Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Economiques
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PUBLIC MANAGEMENT SERVICE
PUBLIC MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

HOW TO STRENGTHEN GOVERNMENT-CITIZEN CONNECTIONS

Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government on
How to Strengthen Government-Citizen Connections
Naples, 11-12 October 1999

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HOW TO STRENGTHEN GOVERNMENT-CITIZEN CONNECTIONS

A.   Preliminary considerations

1.   This session addresses the changing nature of relations between governments and their citizens. This subject was chosen last year as the Public Management Service (PUMA) decided to undertake a new activity on this theme. In the course of 1999, the work of this activity has essentially dealt with the manner in which Member country governments maintain and strengthen their relations with citizens, in order to develop a database, non-existent up to now. It quickly became evident that this study of relations would make up only one part of a much larger set of issues concerning the development and implementation of public policies; an ensemble that should essentially concentrate on the connections, still evolving, between governments, the world of business, and civil society. As the debate on this issue continues to develop, attention has focused on the changing roles, responsibilities and division of power among these three actors. The interplay of different forces among these actors is what the notion of governance aims to encompass.

2.   This document does not seek to address the full range of issues raised by this new paradigm of decision-making. It provides a brief presentation, as participants have indicated they prefer, of a few questions related to this subject and addressing essentially the traditional or evolving relationship between citizens and governments. The discussion will not be limited to these few points and, if the participants wish, they can raise other aspects of the issue in their discussion.

3.   High-level officials from Centres of Government expressed in 1998 an interest in updating the format for their annual meetings. They agreed to the PUMA proposal that the group should contribute more specifically and directly to the work under way within the OECD and PUMA.

4.   Their unique position at the cusp of the political-administrative interface in developing and co-ordinating policy across the government allows them in effect to bring to the work of the OECD – the sole international organisation to benefit from such a network – an important added value. This consists notably of reinforcing the practical character of the work in respect to its use by political decision-makers. The network's contributions are therefore a unique resource that the Organisation may be able to benefit from much more than in the past.

5.   High-level officials from Centres of Government are invited to examine a selection of issues being addressed by the activity currently under way in PUMA on "Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections," in order to:

- Enrich the understanding of these issues based upon information on their own role and experience in co-ordinating policy and advice for political decision-makers;

- To consider these issues from the perspective of the full range of policies developed in each country, in which the participants are unique, along with the higher political authorities in their countries, in having this cross-cutting perspective;

- To determine how to orient the activity to increase its usefulness for decision makers.

B.   Government-Citizen Connections: a preoccupation

6.   Assertions are sometimes made about the decline or inadequacy of democracy, such as: that traditional representative democracy is no longer sufficient to ensure a fully satisfactory relationship between governments and their citizens; that more participative forms of democracy must be found; or that many of our countries suffer from a democratic deficit. They convey a sense of dissatisfaction. For institutions charged with ensuring that citizens' views are represented (legislatures, the executive branch of government, a range of councils and committees elected directly or indirectly), the traditional procedures for involving citizens in decision-making, referenda or consultation with traditional social partners (unions, associations or others) are sometimes judged insufficient for ensuring good relations with citizens, who are the original source of power in a democracy.

7.   Citizens, situated at the bottom of a grand pyramid of power, perceive above them a piling up of decision-making (at local, national and international levels), and sense a powerlessness as individuals to make themselves heard and to influence their decision-makers. Among the many groups claiming to represent their views, they have the impression of being fragmented (taxpayer, consumer of various services, voter, parent of student) and that because of this, the full range of their views cannot be taken into account by decision-makers. Moreover, they do not necessarily recognise their viewpoints reflected in the decisions taken by the politicians elected to represent them.

8.   Governments are testing out new approaches involving more direct interactions with citizens as a supplement to more traditional channels of representative democracy. These approaches are being tested at different points along the continuum which makes up the relationship with the citizen: information, consultation and active participation. The art of governing should integrate more directly the interests of civil society, and within this, the citizen, among those actors including business interests whom politicians should take into account in making and implementing decisions. International, multilateral and intergovernmental organisations are also confronting the question of the quality of their relations with civil society, notably stemming from the growing pressure exerted by non-governmental organisations.

C.   Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections: PUMA work to date

9.   The developments cited below provide participants with the principal components of the activity on "Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections" as one contribution to the discussion. They will find, if necessary, more extensive information in documents annexed to this note:

-   Overview of work [PUMA/CIT(99)1/REV2].
-   Framework for case studies [PUMA/CIT(99)3/REV1].
-   Survey questionnaire, sent by the OECD to all Member countries [PUMA/CIT(99)2/REV2]. The Secretariat will provide a room document at the meeting describing the results of this survey questionnaire, based on responses received by that date.

10.   The OECD activity on "Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections" was launched at the beginning of 1999. Nineteen Member countries[1] and the European Union participate directly in this work through a working group or case studies. The objective is to support increased understanding of the approaches that Member country governments take to inform, consult with and actively involve citizens in the development and implementation of public policies.

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[1]   Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States.

11.   A first working group meeting on 15-16 February 1999 allowed participants to express country interests and priorities, to define the concepts, to specify the body of research to be undertaken during 1999-2000, and to prepare a questionnaire. A second meeting on 17-18 June 1999 focused on the use of new information technologies as one of the tools used by governments in this area. A third meeting to bring together the work completed in 1999 will be held at the end of November 1999. This meeting will include notably the results of the discussion of the Naples Centres of Government meeting.

