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INFORMATION POLICY AND DEMOCRATIC QUALITY

**Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government on
Information Policy and Democratic Quality
Bern, 14-15 September 1998**

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Information policy and democratic quality

A. Introduction

1. **Communication** between the government and the public at large is a key factor in achieving greater **transparency**. It enables information to be passed on. It also helps citizens to be **active participants**, alongside government, **in the management of public affairs**. The communication channel between citizen and government, and the forms of participation in the decision-making process which it may involve are not on the agenda of this meeting. These issues were reviewed to some extent at the Centres of government meeting in 1996 (Mexico City).¹ The subject of discussion will focus on the information provided by the government for the public at large. The aim will be to identify the information policies used by Member countries and to see how they can improve **democratic quality**.

2. Member countries have set up information policies that vary in their complexity. They give rise to the following questions in particular:

- Do they meet the public's expectations?
- Do they result in more efficient management of public affairs **for** and **with** the citizen?
- Have they improved democratic quality in Member countries?
- What is the minimum that must be done to achieve these three aims?
- Who is responsible for information policy and what is the Centre's role?
- What part is now played by new technologies in improving information policies?
- What is the role of the media?²

3. These policies also raise the issue of their effectiveness (evaluation of the quality of information), and that of citizens' attitude to the choices that are proposed and to the more active role they are asked to play. These issues will be studied by the Public Management Service in its programme for the years 1999-2000 (making citizens' choice more effective).

4. Many concerns were undoubtedly at the origin of the introduction of stronger information policies. Two concerns are particularly important for our discussion: **the response to demand for information (section B), and improved management of public affairs (section C)**. It is not certain that the same attention has been given to both objectives in the policies implemented by Member countries.

B. An information policy to meet expectations

5. During the preparatory discussion held by senior officials from Centres of government in 1997 (Dublin), one participant pointed out that the introduction of an information policy providing for access to administrative documents had met with little success in his country. A decision had been taken on this policy in response to needs which it was assumed must exist but which nobody had bothered to verify.

1. OECD/PUMA publication: Public Management Occasional Papers, No. 17, *Consultation and Communications*.

2. Also discussed in detail at the Mexico City meeting (1996).

What, therefore, is **expected** by those who are affected (the citizen, firms and the public at large) by the information held by the authorities?

6. It is usually accepted as an established fact that **the citizen requires information** (in the broad sense, without any specification as to the nature of the information required). This statement has to be qualified so that information policies are effective. The citizen wants information of **several types** and has sometimes high, sometimes not so high, expectations.

- Some of the citizen's demands are expressed in his capacity as a **user of services** provided by government, and concern his **rights** as well as his **duties** in connection with these services and, on a more general basis, with the authorities. Every individual pays taxes, and may receive government aid to bring up a large family or help him find a job, depending on the legislation in force in his country. In many Member countries a non-citizen enjoys the same rights and is bound by the same duties, in some instances, as a citizen. He often has the same expectations as a citizen. **When it comes to services, the citizen expects a great deal.** He wants information on his rights and duties, on where the service will be provided for him and on where he can obtain useful information and make his complaints. He also wants information on whether citizens meeting the same requirements for entitlement to a service are treated equally. In particular, the citizen will be very demanding about explanations for any **individual measures** which may affect him. This last kind of expectation, which **many governments have addressed as a priority**, are only marginally related to democratic quality (with the exception, of course, of civic activity proper, such as exercising the right to vote). In this case, the reference is rather to a relationship between a provider of services and a user, which is similar in certain respects to supplier/customer relationships in the private sector. Very complete information is provided on certain activities, such as education.
- Another aspect of the citizen's demands relates to his wish to **play a role in democracy** within his country. In this area, expectations include: **transparency** in political life and in government machinery, which are the main components in the management of public affairs; the information needed to be able to take part in public life and elections, in the debate on policies and possibly in the decision-making process; and the demand that political and administrative bodies provide sufficient information on their activities so that some form of control is possible, or at least so that the decisions can be understood. In the past, governments have shown less interest in these expectations, except at election time, which is the period most directly linked to democratic quality. They are now taking them into account more frequently in their information policies, for reasons which are discussed below. To be fair to governments, it must be added that while many researchers stress this aspect of the citizen's expectations, the actual demand is less than it is assumed to be. Whatever its quality, information in itself is not sufficient: the citizen also has to use it and react to it.

