Finland's Action Plan on Open Government

Open government and enhancing engagement/participation in Finland

In the Finnish government openness is an underlying value. This attitude is reflected for instance in the structure of Finnish administration, in the strong self-government of municipalities where decision-making power is brought close to citizens. Open government and participation also has a strong basis in the legislation (e.g. The Constitution, The Local Government Act, Access to information legislation since 1951). The Accesss to infromantion legislation was reformed in 1999. The new Act on Openness of Government Activities includes not only the citizen's right of access to information in official documents but also the authorities' obligation to promote the openness of their activities by disseminating information on their activities and producing relevant information. The openness of preparation was also increased.

During the last ten to fifteen years participation has been an important concept in social discussion. In Finland this discussion has been linked to several different topics such as transition of the welfare state, people's alienation from the political decision making and the quality of public services. These concerns have led to discussions, which emphasized the increasing need to strengthen the role of civil society in Finland. Following these discussions different projects and development initiatives were launched around the Finnish administration towards the end of the 1990s. The aims of these projects were mainly to increase the role of civil society in defining social matters and e.g. public services.

The issue of strengthening open government developed from more individual projects during the Government period of 1995-1999 to being a part of a government wide central government reform programme during the Government of 1999-2003 to a very comprehensive Civil Participation Programme being one of the key priority horizontal programmes in the 2003 -2007 Government's programme. During the Government of 2007-2011 a report on the state of democracy in Finland was given to Parliament and a programme of e-services and e-democracy was launched.

The current Government's (2011-) programme itself is titled An open, fair and confident Finland and promoting open government is included in many of its reform projects (e.g open data program, program to develop legislative, administrative and service language, municipal reform, central government reform).

In Finnish municipalities transparency and resident's right to good governance are basic principles. The right to participate in decision making and to get information on preparative work and decisions is stated in several laws on municipalities. Legislation also pushes municipalities to use diverse means to communicate and inform. Communication needs to above all be open, active and timely. The use of new electronic channels sets new requirements for openness also to municipal administration. In municipalities the common target is to use new means of communication to strengthen the trust between residents and municipalities.

Milestones

The Ministry of the Interior launched the Participation Project in 1997 with the aim of reinforcing civil society and preventing social exclusion by increasing citizens' opportunities to participate. The

Participation Project developed forms of direct citizen participation and influence, interaction between the actors in the municipal community, and practices in representative decision-making.

A discussion forum www.otakantaa.fi (otakantaa =Share Your Views with Us) was built by the Ministry of Finance in 2000 for all the ministries to use for consultation of individual citizens and there was also preparatory work going on in the different ministries on how to make use of ICT in listening to citizens' views. The forum is now owned by Ministry of Justice and it has been developed further along with development of a larger online platform for participation in the program of e-services and e-democracy.

Government project register HARE was created 1999 right after the reform of Access to Information legislation. Both legislative and other development projects that are owned by ministries, are registered and in HARE, which is open to public. Documentation of projects is also stored in HARE.

As part of the Central Government Reform (2000-2003) a project called Hear the Citizens was carried out by the Ministry of Finance. The idea behind this project was that increasing consultation and participation also further increases openness in government. After this a new project was set up to implement the suggestions with pilot ministries. As one of the results of Hear the Citizens – project guidelines for civil servants on consultation were drafted.

Compared to previous Government periods the Civil Participation Programme (2003-2007) gave the participation issue a higher status and contributed to how the cooperation mechanisms between the ministries. Although enhancing participation had got support from the Government members already during earlier Governments now one minister was specifically assigned to carry the reforms further.

During the Civic Participation Programme the Hear the Citizens project III was carried out. The idea behind this third project was to get more commitment from the top-level civil servants to the contents of the programme. The OECD principles on strengthening citizen-government connections were modified for Finland and the state secretaries of all ministries, the director of the association of local and regional authorities and mayors of several cities were asked to sign these principles.

