Open and Agile Government: Issues for Discussion

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This document provides guidance for discussions at the Symposium on Open and Agile Government on the first day of the Public Governance Committee (19 November 2012).

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Open and Agile Government: Issues for Discussion

1. In the current context of slow growth and uneven recovery, many countries are facing the need to maintain and improve public sector responsiveness and effectiveness. This is compounded by longer-term challenges that predated the crisis, such as ageing, climate change, natural resource scarcity and emerging risks. At the same time, trust has also been shaken as a result of the crisis. Citizens expect government to be more open and transparent, while also having more of a say in public policy directions and how services are delivered. These expectations are driven by education levels, technological change, and by experiences in private sector services. In a world where information can be diffused instantly across the globe and where the amount of information that is publicly available through the Internet has increased in proportions unknown in human history to date, governments have to be part of the fast-changing society and economy.

2. These pressing challenges are requiring public sectors to increase their openness and agility. The public sector represents a significant share of national economies, and so, in the face of fiscal constraints, competitiveness challenges and social change, it is under pressure to rethink its role and way of functioning, both in terms of its internal ways of working as well as how it works with citizens and businesses and their organisations to generate public value. In many cases, the public sector is ill-equipped to answer these challenges. For public sector organisations, this requires finding the right mix of policy levers – by transforming internal structures and processes, and by reinventing the relations with clients – while delivering on core missions. These short term pressures and the need for reshuffling are not new but they are challenging states in ways not heard before.

3. Agility is required to square the circle, to help the public sector achieve the major transformation that it is facing, and help to achieve objectives. While agility is not an end in itself, it is required precisely to help being strategic and attain policy objectives. Therefore, the analysis has to combine agility and strategic elements, which has been framed in the literature under the concept of "Strategic Agility", and illustrated in some recent OECD Public Governance Reviews. "Strategic Agility" is framed around the concepts of "strategic sensitivity", resource flexibility and collective commitment. These key levers are relational, cognitive and organisational, and may be brought in the context of the concrete tools that are available to foster agility as well as openness in the public sector.

4. Governments are also expected to be more open as they realise that they cannot meet these challenges alone, but must also partner with citizens, businesses and civil society either to gain insight into policy problems and solutions, to better understand the potential impact of government action or inaction, and to use public information in new ways to generate public and private value. Not only can this serve to build trust, but it also allows solutions and services to be developed in new ways that strengthen the relationship between citizens and their governments.

5. Therefore, both issues of Agility and Openness are brought to the fore in the context of this fall 2012 symposium discussion. It may facilitate some reflections on the synergies, but also the trade-offs between agility and openness. The goal is to draw on the existing expertise, and accumulated stock of OECD knowledge. It also helps to forge a forward leaning perspective, and to launch discussions on the "Strategic State", which will follow the symposium. These core issues will inform the Committee's future strategy and its contribution to the OECD New Approaches to Economic Challenges (NAEC).

6. This short issues paper is meant to offer a roadmap to help delegates prepare for the discussions. The substantive issues are presented in the two following reports:

New Developments in Open Government
Analytical report: Achieving public sector agility at times of fiscal consolidation

1. Finland (OECD, 2010), Estonia (OECD, 2011a), France (OECD 2012a), Slovenia (OECD 2012b)
Government on the move: countries’ use of agility and openness as a response to difficult times

7. At a time when dramatic adjustments are required in the hardest hit countries, fostering agility in the public sector is needed more than ever to improve performance and responsiveness. This requires a strategic approach, moving away from strict cost cutting towards realignment of resources with policy objectives, and the building of "smarter governments". Whole-of-government approaches are also needed to counter the “stovepipes” forces and “silos” that prevail in the public sector.

8. The background report on public sector agility (GOV/PGC(2012)10) offers an overview of the potential policy levers that can be mobilised to foster agility. This includes:
   1) **Budgeting procedures and tools**, and notably:
      - Top down spending cuts and revenue enhancement,
      - Spending Reviews
      - Performance budgeting
      - Productivity cuts
   2) **Human Resource management**, and in particular:
      - Workforce planning, including competency management
      - Policies for greater staff mobility in the public service
      - Performance management and compensation
      - Recruitment and hiring strategies
      - Decentralisation of decision making for Human Resource Management through delegation
   3) **Mobilising new technologies**, through:
      - Redesigning architectures and addressing silos
      - Promoting networked governance
      - Fostering personalised and participatory services
      - Crowd sourcing government through Web 2.0
      - Mobilising the power of m-government

9. Details and analytical discussions on the experience in terms of the use of these tools by countries have been collected in the report. Still, fresh and up-to-date experience can be brought by countries to contribute to the debate.

