

Engaging Citizens Online for Better Policy-making

Introduction

What lessons can we learn from current practice in online engagement?

Today, all OECD Member countries recognise new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to be powerful tools for enhancing citizen engagement in public policy-making. Despite the limited experience to date, some initial lessons for online citizen engagement in policy-making are emerging:

How can ICTs enhance online engagement?

Technology is an enabler not the solution. Integration with traditional, “offline” tools for access to information, consultation and public participation in policy-making is needed to make the most of ICTs.

What are the main challenges for online engagement?

The online provision of information is an essential precondition for engagement, but quantity does not mean quality. Active promotion and competent moderation are key to effective online consultations.

For further information

The barriers to greater online citizen engagement in policy-making are cultural, organisational and constitutional not technological. Overcoming these challenges will require greater efforts to raise awareness and capacity both within governments and among citizens.

For further reading

This *Policy Brief* highlights policy lessons from current experience in OECD member countries and suggests 10 guiding principles for successful online consultation. It builds on the results of an initial survey of OECD Member countries published in *Citizens as Partners* (OECD, 2001) and a set of country case studies collected in 2002. It does not deal with online service delivery nor with ICT applications to elections (e.g. e-voting) although some of the issues discussed here, such as providing information online, may be relevant for both. Finally, it identifies five key challenges for online citizen engagement in policy-making. ■

Where to contact us?

What lessons can we learn from current practice in online engagement?

Engaging citizens in policy-making is a sound investment in the design and delivery of better public policies and a core element of good governance. Many OECD Member countries have begun to experiment with a range of ICTs to enable greater citizen involvement in policy-making and initial experience illustrates the opportunities, dynamics and limits of these new tools. Most OECD governments are working to bridge the “digital divide”, and recognise the need to ensure that all citizens, whether online or not, continue to enjoy equal rights of participation in the public sphere. However, their current emphasis on extending direct individual access (through the provision of hardware and public access points) risks overshadowing the importance of public/private partnerships (such as with NGOs and business associations) to multiply points of access and provide valuable support to citizens in using these new technologies. While many believe ICTs have great potential, today they remain complementary to traditional tools for public consultation.

ICTs can enable greater citizen engagement in policy-making...

A review of OECD Member countries' experience reveals three key factors for consideration when seeking to use ICTs for online citizen engagement, namely: **Timing**, **Tailoring** and **Integration**.

Timing

Most examples of online engagement are to be found at the **agenda-setting stage** of the policy cycle. This is not surprising given that this is early enough in the process to be most open to suggestions from citizens and is characterised by a significant degree of public deliberation - which new ICT tools are designed to facilitate. It may also indicate the exploratory or experimental nature of these online initiatives, given that this is a stage where online engagement will be most likely to complement, rather than replace, traditional methods for policy-making. A few countries have developed online tools suitable for use at all stages of the policy cycle, others have undertaken online engagement at a specific stage (e.g. policy formulation or monitoring). Whether the lack of examples of online engage-

ment during the implementation and evaluation stages of policy-making indicates that they are inherently less amenable to the use of new ICTs, or simply less widespread at this time, remains an open question.

Tailoring

A **wide range of public bodies** are now exploring the use of new ICTs to engage citizens in policy-making: from local governments, to national governments and parliaments as well as those operating at the intergovernmental or international level (e.g. the European Commission). Clearly, the objectives and scope of the online engagement efforts undertaken by these bodies differ considerably (e.g. for local urban planning or national education policy). The target groups addressed also vary accordingly, and may include all citizens (e.g. within a given geographic area), all interested parties (i.e. independently of location) or specific sub-sections of the population (e.g. marginalised groups, entrepreneurs, youth).

Integration

Experience to date highlights the importance of ensuring the **integration** of online and traditional methods for citizen engagement in policy-making. Both in terms of providing information on the policy issue or the online engagement exercise itself (e.g. through posters, printed brochures, local press) and when providing a range of options through which citizens may provide feedback (e.g. post, telephone, fax as well as email or co-ordinated traditional and online discussion forums). The active **promotion** of online consultation exercises (e.g. through leaflets, stickers, web site advertising banners) is also necessary. ICTs can also be used to collect and analyse unsolicited comments and complaints, which contain valuable information for policy-makers (e.g. on problems with policy implementation). The specific technologies chosen for online engagement vary in their degree of sophistication - most examples feature a dedicated web site with email options. Others adopt specialised software to manage online deliberation in a discussion forum or use password-protected discussion areas for registered users. Ensuring competent and constructive **moderation** of online deliberations is also a crucial factor for success.