7. **The private enterprise sector** is also affected by the information provided by the authorities, and its demand for such information is high. Although, for the purposes of this paper, this sector is not considered on the same footing as citizens (who are leading participants in the democratic system), the demands expressed by it cannot be ignored. As in the case of the citizen, they relate to rights and duties, the services to which enterprises are also entitled and the individual measures affecting them. With the back-up of their legal and technical services, enterprises keep a close watch on the information available from administrative departments, particularly by using the new technologies. Like pressure groups, and probably to a greater extent than the individual citizen, they are also very keen on taking part in the debate and decision-making process and on being informed about the state of democracy, for government policies may transform their environment and have a positive or negative impact on their activity. Their

action is not without influence on democratic quality (lobbying and sometimes a very strong impact on decisions). In the remainder of this paper, however, the focus will mainly be on policies to inform the citizen.

C. An information policy to manage public affairs more efficiently, for and with the citizen

8. **Governments** have also been **encouraged by other factors** to set up information policies. In some countries, the **constitution** has made this a requirement, by entitling the citizen to a right to information. But apart from such cases of binding provisions, governments have also conducted more **proactive policies** and gone further than the demands expressed by citizens. Here the connection with democratic quality may be extremely strong, since there is a shift from the notion of a citizen/voter to that of a citizen/partner.

9. In many cases the aim of governments has been to improve transparency with regard to their own and to the administration's actions by means of an information policy, in order to make up for what is seen as a loss in citizens' **confidence**. This **transparency** concerning decisions and actions is a way of **being more accountable** to the citizen.

10. The nature and content of some policies have been a factor in the change of attitude by governments in favour of better information. As a result of carrying out long-term policies and dealing with "mega" issues such as the fight against unemployment or preparing for population ageing, governments have responded to the advantages of providing better information and have explained their actions more frequently. In doing so, their aim has been to limit the challenges to the decisions taken, obtain **support** for them or achieve a **consensus**. Similarly, policies to modernise government machinery and reforms involving the role of government have led to a wider dissemination of information.

11. In addition to these considerations, the aim is also to keep citizens and firms informed so that they will be able to **make choices** and **adjust their attitudes** with full knowledge of the facts and in accordance with the economic and social objectives defined at political level. The encouragement to save in order to prepare for retirement in an ageing society, warnings about the effects on health of certain nutritional habits and the resulting cost to the community, information on pollution in urban areas, information on economic indicators which encourages consumers and firms to save, or to spend money on consumer goods or to invest, are examples found in many Member countries. In the process in which some governments are privatising some of their functions and subjecting them to competition, the information disseminated also enables the citizen to **adjust** to the change and make **choices**.

12. In these different instances, information is also aimed at encouraging citizens **to stand on their own feet** and give up their dependent status in order to become an active partner, with and alongside the government, in the management of public affairs (one example is how individuals and voluntary associations are incited to pool their efforts in the event of natural catastrophes).

Box 1

13. *Summary classification of the types of information depending on the objective defined*

Type of information	Identity of the information user	Impact on democratic quality
information on services, rights and duties, information on individual situations	citizen/user of government services	weak (1)
information on national and international political, economic and social life and on the citizen's rights and duties	citizen/voter and vital participant in a representative democracy	medium (2)
information on reforms, policies, options and possible attitudes for the citizen and their impact on the public interest	citizen/consumer required to make choices; citizen/active partner; citizen taking responsibility for certain activities	strong (3)

(1) Impact on the running and quality of the services provided, particularly as regards adjusting them more closely to needs. Transparency of administrative action and explanations concerning individual measures. Facilitation of the citizen/user's verification that he is receiving the same treatment or service as others in the same position. A system of relations that works properly inasmuch as the citizen knows exactly what he can, and cannot, ask for and where to ask for it. There are, however, some limits: for example, it is always the same people or the same categories (pressure groups, lobby associations, etc.) who do the asking. Legal departments are also very active when it comes to asserting the full rights of their firms. The impact on democracy is, however, rather weak. The information concerned is of the commercial type.