10. The second core aspect is Open Government (OG), as OG initiatives have also emerged as a way for countries to foster transparency and trust, and to mobilise change within the public sector (GOV/PGC(2012)9). Openness to public scrutiny, reinforced transparency, greater responsiveness to citizens’ needs and strengthened accountability are at the core of good governance. At the international level, the new multilateral Open Government Partnership (OGP) initiative, which was launched in 2011, currently includes 57 countries. This initiative promotes commitments in four key areas:
   - Fiscal transparency,
   - Access to Information
   - Disclosure related to elected and senior officials
   - Citizen engagement
11. While open government can bring benefits, in terms of better outcomes or compliance levels, or trust, it will also take commitment and mobilisation. Openness is not a given and entails a number of costs, which will need to be addressed and integrated into policy design and implementation. Governments are discovering, for example, that economic and social value of public sector information can be unlocked through open data, but that specific policies are needed to realise this potential. This process also redistributes information, power and responsibilities, driving significant change within government through collective engagement of public entities with the private sector, academia and civil society.

12. Mobilising Openness and Agility in the public sector is an important step in rebuilding trust between the government and citizens and in maintaining pressure to improve public sector efficiency and effectiveness. This session will offer an opportunity to discuss country experiences in using agility and openness in the context of public sector reform, as well as discuss the possible trade-offs and synergies between the two. The discussion will highlight how these can be mobilised to plan broad public governance reforms, and help ensure that these are implemented and deliver results.

Questions for discussion

- How can governments mobilise internal and external policy levers to foster agility in the public sector?
- How can greater agility help to adjust and focus the public sector, to improve productivity and better respond to clients’ needs?
- How can governments make priority changes and provide emergency responses in ways that are easy to understand by the general public?
- What are the key benefits can be expected from Open Government policies, and how can policy makers make sure that they materialise? What are the synergies and trade offs with other policy levers fostering agility?
- What are the options for building smarter governments and for rethinking stovepipes and silos in ways that facilitate strategic realignment of resources?
- How can governments ensure that openness does not become a deterrent for making and implementing hard policy choices?
Breakout session 1: How can public sector agility be strengthened by improving co-ordination and coherence between resources and political priorities?

13. This first breakout session will discuss possible options for strengthening public sector agility, rethinking the public sector tool box. Governments can rely upon various policy levers to foster agility in the public sector, including budgeting and fiscal tools, human resource management strategies, and ICT initiatives. However, these tools are at times used in disconnected ways given current management practices and structures, and are not always aligned with the government strategy as a whole. They can also be used at Ministry, Agency but also local government level. The challenge is to rethink the policy setting process, to maximise synergies and impacts, allowing budget constraints, HR needs and ICT potential to inform strategic priorities, and then aligning policy tools to achieve priority objectives.

14. Co-ordination and coherence have to be supported by broad strategies for engagement of both the public and public sector workers, who are particularly affected by fiscal consolidation and public sector reforms. Internal and external horizontal co-ordination mechanisms inform, and build support for, reform strategies. The session will consider various attempts to find solutions to these challenges, drawing on countries' practical experience.

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<th>Questions for discussion</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What are countries’ experiences in co-ordinating public sector policy levers to achieve strategic change in the public sector and to deliver on national priorities? What has been tried and what have been the results?</strong></td>
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<td><strong>How can public sector management tools be better aligned to maximise synergies and to achieve outcomes in priority areas?</strong></td>
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<td><strong>What are the options for engagement, both externally and internally, to improve agility and set the public sector on the move in terms of openness to reform?</strong></td>
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Breakout session 2: How can Open Government be assessed in terms of its impact on effective institutions and policies, and finding proactive and pragmatic solutions?

15. Open government has a key role to play in helping regain confidence and trust. To achieve results, it needs to be supported by institutions, policies and pragmatic pathways towards implementation. The various dimensions of open government should also be taken into account, including access to information and open data, public engagement, integrity, and fiscal transparency. Given the prominence of open government strategies in countries' political priorities, it is necessary to take stock of current policy initiatives and their impact.

16. This breakout session will consider possible approaches for assessing the impact of open government, in order to help countries map and adjust their own efforts. The Public Governance Committee has been active in many of the areas covered by open government initiatives, including its work on integrity – also at G20 level – its analysis of ICT tools and open data strategies, and the collection of comparative evidence in the context of Government at a Glance and of the Budgeting Database. The report GOV/PGC(2012)9 offers an overview of the current existing OECD work related to Open Government.

17. The session will discuss how best to mobilise these results to support open government strategies, offering a conceptual framework of analysis which can be used for assessing implementation strategies. The issue is to assess what governments need to consider when introducing open government policies, in terms of their consultation processes, access to data, as well as the new balance of the roles between citizens and government.

18. Countries will be invited to share their experiences in assessing and reviewing progress, also in the context of the co-operation with the Open Government Partnership (OGP). The discussions will help to explore the rational and potential contributions that the Public Governance Committee could offer to countries, in the OECD and beyond.

Questions for discussion

- How can countries assess the impact of Open Government strategies?
- How can we measure the value of open data in terms of its impact on greater openness, reduced costs for citizens and business and broader efforts to create public value?
- What are the options for mapping progress and assisting in the implementation of the Open Government Partnership?
- How can countries provide proactive policy responses in a context of Open Government, rather than answer in reactive and defensive modes?
- How can comparative evidence and sharing of best practice be mobilised to support national Open Government initiatives?