Box 1: Guiding Principles for Successful Online Consultation

1 Start planning early

Start planning an online consultation exercise early on. Define what information should be provided to the target group, and in what format. Decide how long the online consultation should be run, who will be responsible for it and how the input received will feed into existing timetables for decision-making.

2 Demonstrate commitment

Ensure leadership and visible commitment to the online consultation at the highest level and communicate this clearly from the outset. Explain the purpose of the consultation (e.g. scoping new policy issues, developing draft legislation, evaluating policy implementation), where the results will be published and how they will be used.

3 Guarantee personal data protection

Guarantees for the protection of personal data must be provided for participants in online consultations. The implications for personal data protection will vary with the form of data collection chosen (e.g. anonymous submissions, online registration or password access for restricted groups).

4 Tailor your approach to fit your target group

Identify the participants whose opinions are being sought (e.g. general public, experts, youth) and adapt the online consultation to their capacities and expectations (e.g. language, terminology). Provide additional support to enable participants with special needs (e.g. physical disabilities, social exclusion) to participate.

5 Integrate online consultation with traditional methods

Consider the use of traditional methods in association with online consultations (e.g. public roundtables plus dedicated web sites). An approach based on multiple channels is likely to be more successful in reaching and engaging citizens than reliance upon a single medium.

6 Test and adapt your tools

Before launching an online consultation exercise, ensure that the tools chosen (e.g. software, questionnaires) have undergone pilot testing. Adapt the tools on the basis of feedback from participants and identify promising information and communication technologies (ICTs) for future consultations (e.g. mobile phone messaging).

7 Promote your online consultation

Invest adequate effort and resources to ensure that potential participants are aware that an online consultation will be launched and know how to take part (e.g. press conferences, advertising, links to web sites, emails). Identify external partners who could help raise awareness and facilitate participation (e.g. NGOs, business associations).

8 Analyse the results

Ensure that sufficient time, resources and expertise are available to provide thorough analysis of the input received in the course of the online consultation. The use of closed or multiple choice questions will allow for automatic processing, while free text replies will require a far greater investment in human resources. Such considerations should be taken into account from the outset when designing the online consultation.

9 Provide feedback

Publish the results of the online consultation as soon as possible and inform participants of the next steps in the policy-making process. Ensure that participants are informed of how the results were used in reaching decisions.

10 Evaluate the consultation process and its impacts

Process evaluation aims to identify the main problems encountered, whether the consultation reached the target group and the level of participant satisfaction. Evaluating the impact of consultation requires an estimation of whether participants' input had an identifiable impact on the content of the final policy decision. Evaluation results should be communicated widely and may, in turn, prompt fruitful public debate on the benefits and drawbacks of online consultation.

But raise new questions for government...

While new information and communication technologies (ICTs) offer significant opportunities for greater citizen engagement in policy-making, they also raise a host of new questions for government. For example: How are citizens' rights of access to information to be ensured in the online era? What aspects of government's current structure, organisation, resource allocations and available skills need to change to respond to new standards in their interactions with citizens? What is the status of civil servants' online responses to citizens' queries or their submissions to an electronic discussion forum? Only a few OECD Member countries have begun to address such issues (e.g. by developing a code of conduct for civil servants, or official guidelines on answering citizens' emails). ■

How can ICTs enhance online engagement?

The effective engagement of citizens by governments rests on their recognition of access to information as a basic precondition, consultation as central to policy-making and public participation as a relationship based on partnership. The new tools offered by ICTs can offer assistance in each of these domains. Their impact can also be greatly enhanced through use in combination with traditional, "offline" methods.

Ensuring greater accessibility of more information...

The Internet is the medium of choice for all OECD Member countries when providing citizens with an unprecedented degree of access to government information. ICTs offer powerful tools for searching,

Box 2: Tools for online engagement at each stage of policy-making

Stage in policy-making cycle	Information	Consultation	Participation
Agenda-setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • site-specific search engines • e-mail alerts for new policy issues • translation support for several languages • style checkers to remove jargon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online surveys and opinion polls • discussion forums • monitoring emails • bulletin boards • frequently asked questions (FAQs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-communities • e-petitions • e-referenda
Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • translation support for ethnic languages • style checkers to remove jargon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evidence-managed facilities • expert profiling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • electronic citizen juries • e-communities
Formulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • advanced style checking to help interpret technical and legal terms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discussion forums • online citizen juries • e-community tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-petitions • e-referenda amending legislation
Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • natural language style checkers • e-mail newsletters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discussion forums • online citizen juries • e-community tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-mail distribution lists for target groups
Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online feedback • online publication of annual reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • online surveys and opinion polls • discussion forums • monitoring emails • bulletin boards • frequently asked questions (FAQs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-petitions • e-referenda

selecting, and integrating the vast amounts of information held by the public administration as well as presenting the results in a form that can be readily used by individual citizens.