12.   An initial questionnaire has been developed to support a better understanding of the legal, political and administrative frameworks for dealing with government-citizen relations, the initiatives and tools used by governments to achieve their objectives, and the approaches used to evaluate their effectiveness. Following a pilot test phase, the questionnaire was sent to all Member countries in June. Several country case studies dealing with the role of government-citizen connections in policy development within specific sectors are also under way in 1999 (Canada/health; Denmark/health; France/public housing; Hungary/public works jobs programmes; and the United States/environment). Other studies will be completed in 2000. A second questionnaire aimed at developing indicators of government use of information technologies is being targeted for a January, 2000 completion date.

D.   Preliminary observations

13.   Certain countries within the working group have concentrated on bringing governments and citizens together most closely where the two intersect most frequently -- at the level of service delivery -- and to regain or strengthen confidence in the administration through more responsive and better quality service. Others are seeking to obtain a more global or integrated view of citizens in order to better take into account their wishes in relation to policy choices, and to strengthen the democratic character of these choices and of democracy in general. Certain countries favour better relations with citizens to strengthen national cohesion within a population with diverse origins, and to strengthen the involvement of populations marginalised by their ethnic origins or their geographic distance from centres of decision-making. Others, notably those countries involved in recent transitions toward representative democracy, feel a stronger need to pursue good implementation of decisions over time, and to consolidate the development of credible public institutions that may pursue more focused and direct involvement with citizens.

14.   One frequently noted reason (already cited in section B of this document) for taking actions to strengthen government-citizen connections is to address a "democratic deficit." This term can refer to a range of developments:

- A loss of citizen confidence in the institutions and functioning of representative democracy or in relation to elected officials. One symptom of this is a denunciation of the gap between decisions taken and public will, a lack of comprehension as to why such decisions occurred, and a feeling that the decision-making process is so complex that the citizen becomes lost from the view of those who are supposed to represent them in the decision-making process. Protest votes or abstaining from elections provide ways of signalling this dissatisfaction.

- A loss of citizen confidence in the effectiveness of government and of those who act on the government's behalf. Government decisions are perceived as being too slow, too costly, not well adapted to the situation, lacking in transparency, and those who take the decisions are considered unaccountable to the public.

- This democratic deficit can be attributed in particular to a local level of government, national and/or supranational level.

- The perception of a democratic deficit differs according to whether it involves individual or collective action (by interest groups, for example).

15.   Citizen aspirations can seem contradictory. Though critical of democratic institutions and their representatives, citizens also remain quite attached to them. But these views also follow a certain logic. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, only a limited number of individuals choose to participate actively in power, while others prefer to devote their time to their private lives. Citizens increasingly are demanding that the persons whom they elect to represent them perform this task satisfactorily in a way that allows for a division of roles between the citizen and his or her representative. Citizens demand improvements in their relations with government, including, in general, more transparent decision-making and better taking into account of their views in these decisions. The citizen is therefore often supportive, in the different stages of the continuum that constitutes this relationship, of better information regarding public policies and more inclusive consultation on these policies. But active participation, for example in the implementation of policy, also raises certain reservations on the part of citizens, above all when this impinges on their private lives. Their desire to participate is complex. It involves a mix of scepticism and passivity -- while recognising that not all citizens are equally participative -- along with an attraction toward new opportunities that open up before them. Cultural traditions related to active participation that are particular to each country, as well as traditions related to individual or collective participation, may also have an impact on the degree of a citizen's involvement in relations with the government.

Points for discussion

- What do the senior officials at Centres of Government think about the seriousness of the democratic deficit?

- What tools or means have been developed to better understand citizens' demands?

- What are the specific objectives of governments that are taking measures to strengthen government-citizen connections?

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16.   The working group on "Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections" decided to direct its survey questionnaire toward the national level, while recognising that in certain countries the local and municipal levels are likewise quite active – and sometimes more active than the national level – in informing, consulting and promoting the participation of citizens in the development and implementation of public policies. This is notably the case in federal systems or countries with traditions of devolved local management. One reason that the working group chose to focus on the national level is that data regarding local experiences would have been difficult to collect, diverse, numerous and most relevant to the capacities and responsibilities of local authorities.

17.   Two case studies have advanced sufficiently (France/the public housing sector and Hungary/public works jobs initiatives) to enable the consultant to draw some preliminary conclusions concerning the respective roles played by national and local levels, and notably in relation to coherence, communication and co-ordination between these levels:

- The national level is where overall decisions establish the framework for action and general orientations. In the French case, this provides for information for citizens (individuals and groups), and citizens are able to participate in decision-making through associations that represent them in different national institutions. For Hungary, participation of the citizen is

not foreseen at this level other than indirectly through the election of politicians to represent them.

▪ The local level is involved in the implementation of concrete initiatives that provide the opportunity for active participation of individuals and associations (regional fora in Hungary select projects including reforestation, maintaining of water lines, and flood protection that are implemented at the local level; in France this involves municipal-level initiatives to rehabilitate housing or to better integrate public housing neighbourhoods into the city). This level is involved in more direct communication with citizens and more active citizen participation in achieving objectives.

▪ The local initiatives suffer from relatively little exchange of information and communication with the national level, and, between them, at the local level. Such communication would allow in particular information to be diffused regarding the factors that contribute to the success of certain initiatives, or to understand in others why there were failures.

▪ Some citizens have the feeling that their opinions expressed at different levels (through associations or directly depending upon whether at the national or local level), are not fully understood, but are fragmented.

Points for discussion

- At what level of government are relations with citizens most susceptible to being improved?

- Is there complementarity between the national and local levels in their efforts to strengthen government-citizen connections, or does each level act in its own, separate interests?

- What is the role of the Centre of Government in relation to strengthening of government-citizen connections?

- How can better relations between the government and citizen (involving consultation and active participation) be reconciled with the need for rapid decision making?