(2) Information in this case is the minimum that any democracy is expected to provide so that the voter is able to exercise his rights in a representative system, take part in political life and be familiar with the legislation concerning him (rights and duties).

(3) Here the citizen is seen as an active partner in society. The information provided should allow him to understand government action, support it and work actively in the public interest, for example by adopting a change of attitude (examples: encouraging people through information to limit spending on health care, to purchase cars or fuel with lower pollution levels). As is the case in some countries, this information may lead to active participation in the decision-making process. The tradition whereby a consensus is reached prior to any decision is strongly rooted in some countries, which means the citizen has to be briefed beforehand.

D. Some factors to be taken into account to improve democratic quality

14. Setting up an information policy is not simply a matter of conforming to fashion or bowing to pressure. **If it is to be effective and have a positive impact on democracy, some precautions have to be taken.** The main questions include the following: how can the citizen's expectations be met as far as this is possible? How can the management of public affairs be improved with the citizen's participation? How can action be taken in line with the respect and enhancement of democracy and without straying from information to propaganda?

15. ***Sectoral information projects or an overall project.*** The Member countries which have opted for the solution of allowing ministries or departments to set up their own information policies (policy whereby individual departments provide information on projects) are confronted with the problem of harmonising the information delivered. The need or facility for communication is greater for some ministries (such as economy and finance ministries) than for others. The lack of an overall, strategic information policy also raises the issue of setting up and co-ordinating the information provided by the agencies. This issue also concerns the agencies and sectors that were formerly in public hands and are now privatised.

16. ***Information provided by central or local authorities.*** Local authorities are closer to the user. As they know more about his needs, they can provide more appropriate information. This is particularly true of information on service delivery, and may be a positive factor when the aim is to encourage the citizen to play an active part in the public interest. But this interest is most often not limited to one local level, which also explains why it is necessary to provide for good co-ordination between local authorities. In a federal system there is also the issue of the distribution of information responsibilities between central and local authorities.

17. ***Information must be easy to find, provided rapidly, adapted to the user and comprehensible.*** The citizen (and the firm) must know where to apply for the information required, obtain it without delay, and in some cases be given more personal attention (elderly people, those not fluent in the country's language, an official specialising in contacts with firms). Some countries have tried out single windows providing information relating to a series of administrative bodies, or have opted for the solution of a single centre housing a number of administrative bodies that are frequently asked for information. This has made it possible, for example, to assemble in the same place all the information needed by those wishing to settle abroad (visa, social security cover, schooling, requirements to obtain a job).

18. ***Access to information on a paying or non-paying basis.*** Each formula has its supporters. If a charge is paid, there is no undue pressure on the administrative body responsible for providing information. However, access to information is then limited to those who can afford it. This reservation also applies when information is available only via new technologies since most households do not yet have the equipment needed to get the information on-line.

19. ***Respecting certain limits.*** Confidentiality concerning individuals, business transactions, defence and international relations must be protected. A study of requests for access to administrative documents shows that protecting confidentiality should be a constant concern, since not all requests are *bona fide*.

20. ***Providing objective information.*** By and large, information for the general public or service users in most countries is objective. However, when information is used to encourage citizens to make choices, change their attitudes, participate in public management and take responsibility for certain areas

of public management, it is important to place special emphasis on the quality of that information. Objective, scientific information on pollution levels, for instance, will be credible and change behaviour patterns, or at least pave the way for new measures, whereas exaggerated, unfounded information will generate disbelief or waves of panic. A particularly sensitive area is information targeted at voters (e.g. policy reviews, employment trends, economic indicators, explanations prior or subsequent to legislation). Here, there may be a very fine line between information and propaganda. Yet it is **the distinction between propaganda and reliable, objective information** that will determine how democracy has been enhanced. This raises the complex issue of how to evaluate the quality of information.