In a project run by the Ministry of Justice in 2007-2008 a strategy for e-consultation and e-participation was drafted. The Government has also set up a Advisory Board on Civil Society Policy to enhance dialogue between the administration and civil society and the Ministry of Justice has set up democracy network between the ministries to co-ordinate the work in the administration to enhance participation. Participation is also enhanced as part of the work aiming at better quality regulation run by Ministry of Justice.

A Decision in Principle on promoting democracy in Finland was given early spring 2010. The decision in principle includes 32 proposals of action regarding representative democracy, strengthening civil society, new channels of participation and democracy education. Decision in Principle stated that under the leadership of Ministry of Justice a report on state of democracy in Finland would be drafted every ten years. In the report the objectives of and achievement in democracy-policy as

well as development of citizens' possibilities to participate and equality in participation will be analyzed. The first report on state of democracy is under preparation and it will be issued to the Parliament in 2014.

To build a modern online democracy infrastructure that offers the citizens, government and decision-makers with tools and methods for joint preparations as well as public assessment and discussion is part of the Action Programme on eServices and eDemocracy (SADe). As part of the SADe Programme a joint online democracy infrastructure for the government and parliament is being established. The municipalities can in some respects utilize this participation environment also.

Finland's Action Plan on Open Government

The cross-cutting theme of Finland's Action Plan on Open Government is encouraging citizen participation. We are focusing on Visibility (*Open procedures*), Comprehensibility (*Clear language*) and Facts (*Open knowledge*). Our fourth working area is *Government as an Enabler*. The diagram below visualizes how commitments included in our first Action Plan are connected to OGP principles.
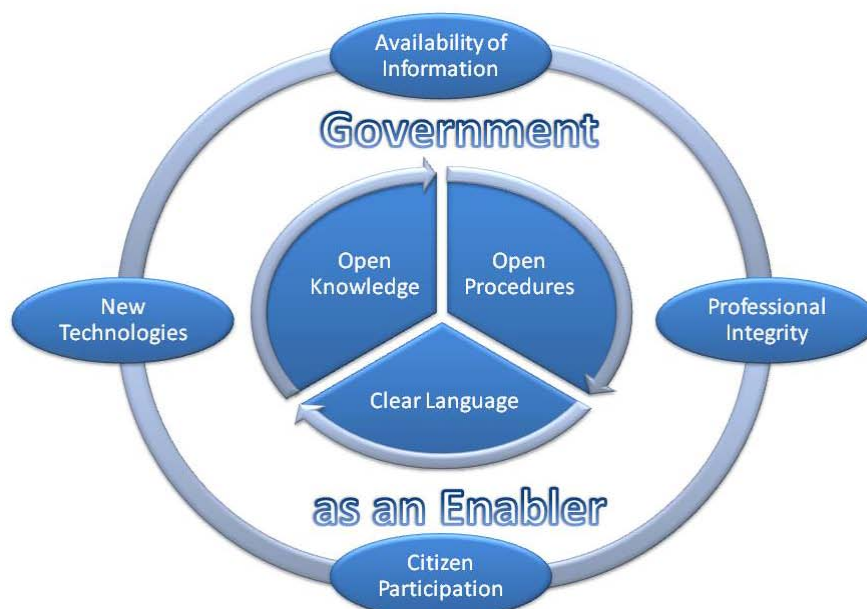
Finland's Action Plan on Open Government has been drafted together with members of civil society, citizens, ministries and representatives from municipalities as well as the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities. Open meetings in different locations and in the internet have been arranged. Crowd-sourcing -methods have been used to further develop the ideas into action plan.

Open procedures -visibility

Openness of preparatory processes has been developed systematically for over a decade. There is still room for improvement in the openess especially in the launching and beginning stages or preparatory processes. Actions are needed for example to help citizens, organisations and businesses to find legislative and development projects easily and quickly. In the state government a project register has been developed for this already some time ago (www.hare.fi), but it is not as well known or comprehensive or easy to use than it should be. Municipalities do not have a similar nation-wide register, although it would be necessary that also in municipalities information about new projects and preparatory work would be easy to find. Besides the core data of projects, information should be available also of the possible impacts assessed.

