

## Embedding Citizen Participation in Government | Note

On 14th July 2022, OGP hosted a peer exchange workshop to share experiences and learn from efforts to embed citizen participation in government. The workshop was attended by officials and civil society representatives from ten OGP members who have led efforts to embed citizen participation, as well as a number of international experts.

There has been a lot of understandable interest and excitement surrounding innovations in citizen participation in recent years. The growth of citizens' assemblies and deliberative forms of engagement, in particular, has caught the imagination of many people. But as we know, these innovations often count for little unless they become properly embedded within governments and part of the fabric of the organisation. This task of shifting institutional cultures, processes and capacity to make citizen participation commonplace is difficult and un-glamorous, but it is essential to making participation and open government a reality.

Efforts to embed citizen participation have quietly been a feature of OGP action plans for some time and a [body of practice](#) is collecting that we can learn from and build upon. Between the countries represented at the workshop, a range of approaches have been tried, including creating toolkits and guidelines; establishing hubs and centres of good practice; developing common tools, methods and platforms; initiating training programmes; building engagement competencies into role descriptions; introducing citizen participation requirements into law; and requiring citizen participation reports to accompany new legislation to Parliament.

The workshop explored the group's collective knowledge and experiences of embedding citizen participation, as well as some ways in which OGP might be able to further support these efforts in the future. Following is an overview of the discussion, structured around a few key themes that emerged.

### Integrating participation and policy

One of the biggest challenges that came through was often the lack of integration of citizen participation with the core work of government. One participant spoke about there being two worlds that do not talk to each other – the participatory world is disconnected from the world of the everyday work of governments. One of the impacts of this is that civil servants are often surprised when processes such as citizens' assemblies and their recommendations land on their desk.

Where participation and policy are integrated, this is often due to a policy entrepreneur who has the interest, motivation and skills. This willingness by some civil servants to take a risk and lead means that some innovative citizen participation processes do take place, but the reliance on particular individuals is neither systematic nor sustainable.

Participants also identified that there is an uneven spread of the use of citizen participation tools across government agencies and that different government agencies view and use

citizen participation tools and techniques differently. It was suggested that a public service wide commitment and learning was needed in order to move beyond isolated pockets of practice.

Linked to this, there was also concern that government departments do not coordinate their engagement with each other, which can mean that multiple departments are trying to engage on the same issue. This was being addressed by trying to get greater visibility across government on who is engaging whom, on what, and how to leverage off each other's efforts and make the most of the community time, as well as developing a common language on participation across departments.

The challenge, as one participant identified it, is to both demonstrate the relevance of citizen participation to the policies that civil servants are working on and to make it part of how they do their jobs. While there are some places where this is happening, it's not currently enough.

## Capacity building

The need to build the time, resourcing and technical know-how required to conduct meaningful citizen participation exercises was a significant focus of discussion. Participants reflected that we need people in government who have the authority, skills and resources to do this work. It is therefore important to upskill civil servants and make citizen participation central to their work – particularly so for senior officials, who have significant influence.

The example of New Zealand was discussed, where there has been a focus on building the capability of public servants through the development of very practical tools. A suite of guidance materials has been produced that begin with the principles of how to think about people and how to design an engagement, before planning or choosing a method. A tool has also been developed with IAP2 to support agencies to design an engagement process. And sessions have been held to talk through what it means to design engagement well. Other countries represented on the call have similarly produced guidance and tools in an attempt to build the capacity of officials to plan and implement citizen participation processes.

Another example came from Spain, where public servants must pass an exam that includes open government as a topic. As a result, every civil servant who has joined in the past 10 years has studied open government, and there are regular courses on open government in the National Institute of Public Administration. The impact of this on officials is something that could be usefully tracked.

There was a concern from some about a lack of experimentation within some governments, with a feeling that public servants are too fond of traditional tools such as written discussion documents and not open to innovation. Another participant, on the other hand, reflected that while their government tries to do new things, it takes a long time to mature and be mainstreamed – pointing to the example of a participation mechanism that took 10 years to be mainstreamed.



## Culture change

Linked to the previous point, the need for culture change within government was another important area of discussion. Participants reflected that the expectation of public servants is often that they are technical experts who should be able to develop policy answers, which can result in a desire to control conversations to reflect their authority and expertise. It was questioned, therefore, whether we can build a new conception of public servants as facilitators?

