38th Annual Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government

Reykjavík, Iceland
17-18 October 2019

SUMMARY
Summary of the discussions

The 2019 meeting of the OECD Network of Senior Officials from Centres of government was hosted by the Prime Minister’s Office of Iceland and chaired by Ms. Ragnhildur Arnljótsdóttir, Permanent Secretary in the Prime Minister’s Office. Ms. Katrín Jakobsdóttir, the Prime Minister of Iceland, was the keynote speaker. Senior officials from the prime minister’s or president’s offices of 30 OECD member and non-member countries participated.

The meeting explored three diverse and highly relevant issues being addressed by governments across the board: strategic foresight and anticipatory government; public communication; and mainstreaming gender equality.

Countries share many challenges, which are of increased complexity. These are mostly horizontal problems and no single ministry can address them alone. Finding ways to work across ministries is becoming increasingly important for governments. Co-operation among public institutions needs to be complemented by mechanisms that ensure the participation of a broad range of stakeholders in decision-making.

**Strategic foresight**

Strategic foresight provides opportunities to broaden national debates and decisions. Participants underlined the importance of better anticipating, preparing for, and adapting to the future by identifying a number of different plausible future scenarios and risks, exploring what impacts they could have and suggesting adjustments to public policies.

The role of the centre of government (CoG) is to link up different government work, fill in any blanks and look to the future, to avoid or minimise the scale of future crises.

Foresight uses a range of methodologies, such as scanning the horizon for emerging challenges, analysing megatrends and developing multiple scenarios, to reveal and discuss useful ideas about the future. The CoG needs to make sure that these are not just interesting experiments for those involved but can feed into better policies and practices.

Participants noted that we need to think differently about how foresight is carried out and by whom. While in the past we relied on expert community, academia and civil servants, now countries are prioritising more interaction with society, public debates and dialogue among political parties, civil servants and the society. The specialized terminology used by the expert foresight community was also identified as a hindrance to the wider use of foresight tools in some countries.

The role of the CoG in promoting use of strategic foresight depends on the maturity of participatory capacities, and on the maturity of governments to commit themselves to long-term policy making. In undertaking strategic foresight, it is important that it not be viewed as a one-off, isolated activity, but as part of an overall governance system that helps to manage uncertainty and achieve positive change. Participants agreed that strategic foresight should not be seen as an optional ‘add-on’ to the conventional policy-making process, but an integral part of it. Policy makers need to think of the “last mile”: using the information produced from strategic foresight to achieve actual change.

SUMMARY OF THE 38TH SESSION
The institutional arrangements for futures thinking vary across countries, but usually a central unit or a team is needed to facilitate the work across ministries. Participants emphasised that the idea is not to centralise foresight, but rather to provide some structure and guidance to enable the integration of foresight practices across ministries and within central decision-making processes. Participants noted that ministries that take the development of future-ready policies seriously are developing their own dedicated foresight teams.

The role of parliaments was emphasised as important for wider sustainability of future-proof policy making. Several countries have initiatives to encourage parliament to look at the future, including experiments with dedicated futures committees and giving parliaments the role of shaping longer-term national development plans.

High levels of trust in society make it easier to hold future-oriented debates among diverse stakeholders; at the same time; future-oriented studies and debates, if carried out well, can contribute to higher trust among stakeholders and, over time, in society more broadly.

Participants concluded that strategic foresight is an evolving discipline and no government claims to have a formula for systematically implementing anticipatory governance in an optimal way. It is a developing area of governance, and experimentation is common among countries.

Public communication

Public communication plays an increasingly important role in how governments work, how policies are designed and how public services are delivered. Participants shared the view that the way people consume and share information has changed tremendously. Online social platforms have greatly increased the speed of the spread of information, requiring public institutions to develop new competencies and practices.

