

Unclassified

PUMA/CIT(99)6



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

OLIS : 26-Nov-1999
Dist. : 29-Nov-1999

PARIS

PUBLIC MANAGEMENT SERVICE
PUBLIC MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Or. Eng.

PUMA/CIT(99)6
Unclassified

FIRST RESULTS OF WORK ON "STRENGTHENING GOVERNMENT-CITIZEN CONNECTIONS"

**3rd Session of the Working Group on Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections
29-30 November 1999**

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Introduction

1. This paper summarises and synthesises preliminary findings of work to date on the PUMA activity on “Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections.” The activity focuses on OECD country efforts to improve the accessibility and quality of government information, public consultation and active citizen participation in policy development. Preliminary findings are based upon the results of a written survey sent to all Member countries, five country case studies, discussion at the OECD/PUMA meeting of high-level officials from centres of government held 11-12 October, 1999, and related research. This paper also seeks the input of the working group on “Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections” on these preliminary findings and on proposals for further development of the work.

2. The primary focus of initial analysis has been on country responses to the OECD questionnaire [PUMA/CIT(99)2/REV2]. Supplementary information was also obtained through country case studies, providing for an initial information base including 22 Member countries plus the EU.¹ This does not provide an entirely comprehensive view, given variation in availability of information. It nevertheless provides a rich source of data and insight regarding how Member country governments view the problem, and how they are addressing it.

3. The remainder of this paper highlights: 1) Key overall problems and issues in strengthening government-citizen connections; 2) Laws and policies to promote government openness; 3) Laws and policies to promote consultation and active citizen participation; 4) The role and impact of information technologies on government-citizen relations; 5) Other initiatives and tools to promote effective implementation of information, consultation and participation policies; 6) A sampling of promising practices; 7) Government efforts to evaluate their progress; and 8) Issues for further consideration and follow-up.

Key problems and issues

4. OECD Member countries clearly view the issue of government-citizen relations with growing concern. Several countries (*Belgium, Canada, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland*) cited unacceptably low or declining confidence in public institutions as a motivation for recent initiatives to strengthen government-citizen relations. A related trend cited by many of these countries was declining participation in political parties. Many others cited pressures created by increased citizen demands for information and expectations that government provide more responsive and better quality service.

¹ Australia (pilot response), Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary (case study), Iceland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico (partial response), Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States (case study) and the European Union. No information has been received so far from Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey.

5. Voter participation rates in Parliamentary and Presidential elections provide perhaps the most clear-cut and comprehensive evidence of a “democratic deficit” -- a growing gap between citizens and their governments. The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) has collected data on voter turnout in virtually all national democratic elections in the world since 1945.² IDEA found that on a global level through the late 1980s, the average voter participation rate as a percentage of total voting age population increased from 61% to 68%. However, the post-1990 average voter participation rate worldwide has dropped back to 64%. OECD Member countries also experienced a decline in voter participation over the most recent 10 years for which data was obtained (1987-96). Twenty-one of 29 OECD countries showed clear downward trends during this period in voter participation rates as a percentage of the voting age population in Parliamentary and Presidential elections. Only *Mexico, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain* and *Sweden* have experienced upward movement in the voter participation rate during this period, while a few countries (*France, Iceland and Poland*) experienced mixed results. Several countries within the OECD have compulsory voting systems, enforced to varying degrees -- *Australia, Belgium, Greece, Italy* and *Luxembourg*. These countries too have experienced a decline in participation. Many responses to the OECD questionnaire pointed to similar declining turnout trends in local government elections.

6. *Norway* offered a number of possible explanations for this decline in citizen participation:

Perhaps the development of the welfare state has made people ‘lazier’, because in spite of everything life is pretty good?

Perhaps the increase in internationalisation and international financial markets is impairing people’s belief in the significance of the nation-state?

Perhaps people are now relying more on the market as a control mechanism and consider participation in political forums less important?

Perhaps the decline in participation is due to loss of confidence in politicians?

Perhaps the participation has taken new forms such as interest groups related to certain issues?

