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PHASE TWO: FROM INTENTION TO CONSULTATION: “PUTTING ITS MONEY WHERE ITS MOUTH IS”¹

Following the Irish government’s letter of intent to join the OGP in May 2013, a tender was issued for an organisation to undertake the initial civil society (CS) consultation process on behalf of the Irish government. Transparency International Ireland (TII) won the tender to coordinate this process under the leadership of Nuala Haughey, TII’s Research and Advocacy Manager.

Ireland’s OGP CS consultation process included three public consultations between July and September 2013 in Dublin, supported by opportunities to [engage online](#) for those unable to attend the meetings. Visitors to the online platform were encouraged to make their voices heard, either by participating in the online discussion forum space, contributing collaborative online documents, by making submissions through [the site](#) or by email.

Haughey says the Irish government’s funding of the CS consultation process was evidence that government was “putting its money where its mouth is” in terms of its commitment to the OGP process so far. “The Irish government funded the platform for this initial engagement. We were conscious that civil society had to own the process even though government paid for the room, and I think the end result was a set of diverse proposals that reflect the strength of civil society engagement,” she said.

The three physical [consultations](#) attracted more than 100 participants, from a diverse range of interest groups including women’s and environmental groups with a common interest in accountable and transparent governance, improved access to information and increased citizen engagement in the decisions that affect their lives.

“The diversity of the participants was really encouraging and showed that opening up government to scrutiny and engagement requires holistic reforms across a wide range of areas,” Haughey stated.

The CS consultations were organised around the OGP’s 4 core principles of Accountability, Citizen Participation, Technology and Innovation and Transparency. The 4 [working groups](#) generated 62 action plan proposals via a transparent process of discussion, prioritisation and consensus voting among the individuals and civil society representatives who participated in the consultation process.

Of the 62 action plan proposals, 22 related to citizen participation, 19 to transparency, 12 to technology and innovation, and 9 to accountability. Proposals straddle the OGP’s five ‘grand challenges’ of improving public services, increasing public integrity, more effectively managing public resources, creating safer communities and increasing corporate accountability.

The most popular area of interest, and the largest working group, was the ‘citizen participation’ group. Haughey attributed the significant interest in citizen participation to “a core of malcontent in Western Europe, a disillusionment with how democracy is

¹This article is the second of three on Ireland’s OGP Process. Watch this space for the next article to be published in January 2014, reflecting on the process to date as Ireland prepares its Action Plan.

“a core of malcontent in Western Europe, a disillusionment with how democracy is working, and a desire of citizens to have a say in decision-making at local and national levels, not just at election time, but on an ongoing basis.”

- Nuala Haughey, on significant interest in the citizen participation group

working, and a desire of citizens to have a say in decision-making at local and national levels, not just at election time, but on an ongoing basis.”

Proposals on **citizen participation** focused on:

- Placing citizens at the heart of reforms;
- Fostering active citizenship; and
- Putting people before the economy.

To this end, **participatory budgeting** was identified as an important entry point for increasing citizen engagement in the allocation of public financial resources, particularly at local government level.

Increased citizen consultation in drafting legislation and making official data user-friendly to increase social inclusion also received priority support. Focusing on the next generation, mechanisms to encourage and enable children and young people to become active citizens, and consideration for reducing the voting age of 18 to 16 to enable young people’s engagement as active citizens was proposed.

Proposals on **transparency** focused on:

- Increasing access to information for holding government accountable;
- Ensuring effective resource use and enabling meaningful collaboration between citizens and public servants;
- The need for better access to information about public policy formation, public services, and government spending were seen as priority entry points for enhancing transparent governance.

The abolition of Ireland’s Freedom of Information fees was seen as key to accessing information that is in the public’s interest and improving citizens’ rights to access information held by the state.

Technology and innovation proposals focused on:

- Unlocking the potential of open data to drive innovation, economic growth, improved public services and strengthened democracy by creating a culture where government information is widely accessible and useful.

Key proposals relating to **accountability** included:

- Improving accountability in the financial sector towards rebuilding public trust in government after the global and Irish economic crises;
- Enhancing the powers and remit of Ireland’s Comptroller and Auditor General, and introducing sanctions for excessive waste of public resources; and
- Improving the effectiveness and openness of existing accountability institutions.

A key outcome of the consultation process was a report outlining the 62 priority proposals across the four focus areas, accompanied by their rationales. The report was submitted to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER), Ireland’s lead agency on OGP, on 1 October 2013.

Commenting on efforts that led up to and preceded the consultation process, Haughey noted that reaching the stage of a formal CS consultation process was the result of the efforts, energy and commitment of a small group of self-selected individuals and organisations committed to OGP values. "There was lots of discussion that came before this, both within civil society and between civil society and government. There were months of engagement before the first consultation meeting," she concluded.

In our next OGP Ireland article, Phase 3, to be published in January 2014, we focus on the processes leading up to the adoption of Ireland's Action Plan and how the civil society lobby and consultation processes helped to inform the content of Ireland's national OGP action plan.



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