E. Two subjects that are very actual in all Member countries: new information technologies and the media

21. The Public Management Service is conducting a special study on **new technologies** and, more specifically, the impact of the information society on democratic quality and the use of information for policy development.³ The study looks at eight Member countries (Canada, Denmark, Italy, Norway, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States), and its conclusions are mixed. Great hopes have been placed in the use of new information technologies by governments, the media, businesses and the public at large. There have been numerous experiments with the collection of information for decision-making and dialogue with the public. There have tended to be either too few participants or, on the contrary, far too many replies to handle. But **more use is being made of new information technologies for the dissemination of information**.

22. Many governments have their own Internet pages (although these should be updated and informative, not just a modish concession). In many cases they are merely written documents reproduced on screen, rather than special creations for the Internet. Electronic media can also be used to contact very rapidly a more targeted and sometimes very distant audience. Governments, in this time of transition, tend to base their information strategy on **several different means of communication**. They combine conventional and still widely used techniques such as the printed word and television/radio broadcasts with new forms of communication such as Internet pages, freephone numbers and fax campaigns targeting audiences such as the press. Videoconferencing is emerging in some countries as a means of reaching specialist audiences. The growing use of new technologies, however, has already led to a marked decline in the printed word.

23. With regard to accountability among decision-makers, new technologies have not caused any great upheaval. They probably enable the more astute members of the public to gather information, but parliamentary debates, for instance, are generally not on the Internet, nor are checklists to see whether governments have kept their promises.

24. One fact not to be overlooked is that new technologies also have their technical **limits**, which move rapidly; they can also be used to conceal information; they are not immune to “hackers”, who have already tampered with official Internet pages in some countries. Finally, the number of requests to access information via new technologies is still low. Even in “wired” countries (the report lists the United States, Norway, Denmark and Canada), only about 30 per cent of households have a home computer.

3. Roberto Gualtieri: “Impact of the Emerging Society on the Management of Information by Governments in the Policy Development Process and on the Quality of Democracy”. Forthcoming (late 1998).

25. Furthermore, new technologies have not always overcome **resistance** by government officials and politicians in some countries, where many still assimilate secrecy with power, and tend to avoid being held accountable. Another interesting point is that countries with a very strong tradition of consultation, opinion-seeking and consensus-building have put more effort into using new technologies for prior consultation and information than for disseminating information *a posteriori*. In any case, where new technologies are concerned, governments appear to be placing the emphasis on competitive/commercial advantages and on better service provision than on the improvement of democratic quality.

26. With regard to service provision, the Internet is already being used to create a virtual interlocutor representing several government departments. The “kiosk” system, in which citizens can dialogue with government, is now being developed. Portugal is one country currently developing this system (Infocid). “One-stop shops” and all-in-one information services are also benefiting from the new technologies.

27. The **media** issue was raised by the Public Management Service at an earlier meeting⁴, but is still topical. Given the media’s role as agents of democratic accountability, the meeting concluded that governments should focus on:

- **Packaging information** intended for the media (a message needs to be well prepared if it is to have the right impact and not be deformed when it reaches the public).
- **Taking a proactive approach** to information rather than just reacting to events or media requests. Many countries are adopting this approach. The information policies they are developing through alternative channels (advertising campaigns, mailshots to the public, Internet pages, public debates) act as a counterbalance to the overwhelming power of the media.
- **Avoiding blurred messages**. This is far more important when governments move away from giving one-off explanations about specific policy aspects towards encouraging the public to play an active role in public management.
- **Striking a balance** between policy and publicity.

F. What is the Centre of government’s responsibility in terms of information and transparency?

28. What role can the Centre of government play when there is so much information to be disseminated, when not all of that information can be condensed and checked at a single point beforehand, when some ministries produce so much information and would be reluctant to see their role undermined, when there is such a wide range of sources (central government, agencies, local government) and when there is a distinction between political information and administrative information?

29. The growing number of press and information offices in ministries, agencies and at local level appears to be making a **co-ordination strategy** necessary in some countries. In Canada, the task has fallen to the Privy Council Office and its Communications and Consultation Secretariat. In other countries, the Centre simply intervenes as and when the need arises, in some cases only in a crisis when information has to be provided under pressure from the media or the general public. In any case, co-ordination is a difficult task. There is no point in trying to maintain full control over content, as this is

4. Mexico City, 1996; OECD/PUMA Public Management Occasional Papers, No. 17 *Consultation and Communications*, Part II: “Managing Media Relations”.

physically impossible and inadvisable in a democratic system that is partially judged by the freedoms it grants. However, attention must be paid to ensuring that information is consistent and, when the aim is to involve citizens as partners, that all the sources promote the intended policy goal.