Whatever the reason, participation is the traditional basis for the political system in Norway and the importance of developing and vitalising participatory democracy is stressed . . . The vitalisation of its democratic systems is now one of the next natural challenges it has to face. The political management systems must emphasise the citizen in the same way as the market emphasises the user, and most OECD member countries - including Norway - can therefore now be seen to be exploring new avenues in this area.

7. These factors point to a growing perception in OECD Member countries that representative democracy is not working as well as it has in the past. Declining citizen participation in elections and declining confidence in public institutions are part of it, but governments face equally daunting challenges in effectively managing the policy-making process, due to its increased complexity. The growth of information technologies and the Internet has made information more readily available and more rapidly circulated than ever before, increasing the power of interest groups to organise campaigns and recruit supporters for their points of view. The number and range of interest groups have multiplied almost as rapidly as the Internet. Old models of consultation that involved interaction with well-established groups representing a range of societal interests, such as the social partner model involving negotiations between business, labour and the government as intermediary, no longer appear to be adequate to represent the more complex range of interests within society. Government has had to become more open and move beyond consulting with traditional partners only.

8. Thus, governments are looking to new or improved models and approaches for better informing and involving citizens in the policy-making process. Such participatory democracy is not intended to replace representative democracy, but rather to supplement it and compensate for its perceived failure to

² This information is available on the IDEA web site at <http://www.idea.int/turnout/index.html>.

fully address citizens' democratic interests. At stake are the legitimacy of public policies and the capacities of governments to implement them effectively, with the support of an informed public.

9. At the same time, there are many barriers to greater transparency and more effective public consultation. Some country representatives acknowledge privately that *too much* democracy can have a negative effect on public policy. More information and public involvement can pose a threat to political leaders' control of the policy agenda, potentially providing ammunition for rival political groups and making it easier for opposition groups to slow down or kill proposals. Public consultation is also sometimes used to defer difficult decisions and deflect controversy to a later date, a tactic which can undermine citizen trust in the value of participating in such processes.

10. Public consultation advocates argue that opposition will have to be faced at one stage or another, and that good consultation processes will allow opposition groups' views to be balanced against other public interests. The objective should not necessarily be to have longer and more extensive consultation, but to ensure that the quality of citizen involvement is high, and that these processes are not dominated by vested interests. Rather, governments should aim to establish mechanisms for ensuring that input reflects - or at the very least that decisions take into account -- the full range of public interests, not just those with the most to gain or lose. Many countries (e.g. *Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Hungary, New Zealand* and *Norway*) also cited inclusion of the interests of ethnic and linguistic minorities (combating marginalisation) as a particular concern and challenge that often required special measures or mechanisms to ensure that their interests were not overlooked by a dominant (and democratic) majority.

11. Countries are adapting a variety of overall strategies for coping with the so-called democratic deficit. Devolution of government programmes and decision-making responsibilities to sub-national levels of government and decentralisation of national programmes to regional programme offices both serve as important strategies for bringing government closer to the people. Country case studies on the *Danish* health care sector, *Hungarian* public works programmes and *French* public housing programmes all found examples of more active and personal contact between governments and citizens at the local level. At the national level, countries such as *Canada, Greece* and *Norway* cited the dispersion of their populations across great physical distances as potentially important barriers to participation in policy-making processes. In addition to devolution/decentralisation trends, increased use of information technologies is seen as an important means for overcoming such physical barriers to citizen involvement. These and other tools for determining citizen interests, such as opinion poll research and more deliberative consultation techniques, are discussed further below in the sections on other initiatives and promising practices.

12. 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 in some of these countries. Differences in cultures, size, legal and political systems also play a role in differing approaches and priorities. Likewise, different sectors appear to approach consultation in different ways: questionnaire responses frequently cited examples of extensive information and consultation initiatives in such areas as health, education, land use planning and the environment. Consultation on issues such as trade, foreign policy and budget formulation often took more restricted forms, focusing on expert input and NGOs as representative stakeholders, rather than approaching the citizen at large.

13. 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.

Laws and policies to promote government openness

14. While most OECD Member countries adopted Freedom of Information legislation guaranteeing citizen access to information by the 1980s, there has been substantial legislative activity on these issues in the 1990s as well, suggesting continuing pressure for more open government.