Promoting open procedures requires also more emphasis on dialogue and interactive skills of civil servants as well as attention to proactive and active communication.

Participatory budgeting gives people the possibility to define, discuss and prioritise how public funds that municipalities or the state has will be distributed and used, In Finland there is some experiences of participatory budgeting. Increasing the use of participatory budgeting requires more determined delivery of information about existing practices and new pilots so that participatory budgeting can be further developed. Internationally there is more experiences of participatory budgeting than in Finland. These experiences and co-operation should be used actively.

Commitments

1. **Enhancing the openness of preparatory processes**

    In the year 1 of the Action Plan the ownership of the already existing government's project register and possibilities of its further development will be clarified. In addition, possibilities for further development of the state government's project register are studied, including its usability and possibilities to increase the awareness of its existence.

    To increase transparency government decision making processes are made more traceable by publishing clear and popular process maps and annual cycles of the core preparatory and decision-making processes during the years 1 and 2 of the Action Plan.

    In year 1 the principles of the consultation guidelines of legislative work will be extended to the rest of the preparatory work in the state administration. Publishing drafts and alternative solutions at the preparatory phase, using diverse consultation methods and consulting people of all ages will be emphasized when updating the guidelines.
    In 2005 the Permanent State Secretaries signed common principles to enhance openness and consultation. In year 1 they will renew their commitment as their ministry's "openness leaders" to further develop openness in their ministries and in the whole-of-government.

    The marketing and implementation of the different functionalities of the e- participation environment/portal will be supported both in the state and municipal administration in year 1. Voluntary commitments will be collected from state agencies and municipalities on

how they will promote openness. On their websites, the agencies will inform the public about their new actions to promote openness.

Finland will join the Open budget index programme in year 2014.
In years 1 and 2 as part of the comprehensive reform of the Local Government Act other ways of increasing the openness of preparatory processes will be studied.

2. **Emphasizing dialogue skills in the job descriptions of civil servants**

   Starting from the year 1 of the Action plan competences needed to enhance open government are specified. Across the public administration the importance of dialogue skills will be highlighted in job descriptions, in recruitment criteria and in assessing personal performance in positions demanding such competences. In addition training in customer oriented service design is arranged for civil servants and citizens.

3. **Strengthening proactive publishing and communication**

   As part of the comprehensive reform of the Local Government Act possible needs to renew the legislation regarding the information-, interaction- and consultation practices will be evaluated. The possible regulatory ways to support proactive communication will be studied during the years 1 and 2 of the Action Plan.

   In the ongoing Action Programme on eServices and eDemocracy (SADe) the importance of proactive communication will be emphasized. Communication training will be organized for the project actors in years 1 and 2.

4. **Promoting participatory budgeting**

   Starting from the year 1 of the Action Plan information about existing national and international practices and experiments as well as experiences of participatory budgeting will be spread. A possibility to create an open, game-like application to citizens for alternative budgeting in government and municipalities will be studied. Municipalities interested in piloting participatory budgeting will be searched for. As part of the comprehensive reform of the Local Government Act the possibility of promoting participatory budgeting by legislative measures will be evaluated. In addition a pilot government agency, willing to put a part of the appropriation (e.g. 1 %) to be budgeted in a participatory process, will be studied.

5. **Increasing openness and customer orientation in ICT and e-services development**

   During the years 1and 2 in the Action Programme on eServices and eDemocracy (SADe) services will be designed, tested and implemented together with the future users of these services. Joint communication to common target groups of the services developed in the programme will be supported.

6. **Increasing the number of open and online meetings**

Starting from the year 1 good practices of organizing open and online meetings as well as co-production of texts will be gathered and shared.

