

Statement by the Chairman
Mr. Alexander Pechtold,
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Ladies and gentlemen,

There is an old Dutch saying: ‘Trust comes on foot, but leaves on horseback’

At the start of this meeting, the Secretary-General of the OECD noted that “there can be no higher priority for any democratic government than maintaining the trust of its citizens.” This truth is amply demonstrated by the fact that we – the ministers responsible for public governance arrangements in our respective countries – decided to meet to discuss ways to strengthen citizens’ trust in government. This is especially important in today’s globalised world where effective and efficient public governance is more important than ever in order to ensure economic and social development.

I would like to share with you what I thought were some of the key messages emerging from the day’s discussion.

We need to be better at engaging with citizens. National elections are the ultimate test of citizens’ views, but they are not enough. The democratic system needs constant input and renewal. OECD countries have implemented a variety of consultation mechanisms – all aimed at putting citizens at the centre. These include: user surveys and polling, explicitly soliciting feedback from users of government services through the Internet or call centers, citizens’ charters, the use of public hearings, the establishment of inclusive consultation panels for policy development – and the use of petitions and referendums. Such measures require the investment of sufficient time and money. It needs to be recognized as an integral and inherent cost of policy development and implementation in modern democracies.

But simply putting such mechanisms in place is not enough. Governments have to demonstrate to citizens how they use their input – or why they decide not to do so.

Otherwise, such consultation mechanisms may only foster cynicism among citizens – and undermine the very purpose that they were originally established for.

Governments also need to ensure that the results of citizens' consultations reflect the wishes of the whole community – not just those of vocal vested interests who participated in the exercise. The use of E-government may be of assistance in this regard.

But government cannot do everything. Citizens cannot expect their governments to fix every problem. Sometimes in the public interest government will say “no.” Political leaders should not make promises they cannot keep: that erodes trust in government.

Governments also need to send out early, clear and consistent messages to citizens that effectively convey why reforms are needed and what they will achieve. This is especially the case where the results are long-term rather than immediately visible – such as efforts to reform pension systems to tackle the challenge of ageing societies. Here, vision and political leadership are essential. Measuring results is key here.

Governments also make mistakes. The tasks facing governments today are increasingly complex - and the potential for mistakes is higher as a result. The use of effective risk management strategies is increasingly essential to mitigate the potential for mistakes. When mistakes occur, however, the common lesson was the importance of admitting the mistake, explaining what went wrong and why, and correcting the course.

We need to continually improve the performance of government. The public's trust in the institutions of government is related to the public's perception of whether those institutions are working well or not and whether governments deliver what they promise. We are all implementing policies to modernize how our respective governments operate. The key element of these reforms is to re-orient the allocation and management of resources in government around results. They also include transferring responsibilities to lower levels of government – and thus closer to citizens where they are in a better position to influence them. But at the same time, the organizational boundaries of government should not be 'visible' to citizens!

It also means introducing greater user choice – often by involving the private sector and the voluntary sector in the provision of public services. This reform agenda is on course, but is by no means complete.

The public service is key to the success of any reform. As stated by the delegate of the United States, “If government employees are not on board, reforms will not happen.” Government employees need to be partners in the reform process. It is essential to overcome both the resistance to change and the fatigue that may set in as a result of continual reforms.

Integrity is critical to government. Governments need to be more vigilant than ever that the highest standards of ethics and prevention of conflict of interest are adhered to.

We call on the OECD to continue its work with Member countries on public governance issues and help us in our efforts to strengthen citizens’ trust in government.

Finally, there is no alternative to strengthening citizens’ trust in government. If you do not do it, you drive up the cost of government for everyone and promote the disengagement of citizens.