15. All but two surveyed governments now have freedom of information laws in place guaranteeing citizen access to information.³ The two exceptions -- the *UK* and *Switzerland* -- nevertheless had codes or policies in place for providing access to information, and the *UK* is currently considering Freedom of Information legislation, while *Switzerland* is elaborating a bill on government transparency.

16. Countries most recently acting to adopt Freedom of Information legislation include the *Czech Republic*, *Finland* and *Japan* earlier this year, and *Ireland* in 1997. *Greece* also recently updated its laws on access to administrative documents, *Finland* is preparing legislation on access to electronic records, and the *US* adopted an "Electronic Freedom of Information Act" to take into account access issues involving electronic records. It appears, however, that most countries have yet to update laws to take into account differences between electronic and paper records. Nevertheless, many have adopted policies to make government information available on the Web. For example, *Denmark* has a policy to make available all pamphlets, reports and publications issued by state institutions on the Internet.

17. A separate requirement in a few countries, such as *Canada*, *Belgium*, *Finland*, *Norway* and *Switzerland*, calls for government information to be provided in multiple languages.

18. Most countries have also adopted sector-specific legislation granting citizens rights to information, most frequently regarding environmental data, health data, and consumer protection. European Union countries as well as many others signed a United Nations/European Union accord in Aarhus, Denmark in 1998 providing citizens with rights to environmental information and public participation in relation to plans, programmes and preparation of policies relating to the environment. EU institutions are also bound by the so-called Aarhus Convention. Health legislation frequently secures patient rights regarding access to information, as well as privacy protection.

19. An important aspect of all countries' legal framework for providing access to information is the restrictions or exceptions where information is *not* provided to the public. Most countries legally guarantee the privacy of certain personal data, either through separate legislation or through sections within overall government access legislation. In addition to restrictions to protect personal data, numerous other exceptions are also common -- e.g., keeping government documents private for reasons of national security or other national interests, to protect trade, industrial or commercial secrets, internal working documents, and others.

20. Some countries noted that laws providing access to information are not sufficient in themselves to ensure government transparency and citizen access. Some, such as *Canada*, have adopted policies promoting good communication and effective management of information as well. Many governments such as the *Czech Republic* and *France* have developed official journals or newsletters to promote citizen awareness and understanding of developments within government. Government pamphlets and information campaigns are also common on specific issues where increased public awareness is needed.

³ Mexico is not included in this assessment because its survey response did not address this issue.

Laws and policies to promote public consultation and active citizen participation

21. The OECD's research on laws and policies to promote public consultation and active citizen participation in the development of public policy has been directed principally towards actions of the executive branch of Member country governments, given that questionnaire responses were developed by the executive branch. The findings show clearly that the measures taken by the Executive -- including those taken based on the direction or agreement of legislatures -- are not intended to reduce or replace the traditional role of Parliaments. Rather, they aim to supplement the representative democratic processes and institutions already in place. Moreover, complementary information collected regarding the attitude of legislatures toward their relations with citizens show that many of them (for example, *Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the UK and US*) have also taken actions to improve these relations, notably in seizing the opportunities offered to representatives to intensify their connections with their electors through information technologies. The problems that governments seek to address in improving government-citizen connections identified in the first part of this document, notably including a decline in citizen confidence and the quest for stronger citizen support for decisions, are equally concerns of legislatures. Citizens do not necessarily make a clear distinction, for example, regarding issues of trust between the legislative and executive branches.

22. The national or local referendum is a frequently accepted technique permitting the direct consultation of the citizen in coexistence with a representative democracy, and has already been in long-standing use in certain countries such as *Finland* and *France*. It is complemented in certain countries (*Switzerland* for example) by other possibilities for the citizen to participate directly in public policy decisions, including the right to petition and place initiatives up for election. In many countries, national referenda are used only exceptionally (outside of *Switzerland*, where it is an ongoing tool of participation; but for example *Finland* has had only two national referenda in its last 68 years). Thus it is reserved for particularly significant changes in the direction of a country's political life, such as decisions to join the European Union and a single European currency. Two countries recently adopted the possibility to conduct national referenda: *New Zealand* in 1993 and *Poland* in 1995. In certain countries (e.g. *New Zealand*), referenda results are not legally binding for decision-makers. It is evident, however, that in many cases the results of such a consultation become, in fact, a kind of moral obligation for the decision-maker. The *Netherlands*, where local referenda are already possible, is considering legislation to allow national referenda, but has been involved in heavy debate regarding whether such referenda, if binding, would be compatible with representative democracy. Agreement reached but not yet adopted would make the referenda consultative, and consider more binding referenda at a later stage. Debates such as these appear to demonstrate a will to distinguish between public consultation as an input to a decision and the actual taking of the decision by those democratically elected to do so.

