Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Economiques
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OLIS : **11-Oct-1999**
Dist. : **12-Oct-1999**
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Or. Eng.

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT SERVICE
PUBLIC MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

ISSUES, TRENDS AND PROMISING PRACTICES EMERGING FROM QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES AND CASE STUDIES

**Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government on
How to Strengthen Government-Citizen Connections**

**Royal Palace, Naples (Italy)
11-12 October 1999**

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ISSUES, TRENDS AND PROMISING PRACTICES EMERGING FROM QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES AND CASE STUDIES

1.   The OECD has so far received 17 responses to its questionnaire on "Strengthening Government Citizen Connections," and additional information from five country case studies that are in the drafting phase. While results are only partial at this stage, some preliminary findings are highlighted below.

Emerging Issues

2.   Many countries cite concrete evidence of changing circumstances and developments that point to a democratic deficit and lack of public engagement as a growing concern:

> ➢   **Canada**, **Finland**, the **Netherlands** and **Norway** cite surveys showing declining confidence or trust in government, declining rates of voter participation, and/or declining participation in political parties;

> ➢   This is of course also an issue at the **European Union** level, where the entire Commission was just replaced.

> ➢   **Australia, Canada, Hungary** and **New Zealand** also have cited concerns about ensuring inclusion (combating marginalisation) of minority populations;

> ➢   Even countries with relatively open, consultative traditions note that traditional methods of contact with social partners and large representative organisations is no longer considered adequate due to a growing diversity of interest groups and citizen demands; others found the process non-transparent and closed. Government has had to become more open and move beyond consulting with traditional partners only.

3.   A growing number of countries are using survey and polling research to determine citizens' views on government and public services (e.g. **Canada**, **Denmark**, **Sweden**, the **UK** and **USA** make extensive use of such surveys). For example, the Canada Information Office conducts a regular series of surveys on Canadians' priorities and their assessments of the performance of government generally. A key finding was that "the more familiar **Canadians** say they are with government activities and the more opportunity they have to participate and offer input, the more likely they are to hold positive views of government in terms of its role, relevance and performance." Along similar lines, **Danish** surveys of citizen satisfaction with government services consistently show users of the services to have more positive attitudes towards those services than non-users.

4.   Countries that use such surveys indicate that they do not provide a sufficient basis for obtaining and taking into account citizen views. Opinions change depending on how a question is asked, and depending on the related information that citizens are given. Consultation is a necessary part of educating the public, building support and "buy-in" for policies so that they may be implemented effectively. Thus, many countries are seeking to develop innovative ways to ensure more deliberative and ongoing consultation with citizens (see Promising Practices below).

5.	Different governments are focusing on different priorities in their relationship with the citizen. Countries with high levels of education and an active civil society are responding to stronger demands for meaningful consultation in policy development. Others with lower socio-economic levels or those recently in transition to democracy, with less participatory traditions, are tending to focus first on ensuring that they have effective laws and institutions in place, and well-functioning public programmes. Initiatives to promote more active citizen engagement may be seen as a luxury of lower priority. However, ensuring access to government information appears to be a strong concern of all Member countries. In some cases the main reason is to promote democratic participation; while in others the focus is on transparency as an instrument for ensuring accountability and combating government corruption.

Selected trends

6.	Many countries have recently proposed, adopted or modified Freedom of Information laws (**UK** proposal in May; **Japanese Diet** passed law on disclosure of administrative information in May); **Korea** adopted legislation in 1996; **Ireland** adopted a Freedom of Information law in 1997 that continues to generate debate. The **US** and others have modified laws to take into account electronic information.

7.	Most countries have appointed ombudsmen to defend citizens' rights and their numbers are growing (e.g. **Greece**); many have multiple ombudsmen responsible for different sectors. The **UK** proposed Freedom of Information legislation would require appointment of an ombudsman to be specifically responsible for safeguarding citizens' rights to information.

8.	Clearly information technology is having a huge impact on access to information, and also influencing innovation in public consultation. But there is also a long ways to go:

> A US government official has indicated that the "glass is 90% full" in terms of electronic access to government information, and that the focus is shifting toward electronic provision of services.

> Many promising databases on public information have become available on the Web: legislative information in **Austria** and **Finland**; **US** data on environmental risks available by postal code; a **Japanese** "global environmental information centre" addressing work of NGOs, business and government.