For citizens seeking information online, the distinction between **access** and **accessibility** is a real issue. Even when citizens do have access to ICTs, searching for a specific piece of government information online is rarely a simple or straightforward exercise. Designing better public information online must start from the perspective of the end-users of government information and requires an assessment of their needs, capacity to find, digest and use relevant information. Enhancing the accessibility of online information can be achieved by: providing online information in terms of specific life events or policy issues; search engines; software for style checking and improving the intelligibility of government texts; multilingual translations of official documents; provision of online glossaries.

As any user of online information may testify, **quantity** does not mean **quality**. While all OECD Member countries provide an increasing amount of government information online, the quality of the information available varies considerably in terms of its accessibility, relevance and utility to citizens wishing to be informed of, or participate in, policy-making. Faced with an increasing information overload, the role of trusted “information mediators” (whether within, or independent of, government) capable of identifying, aggregating and explaining relevant information on specific policy issues of concern to citizens is likely to grow.

Harnessing the interactivity of ICTs for online consultation...

The unprecedented degree of interactivity offered by new ICTs has the potential to expand the scope, breadth and depth of government consultations with citizens and other key stakeholders during policy-making. At the same time, such new tools pose significant challenges to governments in terms of their technical, political and constitutional implications. Among the questions raised are: How can government ensure an equal hearing and ‘assured listening’ to so many individual voices? How will such inputs be integrated into the policy-making cycle? How can guarantees for personal data protection be ensured? What is the role of traditional mediators of public voice (such as elected representatives) and new pro-

ponents of citizens' concerns (such as civil society organisations or CSOs)?

A number of **tools** are available to governments intent on collecting citizens' views and suggestions on issues proposed for online consultation, including: government consultation portals or web sites; email lists; online discussion forums; online mediation systems to support deliberation; ICT support in conducting traditional 'face-to-face' consultations.

In the interests of transparency and accountability, governments also need to develop ICT tools for the **analysis** of public input and to **provide feedback** to citizens on how their comments and suggestions have been used in reaching decisions on public policy.

As is true for traditional consultations, the earlier an online consultation is planned in the policy cycle the better its chances of success. Online consultation also faces some specific challenges, such as its in-built self-selection of those participants who already have access to new ICTs – thereby raising the risk of over-representation of a small cross-section of the population. However, such risks can be reduced by serious efforts to enable wider access (through public kiosks, cyber-cafes and community centres, as well as via digital TV and other platforms) and an adequate investment in promoting and supporting online consultations by governments and their partners from civil society.

Exploring online public participation...

Only a very few OECD countries have begun to experiment with online tools and discussion formats which leave citizens wide latitude in proposing opportunities for participation, setting the agenda for discussion, submitting their own proposals and shaping the final outcomes.

Among the options for online public participation currently being explored in some OECD Member countries are the use of electronic discussion groups for the deliberation and development of policy options; e-petitions (to government or parliament); and online referenda. While many of the barriers to such innovative forms of online engagement may be technical, others are more closely related to cultural resistance to new forms of partnership with citizens and civil society in policy-making and constitutional factors shaping the traditional policy process within representative democracies. ■

Box 3: Issues for the evaluation of online engagement

Evaluation Issue	How to address the issue
1 Was the e-consultation process conducted in line with best practice?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask stakeholders if they are satisfied with the process. • Assess whether adequate resources are in place to conduct the consultation. • Check whether process followed best practice guidelines. • Assess whether the choice of an online tool was appropriate for the consultation.
2 Were the consultation objectives and what was expected of the citizens made clear?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask stakeholders if they understand what is being asked. • Assess whether the participants' contributions are appropriate.
3 Did the consultation reach the target audience?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess the adequacy of the promotion of the e-consultation. • Identify who and where potential participants are, in terms of demographic and geographic characteristics.
4 Was the information provided appropriate and relevant?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess how easily the participants can access the information. • Assess whether the participants' contributions were informed by it.
5 Were the contributions informed and appropriate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess to what extent the contributions address the consultation issue. • Assess how easily the participants can access contributions from others. • Classify contributions according to whether they provide information, ask questions or make suggestions. • Assess to what depth contributions respond to other contributions.
6 Was feedback provided both during and after the consultation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess whether questions are answered by government during the consultation. • Assess the extent to which the government feedback relates to the contributions.
7 Was there an impact on policy content?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check to what extent a change of policy is possible given the stage in the decision-making the consultation occurred. • Assess to what extent contributions are reflected in the revised or newly formulated policy.