23. The majority of laws and policies adopted by Member countries in support of consultation and citizen participation have occurred relatively recently, within the past 15 years, including many in the 1990s. Every country has taken actions to strengthen this area, including those with ancient traditions of public consultation (for example this is the case in *Denmark, Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway* and *Switzerland*). It would be premature to draw general conclusions on these policies, but it can be noted that the recent densification of the legal framework regarding relations between administrations and citizens reflects a clear awareness of the need for actions in this area, across the OECD.

24. As noted in paragraph 12, countries' stage of development, cultures, size, political systems and traditions of relations with the public all play a role in determining country motivations and priorities for improving relations with citizens. These differences in objectives and contexts can create great disparity in the actions undertaken. Certain countries, such as *Iceland*, have no overarching set of regulations for promoting consultation and citizen participation, and enact legislation to promote participation on a case by case basis, drawing upon a strong participative tradition. Many countries provide a general legal

framework that constitutes the sole framework applicable to the administration as a whole. For certain countries, these overall orientations may be set out through the state constitution (*Poland*), while others establish orientations more precisely through legislation and more general recommendations (*Canada*), or choose to specify particular cases like *Finland* for consultation requirements at the local government level.

25. On the other hand, countries appear to have much in common across the OECD regarding particular policy sectors where such policies are applied. Virtually all country responses cited legislation favouring relations with citizens on environmental policies, whether for its protection or in relation to decisions on territorial management and land use planning. Many countries mentioned participation policies regarding decisions at the *local level*, including municipal decisions and, where applicable, regarding local ethnic or linguistic minority populations. Generally countries also volunteered information regarding social sectors such as education and housing. These subjects directly relate to the daily lives of citizens where their geographic or physical environment are directly concerned, and appear to involve greater efforts to consult and more actively involve citizens. At this stage of research, it is not clear whether these are domains where governments more easily solicit citizen involvement, or whether citizens are exerting more pressure and clearer demands to be involved.

26. Among the difficulties cited in the promotion of consultation and active citizen participation are, in some cases, the lack of interest and action by citizens themselves. This may appear paradoxical, given that countries' actions taken to strengthen government-citizen connections are reportedly in response to citizen demands. While the individual may at times be difficult to mobilise, a characteristic that poses a major challenge for many countries, associations and organisations that represent the citizen are often very active, and lead certain countries to emphasise the growing complexity of policy-making processes that involve their extensive consultation and participation. An equally important question relates to the representativeness of these groups in their dialogue with the administration. It is certain that citizens' educational and socio-economic levels, the existence or absence of participative traditions in public life, and the evolution of attitudes toward government are determining factors, to varying degrees, in their involvement. One of the conditions influencing the quality of dialogue and citizen involvement is the degree to which the citizen is convinced that his or her opinion will be truly taken into account in the decision, and that the consultation undertaken is not done so merely for the sake of form. Thus, for decision-makers, meaningful consultation has direct costs in terms of time, financial resources, and the involvement of personnel that must also be taken into account.

The role and impact of information technologies

27. The rapid growth of information technology across the economy and the emergence of an "Information Society" has had a major impact on government and government-citizen relations. Virtually every government surveyed has adopted or updated a national strategy or action plan for promoting the use of IT. These address a range of objectives, from increasing economic competitiveness and building up IT infrastructure to expanding citizen access and modernising government. Within government, focus is usually on improving access to information and the efficiency and quality of service delivery, while generally democratic improvements are mentioned secondarily.