> Many countries issue policy discussion papers on their Web sites and open them up to public comment (**UK** green papers, **French** consultation on national policy to promote Internet use;);

> Others are experimenting with on-line discussion groups with mixed success. **Norway** notes that these are difficult to sustain but that efforts must continue in order to change habits and culture of consultation;

9.	Many countries indicate that consultation and participation is more active on the local level, and that reforms have deliberately moved responsibilities to the local level to promote more active citizen involvement (country case studies on **Danish** health sector, **French** public housing and **Hungarian** public jobs programme).

Promising practices

10.   Questionnaires have already highlighted numerous innovations and promising practices.   For example:

> **New Zealand** consults with Maori populations by going directly into their communities -- ensures greater participation, an atmosphere conducive to greater dialogue and increased sensitivity to Maori concerns.

> **Norway** has created   a Youth Forum for Democracy, composed of 16 youth representatives from ages 15-26, to provide ongoing input to the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs.

> **Canada's** "Rural Dialogue" has involved consultation with 7,000 Canadians from rural areas through regional and national workshops and completion of a workbook. Consultation is ongoing and has been supplemented this year by an on-line discussion group.

> **Netherlands'** "cyberbus", emblazoned with the government's Web site address on its side, tours the country, providing training on the use of information technologies for target groups such as homes for the elderly, health, community and shopping centres to encourage IT use in interactions with government.

> **Austria** sends experts "under cover" to anonymously test the quality and responsiveness of public services through its new "Mystery Shopping in the Public Administration" programme.

> **Finland's** Participation Project has provided funding support for 62 democratic participation projects in 54 municipalities.   They also monitor, evaluate and provide information to support further developments in this area.   The city of Tampere has developed a Web-based interactive "game" on city planning that provides participants the opportunity to simulate different future growth options and to provide feedback on their preferences.

Questions for further consideration

11.   It is too early to draw firm conclusions from this work, but information obtained so far can lead to certain "hypotheses" regarding the strengthening of government-citizen connections, and suggest key questions that should be studied further.   A preliminary exchange of views could provide further insight into these issues, and help PUMA to determine whether these are the "right" questions to pursue.

- Everybody seems to support public consultation in theory but governments may find that they do so less in practice.   Ultimately, successful policy consultation may depend upon whether those responsible for carrying it out truly believe that it will result in better policy decisions and programme solutions.   This involves dealing squarely with the concerns people have about the limitations or disadvantages in addition to advantages of public consultation.   For example:

> Are there **particular policy sectors** (environment? health? social programmes?) that especially require active public participation or partnerships to be effective, or where public consultation tends to be more successful? For what reasons?

> ➤ Are there **particular policy sectors** (e.g., economic and budget policy, technical or scientific matters) where there may be greater advantage to keeping public involvement to a minimum, or that pose greater difficulties? For what reasons?

> ➤ Are there particular **circumstances** where policy consultation may be inadvisable (for example, responding to emergencies or crises, or areas where it may be deemed "impossible" to reach consensus)?

> ➤ Are there **natural stages of progression** toward more participative democracy that suggest that some countries should give it higher priority than others? Is active citizen participation in policy development a "luxury" of greater concern to rich, developed countries with active, well-educated populations, while resources in less wealthy countries may need to be reserved for ensuring that more pressing social concerns (e.g., employment, housing, or social programmes) are addressed?

- Initial information appears to suggest that greater innovation and initiative to consult with the public is taking place at sub-national levels of government. **Is participative democracy stronger at the local level**? If so, is this a persuasive argument for further devolution of government policies and programmes, or are there other, more compelling arguments for maintaining national responsibilities?

- Is it true, as some observers assert, that policy-making and consultation have become increasingly difficult due to a proliferation of non-governmental organisations and fragmentation of interests? What kind of impact has this had on the **relations between the executive branch and Parliament**? Is there also a growing independence and fragmentation of Parliamentary views (for example, a proliferation of single member bills on issues of special interest)?

- **Information technolog**y appears to be providing new opportunities for promoting a more open, accessible and interactive government-citizen relationship. Some see it as a way to obtain more objective and deliberative points of view, less subject to manipulation or intimidation that may occur at public meetings. On the other hand, it also tends to facilitate participation of those with higher education and income levels. Is it nevertheless on balance a positive development that should be exploited more fully? What should governments do to address concerns about unequal access?

- With **advances in public opinion polling**, governments can obtain information on citizen views and demands stratified by different economic, ethnic and social backgrounds. How much does your government conduct such polling, and how much weight should be given to this approach to determining citizen views and demands, versus other, more traditional tools for consulting with the public?