Clear Language - comprehensibility

Administrative Procedure Act includes a requirement of proper language. According to the law civil servants shall use appropriate, clear and comprehensible language. The basis of the law is that citizens have a right to be able to understand the language authorities are using. The matter is of the utmost importance when considering the possibilities of true power of people and lingual democracy.

Clear language and especially clear administrative language is a civil right. It gives people a possibility to participate and have their voices heard. Issues meant to be common can be made common with the language. Good governance is mostly about good language. Ministry of education and culture has founded a working group to develop legislative, administrative and service language.

Commitments

1. **Standard language titles and resumes will be drafted of the Government proposals.**

   All draft legislation will be given a concise title for communication already in the preparatory phase. If possible a plain language version will be made of the main content of the law and its core issues. Crowd-sourcing and test reading groups will be used in drafting the standard language names and resumes. The need to update instructions regarding implementation of the law being drafted is evaluated already at the beginning of the law drafting process, so that authorities can be prepared for the update work. Year 1 of our Action Plan we will create the guidelines for drafting the titles and resumes and start testing them in pilots. Year 2 of the Action Plan new guidelines will be added to the handbook on law drafting.

2. **Visualization of decisions**

   Year 1 on Action Plan we will visualize the state budget "what do I get with my tax euros?" and the budget of the programme of e-services and e-democracy (SADe). In years 2 and 3 the visualization of budgets will be further spread in public sector.

3. **Training will be organised for civil servants in use of clear language and plain language including committing to use of terms already known.**

   In year 1 of the Action Plan a working group will create a program to develop the use of clear and plain text in government documents.   Defined actions will be implemented in ministries and agencies with support of professionals. Implementation may include training in years 2 and 3 of the Action Plan. A plain language check-list will be produced to support training and to be utilized by civil servants.

4. **The comprehensibility of the texts produced by public administration will be tested together with citizens and service users.**

   The comprehensibility of the texts, guidelines, forms etc produced by public administration will be developed by testing them together with citizens and services users. Agencies will ask

for feed-back and corrections through their feed-back channels on comprehensibility of the existing texts. The work will start with pilots in year 1 of Action Plan: A user panel will be formed to test the comprehensibility of the new core texts and pilot agencies and municipalities will be nominated.

5. **Standardizing and clarifying the terms and concepts used in public administration and service production.**

   We will define the common concepts of the public administration and the relationships between the concepts in a computer- readable way. This definition work (ontology work) is needed, because the same service or information can be searched after by using many different terms. Year 1 of the Action Plan we will create a stable operational environment and sustainable operational model to current project-based ontology work.

   We will make sure that the names of administrative organizations, programs and job titles are comprehensible and transparent. Names and their abbreviations are used with consideration and the abbreviations are not used as primary names.

6. **The comprehensibility of customer letters and decisions will be enhanced, especially when using standard texts.**

   Year 1 of Action Plan we will make the phrase- based writing visible by organizing a seminar focusing on the issue. We will continue developing phrase- based writing in a pilot to which different people with different skill profiles will be invited.

   Year 1 of our Action Plan the requirement of simple update of standard texts is included in the recommendations of procurement and development of ICT- systems.

Open knowledge – Facts

Opening data enables following the functioning of public administration and to participate. A significant part of decisions are published in the net, but often in document format, that cannot be automatically be exploited and thus for instance the information cannot be synthesized. The information and the analytical method used as basis for decision making should be available in the web, if there are no legislative grounds to restrict.

The terms for use of the data opened by the public administration should be similar, so that for instance when combining data the users do not need to apply several . The terms should be based on models that are internationally considered good practices.

Citizen has a right to check his/her own data that has been saved to the registers except in some special exceptions. The practices to check the data varies from one authority to another. Checking the data through a web service would best support the right, because it would be cost-efficient. But it would require a reference data base that does not yet exist.

In order to open registers which have personal data according to open data principles data has to be anonymised so that a single person can not be identified from the data. This requires commonly accepted practices and technical solutions. These should be built common for whole administration.