Relatedly, it was also questioned how the leadership required to embed citizen participation can be built? One participant, for example, reflected that their government had a chief data steward, but that there is not an equivalent government chief participation steward. An example was shared from New Zealand, where the [Public Service Act](#) makes it a legal duty on the chief executives of government departments to “foster a culture of open government”, though it was not known how this is given effect in practice.

An important question raised during the discussions was whether legal duties requiring participation are effective at creating a participatory culture or not? A number of the countries represented in the workshop have regulations that require some level of citizen participation – though some pointed out that there is a tendency of national government to regulate local government practice, but not its own. There were concerns, however, that legal duties do not necessarily lead to good practice and can result in tick box exercises, non-inclusive processes and poor organisation. Another participant reflected that momentum had stalled in their country despite there being a legal requirement for citizen participation and that not much experimentation is happening anymore. While a regulation may be an important normative signal, we need to understand under what conditions it makes a real difference to practise.

## Political leadership

The critical role of political leadership was emphasised throughout the discussion, but participants had mixed experiences of the approach of political leaders. Some spoke about political leaders not being engaged and/or needing to be more open-minded to citizen participation, while for others they sensed that political leaders do want greater citizen participation but are unsure of how to do it and to accept the impacts. One participant spoke about there being good support from politicians, but that they faced a problem in politicians not initiating things – rather, the big demands come from civil society organisations to do new things.

Participants reflected that ministers often conceive of their role as one of action – they have been elected and therefore have a mandate. This can mean that they can view citizen participation exercises as undemocratic and/or are unwilling to accept the outputs of an engagement exercise, particularly where they already have a specific formulation of the policy problem and potential solutions. Even where there is express political authority for public servants to conduct a citizen participation exercise, one participant reflected that the absence of preferred solutions from politicians is very rare.



On the one hand, the fear of losing power was identified as a significant barrier to citizen participation for politicians. While on the other, some participants spoke about the need to convince politicians to give away power. In general, participants spoke about the need to secure political buy-in and to give confidence to political leaders to use the results of engagement processes.

With the current spread of citizen participation innovations, one participant raised the question of whether we are experiencing a shift in political attitudes towards accepting how you can and need to build participation into government? Or, alternatively, are we still stuck with a group of people who want to experiment and a political cast that is happy to use it for good public relations – and occasionally happy to use it for some advice – but is very wary of giving up power?

### **Making the case**

Perhaps unsurprisingly – given the discussion of the need for capacity building, culture change and political leadership – the need to make the case for embedding citizen participation came up a number of times. While there is a clear normative argument for citizen participation, there was discussion of whether we have examples or evidence of the value of citizen participation in government.

One participant pointed to the fiscal cost of failed policies that could have been prevented with greater participation, but also reflected that the often long time horizons of these failures can mean they are not necessarily convincing in conversations with ministers and civil servants. Another participant referenced work being undertaken by the OECD to evidence the value of participation.

### **Creating a critical mass**

The need to form a critical mass of practice, support and capacity came up across the discussions. The example of Scotland was discussed, where the reopening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 after 300 years led to a strong narrative of Scotland becoming a more participatory country where community empowerment was the driving force of social cohesion, the economy and a vibrant community sector. The interplay of action from both government and civil society led to, what was described as, “a critical mess” of lots of disparate activity – but the question became how to transform this into a critical mass that can bring systemic change. Key to this has been “internal activists” – civil servants who were able to create alliances across sectors, open space for new frameworks, carve space in the system; the linking of initially dispersed actors via brokering and alliances; and the interplay between civil society and government. Others similarly discussed there being lots of activity in their respective countries, but needing to create synergies between different approaches.

Finally, one participant reflected that to get citizen participation properly embedded, we should move to the question of choices about “how,” and not “whether or not” – making



citizen participation normal, boring and mainstream, and not as an option or a question whether it should be done. Some have made the shift, but it is still fragile.

## **Conclusion**

This workshop helped to surface some common challenges being faced across OGP members in embedding citizen participation, as well as experiences and learning from efforts to date. Although important work is taking place, it is an area that is in its relative infancy – with expectations of the participatory future of government currently far outstripping the reality of administrations.