Participants noted that the traditional public communications activities of government spokespersons and public institutions issuing press releases have not changed considerably. Governments still need good and up-to-date websites. But while social media does not replace existing ways of communication, it vastly expands the ways different content can be provided and used for public debates.

For a long time governments focused on supplying information: providing more information was often seen as a solution for information gaps. Today, government communication has become more interactive and nuanced and uses a greater variety of channels. Streamlining a multitude of government websites with unified communications channels and standard branding have become a norm in many countries.

Dedicated public relations departments have a key role to play in co-ordinating and facilitating public communication, but several participants emphasised that all civil servants are active members of public communication.

Delegates agreed that drawing the line between government public relations and the public relations work of politicians and political parties requires constant attention. A simple division where government websites are run by the public administration and social media run by ministers does not work. Public institutions also need to use social media as a means to collect data and insights from the public quickly and from a wide range of groups. Also, it is often beneficial for ministers to check with civil servants before publishing information.

Participants agreed that the public is increasingly worried about the propensity for sharing disinformation. While threats related to disinformation are not new, modern technologies have amplified them, raising important implications related to trust in institutions and even national security in several countries. Misrepresentations have always been around in politics, but now these travel faster and without filters of traditional newspapers.
To counter information manipulation and “fake news”, countries are debating and in some cases already implementing new regulations for social media platforms. These include mechanisms allowing users to flag fake news, and increasing transparency regarding the original sources of information. Participants emphasised that not every wrong statement needs a reaction – public authorities should be concerned when falsehoods threaten the public interest.

Participants agreed that governments can undertake explicit efforts to identify disinformation and create better environments for factual information. Regulatory reforms can help shape the media and information ecosystem by reinforcing freedom of speech, encouraging co-ordination across relevant regulatory bodies (for example, those focused on media, competition and elections), promoting self-regulation of social media companies, and drafting specific regulations focused on platform transparency and even content.

Participants concluded, however, that there is a fine line between safeguarding against false information and manipulation and infringing on freedom of expression.

**Mainstreaming gender equality**

Gender equality is another cross-cutting, persistent goal for all countries. Inequality is evident across many policy domains, including in the labour market, education and health, as well as in management and leadership. Gender inequalities hamper economic growth and societal well-being and can damage confidence in government. It was recognised that closing gender gaps is a pressing global challenge, and the public sector has the most important role to play in addressing this situation.

Most countries have an institution responsible for leading policy initiatives on gender equality and women’s empowerment. These institutions are usually also tasked with providing expert advice across the government. Moreover, most countries have developed multi-year strategies for gender equality. These strategies seek to apply a “gender lens” to all aspects of public policy making.

In practice however, the gender equality institutions have only limited influence over line ministries to co-ordinate and monitor the implementation of such strategies. It was therefore agreed that a regular and active role of the CoG is needed to support this cross-cutting objective. Furthermore, support from the prime minister or president and other political leaders is crucial.

Participants agreed that the practice of considering gender-related aspects in all policies, regulations, and budgets should help to identify and remove systemic barriers to more equal participation of women in public life. Governments are not, however using these principles sufficiently. Even where tools such as gender impact assessments are introduced, their impact on decision making remains limited. Nevertheless, participants also highlighted positive examples where ministries are not allowed to propose regulation without having carried out a publicly disclosed gender impact analysis. Gender budgeting was cited by several countries as an important tool for consideration of gender equality in policy-making.

There are positive trends in several countries, including greater representation of women in parliaments and in more senior positions in governments. The publication of gender pay data is seen as an effective measure for raising awareness but also for nudging decisions towards more equal pay between genders.

Participants agreed that the CoG can do more to facilitate genuine efforts to counter gender biases in public policies. These include advising ministries on incorporating gender equality objectives in the relevant strategies and government work programmes, clarifying accountability for gender aspects across government, ensuring that impact assessments take gender aspects into account, promoting the collection of sex-disaggregated data, and ensuring outreach of government communication to a broad range of groups in society.