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## OVERVIEW OF WORK ON STRENGTHENING GOVERNMENT-CITIZEN CONNECTIONS

**1st Session of the Working Group on Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections  
15-16 February 1999**

*This document provides an overview of the PUMA activity on "Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections", addressing government policies and practices for providing information and enhancing consultation with citizens, including the role of information technology in these efforts.*

For further information, please contact Daniel Blume:  
Tel. (33-1) 45 24 97 59; Fax: (33-1) 45 24 87 96;  
E-mail: daniel.blume@oecd.org or Christian Vergez:  
Tel. (33-1) 45 24 90 44; E-mail: christian.vergez@oecd.org

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## **OECD Public Management Service work on Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections**

### **The context**

The relationship between government and citizens is becoming increasingly complex. Policy decisions are taken at multiple levels of government. Many problems (e.g. environmental degradation, tax evasion, crime) must be addressed within a global and increasingly inter-related environment, requiring co-operation and agreement across regions, nations, or on a global basis. Modern information and communication technologies have reinforced these interdependencies, and have increased the ability of a multitude of interests to communicate across borders and influence policy-makers internationally. Faced with such complexity and the perception of a loss of direct influence over national and local policy decisions, many citizens are complaining of a “democratic deficit,” and are demanding that governments respond with greater transparency and accountability. Governments not only face greater challenges in agreeing on policy decisions in such an environment, but also in carrying them out. **They increasingly realize that they will not be able to conduct and effectively implement policies, as good as they may be, if their citizens do not support them.**

### **The OECD project on “Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections”**

This Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development activity aims to support government efforts to strengthen public participation, transparency and democratic accountability, and ultimately, policy effectiveness, through development of comparative information, analysis and advice in three inter-related areas:

- Comparative analysis of government policies and practices **in support of citizen access to information** across the 29-country Membership of the OECD. A related trend to be examined is the impact that the increased emphasis on information is having on the **strengthening and expanding of citizen choice** -- in obtaining services from multiple providers, or in making individual choices impacting on the public interest (e.g. choices affecting public health and safety).
- Exploration of how public participation in policy-making is changing, examining government policies and practices for **consulting with individual citizens, stakeholders and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in policy making.**
- Analysis and development of comparative information and indicators on how the explosive growth of the **Internet** and the emerging information society is impacting **citizen access to government information and services.**

### **Working methods and outputs**

A **written survey** will provide the initial basis for undertaking a comparative review of country practices for informing and involving the public in the policy process as a way of strengthening overall government legitimacy and policy effectiveness. In addition, 5-15 **case studies** of international, national and/or local policy making (depending on funding availability) will be launched, based on a comparative framework involving extensive interviews with those involved in the policy-making process from both within and outside government and participating international organisations. These more in-depth studies would be used (i) to test and further develop findings from the written survey; and (ii) to develop

recommendations to strengthen democratic processes for government-citizen collaboration. Assuming that stakeholder groups and NGOs will play an increasing role in policy processes at both the national and supranational level, the aim of this work is to identify ways to enhance these processes to ensure transparent and accountable interactions and decisions that represent not just government and special interests, but also the interests of the broader citizenry.

- Work will be carried out in close co-operation with Member countries, international organisations, and policy sectors through establishment of two advisory working groups that will provide ongoing feedback and guidance: a “review group” representing some 10-12 countries and international organisations; and an internal OECD Secretariat group containing representation from selected policy sectors.
- Data on countries’ **information delivery, consultation and participation practices, and on use of information technology in these practices** will be collected initially by means of a written survey. This information base will provide an overall perspective as well as a basis for determining promising practices for enhancing democratic quality through improved information and consultation policies and practices.
- In collaboration with country-based consultants, and with additional voluntary funding by the concerned countries or by other interested organisations, the Secretariat will develop case studies focusing on **the role of stakeholder groups and NGOs as mediators in the dialogue with governments and international organisations** in policy making and policy implementation. These reports will support understanding of the major difficulties faced by governments and international organisations as well as by the pressure groups, and will provide a basis for advice on establishing a better dialogue on the basis of mutual confidence.
- The OECD will initiate contacts, contribute to and organize meetings aimed at establishing a common framework for development of **indicators of citizen electronic access to government information and services**. The information collected through these contacts and existing international networks of IT officials (The International Council for IT in Government Administration, and the G8 Government On-Line pilot project) will be used to contribute to comparative work on the impact that IT is having on both service delivery and policy-making processes.
- The above analyses will contribute to **guidelines for Member countries on improving public participation in public policies and programmes**, and more generally in strengthening government-citizen relations and democratic quality.

### **Key questions to be addressed**

- What can be learned from cross-country comparative work about how governments can give better opportunities to citizens, directly or through the mediation of groups representing them, to be informed and to participate in decision-making and in the implementation of policies? How do such processes guard against “special interest capture” and ensure that decisions reflect the broad public interest? How can governments promote both efficient and inclusive consultation without unduly slowing down or stalling policy-making processes? What legal frameworks have been established to promote openness and consultation, and what is the real situation?
- How are governments communicating information effectively? What impact is the information society and growing use of the Internet having in this area?

- What means are being established for citizens and businesses to use government information more effectively? What are the choices offered to citizens and the incentives to change their habits when necessary for efficient policy applications?
- How can the sometimes problematic role of interest groups be strengthened to yield more representative and accountable results in the decision-making process on both the national and supranational level?
- What lessons can we learn from common practices, as well as from innovative approaches, in these areas?

These questions would be addressed first on a more simplified basis through the written survey and in greater depth through the case studies. The case studies will be carried out among a range of OECD countries reflecting the diversity of OECD experience. To ensure policy relevance, they will examine policies and practices in relation to particular sectors of government operations, e.g. environment, energy, health, education, and/or technology policy. To achieve sufficient depth, they require enough financing to engage a consultant to carry out extensive interviews with a range of participants in the policy development process for development of a written report, and background research, review and editing overseen by the PUMA Secretariat.