Several challenges and possibilities are evitable regarding open data and personal information: personal data protection, privacy and use of personal information to name a few. The understanding of combining constitutional rights and open data is raised by enhancing the training on legislation (e.g. Act on openness of government, Personal data act) in public administration and IT- sector.

Commitments

1. **Opening and publishing new data and changing existing open data into a machine-readable form.**

   As part of Ministry of Finance's open data programme the possibility to open more documents in structured form will be studied. The Open Data program will start simultaneously with the implementation of the Action Plan. Year 1 information on public sector databases and the data sets is gathered by linking the specifications of IT- systems to one portal. Open data and open application interface requirements will be included in procurement guidelines for ICT- systems and architectural principles, in order to enable building of alternate user interfaces to IT- systems year 1 of the Action Plan. When purchasing analytical tools and research the possibility to publish tools, methods and data will be taken into account.

   Starting from year 1 of the Action Plan data reserves that are central to openness of government will be opened. The project portfolio of State administration ICT projects and Government program follow-up data will be published online. The possibility to open legislation in machine-readable form is studied. In Years 2 and 3 more data will be opened.

2. **Clear terms for use of for open data and knowledge**

   In year 1 of the Action Plan we will produce a public sector recommendation of terms of use of open data based on international practices.

3. **Strengthening skills needed to understand combining privacy and open data and strengthening the citizen's right to his/her own personal information "the right to be anonymous"**

   A citizen should have the possibility to check to which registers information about him/her has been recorded. Different options to realize this will be studied in year 1 of the Action Plan. In years 2 and 3 of the Action plan a viewing function for citizen's own personal data and her right to re-use of personal data will be built to core registers of authorities. In year 1 of the Action Plan we will look into the training needs for open knowledge and organize a seminar jointly with the open data community, experts of access to information legislation and the office of the data ombudsman. In year 1 we will create a stable operational environment to produce open data support services and tools: systematic training for finding, processing , harmonizing, publishing and utilizing open data.

Government as an enabler

Public administration must enable the actions/operations of the third sector and active citizens and to(POIS) create possibilities for development of civil society in Finland. In this action plan three groups of actions have been identified to further civil society's work. The proposals for action aim

at identifying and pulling down the obstacles/barriers for dialogue and development of new services that come from current legislation and ways of action, to promote communication and dialogue culture between civil servants and representatives of civil society, to offer training and tools for organisations, to promote civil society oriented services and tools and their public financing and visibility.

Commitments

1. **Tearing down barriers of action of the civil society**
   A campaign of "inform about barriers" will be started in year 1 of the Action Plan. In this campaign one can report about barriers, obstacles or hindrances in public administration. This will help to prioritize open citizen debate and fixing issues that are in the way of developing services for instance by updating legislation, guidelines or web services. Also in year 1 of the Action Plan consultation guidelines are updated so, that engaging citizens in consultation process al-ways includes a commitment to process the results. The Open Knowledge Forum Finland will actively monitor and report of the creation of applications using open data and their implementation.

2. **The proactive presence and accessibility of civil servants**
   We will create a voluntary openness agent's role in year 1 of the Action Plan and spread the concept to all agencies. The civil servants can register voluntarily to become openness agents. All agencies will be informed of openness and leaders and managers will be asked to commit to being openness leaders. Openness agents and leaders are available to citizens and keep contact with each other to promote openness in public administrations.

   Starting year 2 of the Action Plan a yearly prize is given out to a representative from each level of the public administration, possibly in connection with democracy prize. The basis for the reward is that the person has enabled civic society action in his/her own work. The reward is given yearly to one representative from municipal, one from regional and one from state central administration. Civic organizations will offer training to civil servants in engaging citizens in consultation process. Civil servants are encouraged to participate in this training.

3. **Providing tools and training to organizations**
   The needs for web tools and training of the civic society and organizations will be mapped out in year 1 of the Action Plan. Organisations and representatives of civic society will be offered training as well as web tools and training linked to those through for example the e-participation portal/environment of the Ministry of Justice.