacking, but because the active role of citizens as players in policy formulation and policy implementation will be increasingly central to creating new common public goods.

### Is there a demand for citizen engagement?

It is sometimes argued that the proponents of citizen engagement "romanticise the citizen" (Pollit C., 2007). According to that view, the vision of participating, choosing citizens rarely exists in practice. Most people find it difficult enough to make a living and to look after their family. They do not want to spend their time in town hall meetings or filling questionnaires. At the same time, it is argued that government should not discriminate in favour of those who get actively involved and should respect the decision of those who choose not to participate.

No one is interested in everything. People have not demonstrated an inclination to do the jobs of the elected officials they have selected to represent them or of the professionals paid to serve them. I would readily agree that people have no interest in spending their week-end in town hall meetings; why should they? However, I would hasten to say that these practices are not tantamount to citizen engagement; they are more representative of traditional consultation practices.

Put simply, people want to know that they could participate if they wanted to and that their voice would be heard.

In practice, public servants are not confronted with a lack of interest but with the difficulty of managing a process of engagement that balances various interests and responsibilities. The issue from a practitioner's perspective is not whether people want to participate – they do – but rather how to encourage citizen's participation in a manner that balances the diversity of interests, while avoiding being hostage to special interest groups. Some participants have an explicit role and responsibility in the decision process; some bring expertise necessary for making a decision that engages their professional responsibility; some have powerful power bases; others are beneficiaries and have a direct and personal knowledge of the potential impact of a decision.

From a practitioner perspective, citizen engagement opens up the possibility of a disciplined and structured way to respond to the pressures exerted by citizens demanding to have a say in the decisions that affect them most.

People “want in”. Closing our eyes to this reality may simply lead to further erosion of confidence in government and public sector institutions.

### Are the costs too high?

There is a concern that citizen engagement may be too costly. Consulting takes time, involving people even more time. Citizen engagement may delay necessary decisions. Furthermore, there is no compelling evidence that citizen engagement leads to better results at a lower cost.

All this is true, and yet these may not be the most significant costs to consider. Since the early 1960s there has been a steady decline in trust in government and public sector institutions. For a while, some countries with long traditions of civil engagement and active non-governmental organisations resisted the trend. Today, this trend is apparent in every developed country and in every segment of the population irrespective of income, education or age.

It is a disturbing phenomenon. Building trust in government was the subject of the 7th Global Forum on Reinventing Government in Vienna organised by the UN and hosted by the Government of Austria in mid-2007.

An unprecedented period of growth and economic prosperity did not reverse the decline in trust in government. Twenty-five years of public service reforms aimed at improving the quality of service may have improved *user satisfaction* but it did not translate into higher trust in government. Measures such as access to information, codes of conduct, ombudsman, and new controls may have improved *transparency* but did not reverse the decline in trust in government.

Declining trust is a cost to government and society as a whole. No country is rich enough to pay the price of distrust.

Distrust in a government may lead to a change of government through the democratic process, but it may also lead to social tensions. Low trust reduces the scope for public initiatives, in particular when the benefits are in the medium-term and are not equally distributed. In the absence of trust, governments become timid; and the costs of government services increase as layer after layer of controls are added, which further erodes trust. Declining trust in public institutions may lead to low voluntary compliance; tax evasion; corruption; social unrest; instability and even violence.

In my opinion, there has been a growing disconnect between the public service reform agenda of the past 25 years and citizens expectations. Citizen engagement brings us back to basics and to the very purpose of government and public sector institutions.

Citizen engagement is not a new kind of public service reform or the fashion of the day. It is a view, in fact a very old view, of the role of government in society that has implications for the way we develop policies and deliver programmes.

Citizen engagement may not be able to reverse the trend in the declining trust in government. Trust is not an input but an outcome of good government. It comes at the end of a long chain of deliberate and sustained actions.

At first, the tangible results may simply be more openness and greater public accountability, which in turn elevate the public discourse and public debate. Over time, results are more responsiveness and a greater awareness of citizens, needs or expectations. Only then may we see the early sign of increasing trust in government and public institutions. In the meantime, public confidence has been undermined.

## The role of government

Governments are the primary instruments of democracy in our society. Their role is to preserve democracy; defend and expand citizen choices; create the space for public debates; and encourage civic participation and community building. A characteristic of good government and good governance is the existence of an active and literate citizenry; without it, democratic institutions can easily fall prey to the next dictator, benevolent or not.

Citizens are all at once citizens of the world, of their country and of their chosen communities of interest. In a global environment, the role of government is to carry the voices of its citizenry in an international forum and to exert influence on their behalf. Citizen engagement enhances the legitimacy of a government's action beyond its borders.

Governments have a key role to play in encouraging citizen engagement while at the same time avoiding misunderstanding and false expectations. The first responsibility is to create an **enabling environment**; the second is to clarify the **rules of engagement**.

An enabling environment encourages civic participation. Citizens are more than constituents, voters, or clients. As citizens, we reconcile our conflicting individual interests as taxpayers, workers, parents, or users of public services. An enabling environment helps to remove the obstacles to the participation of groups most frequently excluded: the youth who have no right to vote but are frequently saddled with disproportionate costs for the services provided to the generation in power; the poor whose voices must be heard on issues of fairness and social justice; those affected by special barriers due to age, handicaps, distance, literacy, etc.

The rules of engagement are specific to a domain of activity, a service, or an organisation since the diversity of circumstances implies a diversity of approaches. Some

areas carry deep responsibilities for law and order; others require a high level of expertise; or are aimed at protecting rights. The rules of engagement help clarify how the commitment to citizen engagement is given shape in practice in the decision-making process of an organisation.

Citizen engagement is hard work; it is neither a panacea nor a romantic vision of the ideal citizen. Citizenship is the cornerstone of the democratic system and of democratic institutions. Giving citizens a voice in the matters that affect them most will be central to future public sector reforms.

## Conclusion

Citizen engagement has both an **intrinsic** and **instrumental** value. It has an intrinsic value because it leads to a more active citizenry. It elevates the public discourse, enhances transparency and accountability. It increases the sphere within which citizens can make choices.

It has an instrumental value by encouraging debates that lead to broad based consensus in support of government initiatives. In that sense it increases reduce the political costs, and improves the likelihood of success of government actions.

It is a vision of the role of government within society which impacts on the way we develop policies and the way we provide services. Seeking citizens' participation from time to time, when it is convenient or on issues of interest to the government of the day can be met with cynicism if it is not part of a broader commitment which recognizes the value of citizen participation as a matter of course and on matters that interest them most.

The OECD is ideally positioned to advance this body of work and to provide timely advice to member countries on **how to remove the barriers** and **how to create an enabling environment**. There are many unresolved issues but one thing we know for sure is that the reform agenda of the next ten years will not be the simple extension of the past agenda. I believe it will be about *people* as economic, social and political agents in a global economy and global society.

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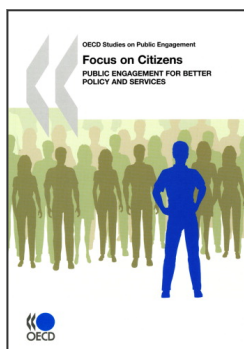
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