30. **Communicating with the public** (as distinct from the media) is part of the Centre's mandate in some countries. Belgium, for instance, has a Federal Information Service; Denmark, a unit in the Prime Minister's Office; and Ireland, a Government Information Service. Placed at the Centre of government, these services can provide useful guidance for other communications units.

31. Finally, the production of information is not confined to the public sector. Collecting, packaging and communicating require the services of professionals. This may mean **bringing in the private sector**. The Centre certainly has a role to play in organising and managing this kind of outsourcing (dialogue with the private sector, for instance, and rules on public/private sector relations).

32. The Centre's traditional **role** as an adviser to government, ensuring that it operates smoothly, and as protector of democratic procedures is likely **to take on more importance** when politicians become fully aware of how information can be used to persuade citizens to become partners in public management. The Centre will then have to ensure, during the policy-making phase, that information really does enhance the quality of democracy. In some cases the Centre must also ensure that every policy proposal includes a **communications plan**.

Box 2

Some experiences

Access to information

33. Most countries have taken, or are about to take, legislative steps to give citizens access to information. In 1978 France introduced legislation giving access to administrative documents. The United Kingdom, too, has its "Code of Practice on Open Government". In many countries, the requests come from firms seeking business information (as in the United States) or from the media (as in Norway). There is not a high demand from the general public (Canada was counting on 75 000 requests a year when it introduced its policy on access to information in the late 1970s, but the actual figure is more like 10 000). The United States receives some 400 000 requests a year. However, the real figures are hard to establish. In New Zealand and Australia, most requests appear to come from private individuals. In some countries, such as Canada, legislative arrangements on access to information are now being tightened to curb misuse via the Internet.

Proactive dissemination

34. Most countries have also adopted a proactive policy on information (initiative stage). These policies still focus closely on information for citizens and service users. One example is Centerlink in Australia, which specialises in social information. However, they coexist with information policies on political life, reforms and leading economic indicators. The need to explain policy (e.g. Community policy for those in the European Union⁵) or to change attitudes following radical reform (as in New Zealand) has led to the development of communication strategies based more on the concept of

5. OECD/SIGMA: *Public Management Forum*, Vol. IV, No. 3, May/June 1998. "Government's Role to Inform about Europe" (experience of Austria, Hungary and Sweden).

information as a community or public service. Finally, “mega” issues (e.g. environmental sustainability, employment, population ageing), which increasingly require the active involvement of the public, have accentuated government interest in this kind of information policy. “One-stop shops” are also being set up in many countries; not confined to information on services, they provide broader information on the political, economic and social situation in the country and how government is responding.

Dissemination planning

35. In Portugal the Infocid system also co-ordinates information from many different services and packages it to make it practical. Norway’s National Information Centre has a dual function, as both an information centre and an adviser on information policy.

New-technology phase

36. Numerous experiments are being conducted in this field. Countries are combining new technologies with more traditional ways of disseminating information (e.g. terminals throughout some cities give citizens access to very comprehensive information. The Netherlands has several “digital cities”, with Internet connections to foster dialogue between citizen and government).

G. Issues for discussion

37. The purpose of the Secretariat’s paper is not to conduct a full review of the issues and provide all the answers in advance. It merely highlights a few points to further the debate among senior officials from Centres of government. Other points may of course be raised. However, given the limited amount of time available for this topic during the session, participants may wish to focus initially on the following three questions:

- **Information policies are still very citizen/user/voter-oriented. They should further target the citizen as a responsible stakeholder in the development and carrying through of public policies. How can we improve this aspect of information policy and help to involve citizens more actively in public management?**
- **What factors in particular will enhance democracy when strengthening information policies?**
- **The Centre has a role to play in enhancing democracy. How might its role evolve in the future, given the emergence of multimedia information policies, and the powerful influence of the media?**