What are the main challenges for online engagement?

Online citizen engagement in policy-making is new and examples of good practice are scarce. Hence the imperative for building on the experience of others and the need for further comparative work on

this emerging issue. National governments should take advantage of the innovations being introduced at the local level, in parliaments and in other countries. Of course, any approach to online engagement that proves successful in a given context must be adapted to the culture, traditions and objectives of other government units who might seek to replicate

this experience. On the basis of OECD Member countries' experience to date, five main challenges for the future of online engagement of citizens in policy-making may be identified:

1. Scale

From a citizen's perspective how can technology enable an individual's voice to be heard and not be lost in the mass debate? There is a need for policy measures and technologies to promote and maintain virtual public spaces that enable an individual's voice to develop into a community (public) voice. From a government perspective, there is the challenge of how to listen to and respond appropriately to each individual contribution. Fostering online communities and developing ICT tools to support such communities could enable a more collective approach.

2. Capacity

The second challenge is how to provide citizens with greater information on public issues and to enhance their capacity for listening to, and engaging in, argument and counter argument. At the same time, greater efforts are needed to raise awareness and capacity among government officials with regard to the opportunities and limits of new channels for citizen engagement in policy-making offered by ICTs. Accessible and understandable information and the opportunity to engage in debate, enabled by such tools as next generation mediated discussion forums, are basic preconditions. Closely connected issues are those of bridging the digital divide and the involvement of traditionally disenfranchised groups in policy-making (e.g. those subject to social exclusion, youth). The challenge is to develop tools for online engagement that provide citizens with an opportunity both to participate in, and to understand, collective decision-making and to develop the skills for active citizenship.

3. Coherence

Governments need to take a holistic view of the policy-making cycle and design technology to support the processes of informing, consulting, participating, analysing, providing feedback and evaluating. Inputs received at each stage in the policy-making cycle must be made available appropriately at the other stages of the process. This will lead to better quality policies that are more likely to be successfully implemented and better informed citizens. Consideration should be given to addressing if, and to what extent,

knowledge management techniques could support the policy-making cycle.

4. Evaluation

As governments increasingly support the development of ICTs to enable citizen engagement on policy-related matters, there is a corresponding need to know whether online engagement meets both citizens' and governments' objectives. Evaluation tools to assess what value-added online engagement has, or has not, brought to policy-making must be developed. The benefits and impacts of applying technology in opening up the policy process to wider public input have yet to be evaluated and articulated.

5. Commitment

Engaging citizens online raises legitimate expectations that public input will be used to inform policy-making. Governments need to adapt their structures and processes to ensure that the results of online consultations are analysed, disseminated and used. This commitment must be communicated widely, demonstrated in practice and validated regularly (e.g. via annual reports, audits, parliamentary reviews). ■

For further information

The full report on which this *Policy Brief* is based, *Promises and Problems of E-democracy: Challenges of Online Citizen Engagement*, will be published this year and may be purchased from the OECD Online Bookshop (www.oecd.org/bookshop). The report includes numerous examples of current practice from 12 OECD Member countries (Australia, Canada, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Slovak Republic, Sweden, UK) as well as the European Commission. These country case studies were collected under the auspices of the OECD E-Government Project. The *Policy Brief* and report draw heavily upon the insights and guidance of national experts and senior officials from the centres of government in OECD countries participating in the Expert Group on Government Relations with Citizens and Civil Society.

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For further reading

- **Promises and Problems of E-democracy: Challenges of Online Citizen Engagement**, 2003 - *Forthcoming*
- **Schooling for Tomorrow: Learning to Bridge the Digital Divide**, 2000 ISBN: 92-64-18288-8, €20, 140p.
- **Citizens as Partners: Information, Consultation and Public Participation in Policy-making**, 2001 ISBN: 92-64-19540-8, €20, 116p.
- **More information is available on our Internet site at www.oecd.org**

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