28. Every country surveyed cited a growing use of the Internet, e-mail, and government Web pages that have allowed them to disseminate information more rapidly, and at lower cost. Even countries in which citizen access to IT remains quite low note its impact on government transparency and democratic debate, due to the greater accessibility of data on legislation, regulation and other government communications that can be used by the press and other influential participants in the policy process. For example, *Austria, Finland, France, Iceland, Netherlands, Switzerland* and the *EU* all cited the availability of legislative databases on-line. *Japan* has created an on-line "global environmental information centre"

that brings together the work and perspectives of NGOs, business and government, while the *US* provides access to information on environmental pollution levels available by postal code. A *US* government official indicated that the “glass is 90 per cent full” in terms of electronic access to government information, and that the focus of government priorities is shifting toward electronic provision of services.

29. Indeed, many countries have moved from the first generation of government Web sites, when largely static information was provided on a decentralised basis with uneven levels of quality, towards more co-ordinated provision of information and services. For example, *Austria* and *Denmark* have organised sites around key life events such as birth, marriage, changing an address, buying a house or retirement, that provide a range of information and services for citizens. *Australia* and the *Netherlands* have made a particular effort to integrate Web sites across levels of government. *Belgium* has created an electronic “Postal Box 3000” that allows citizens to have any questions of government routed to the appropriate authorities for a response. Currently functioning on the federal level only, it will soon be expanded to integrate local government into the system as well. The *UK*’s “Modernising Government” white paper makes IT a central pillar within its efforts to create a “joined up” government that treats citizens as “whole customers,” with a range of needs that can be met through a single entry point.

30. Numerous other initiatives could be mentioned regarding attempts to use IT to improve the quality, efficiency and responsiveness of services, but the focus of this paper is on its role and impact on the development of policy. Along these lines, some movement can be seen toward greater use of the Internet for public consultation as well. Slightly over half of responding countries mentioned the use of on-line discussion groups or electronic feedback from citizens on policy proposals. This evolution in thinking can also be seen at the European level, where the EU’s Fifth Framework for research and promotion of IT use, initiated in 1999, gives “user-friendliness” and “on-line support for democratic processes” growing priority. The EU’s reliance on the Web to disseminate information (often in 11 different languages) and, in some cases, for policy consultation with citizens, is particularly important due to the greater difficulty of having direct contact in such a large and diverse region. However, both in the EU and in OECD Member countries, the main focus for IT use in relation to citizens continues to be on providing information, rather than interacting in policy development.

31. One reason that IT is not being used more for public consultation is due to concerns about uneven access. Certain demographic groups, such as the poor and the elderly, tend to have lower access or IT literacy. Those with higher education and income levels make greatest use of the Internet. Thus, the Internet may be useful for certain political activities, such as fund-raising and campaign organising, where elite (and student) populations may be most active anyway. It appears to be particularly useful in policy sectors where access among interested populations is already high, such as education, or where the debate revolves around technical issues which require deliberation among experts (for example, regulation within the energy or telecommunications industries). In general, however, the Internet and on-line discussions appear to be more useful as a supplementary tool to other means of public consultation that lend themselves better to obtaining representative viewpoints.

32. Given these concerns, many governments are working proactively to ensure greater access for under-represented groups so that government use of IT can have more broad-based benefits. Many countries have initiatives to equip schools and public libraries with computers and Internet access. For example, *Canada*, whose national “Connecting Canadians” initiative aims to make it “the most connected nation in the world,” has launched several programmes. Among these are the SchoolNet initiative, which aims to promote effective use of IT in schools, and to extend connectivity from schools to classrooms by 2001; the “Computers for Schools” programme, which has delivered more than 125 000 refurbished computers to schools and libraries across *Canada*; and the VolNet initiative to improve the voluntary sector’s access to IT and to related skills and tools. *Australia* has developed “rural transaction centres” in addition to library access in order to increase Internet access to local communities. The *US* provides 20 to

90 per cent discounts on the cost of Internet connections and access for schools and libraries in lower income areas.

33. Several countries, such as *Finland*, *the Netherlands* and *Norway* have launched specific initiatives targeted at training and bringing the elderly on-line. *Netherlands'* "Cyberbus," emblazoned with the government's Web site address on its side, tours the country, providing training on the use of IT for target groups such as homes for the elderly, health, community and shopping centres to encourage IT use in interactions with government. The *UK* has invested in market research that has identified certain groups -- roughly 40% of the population -- who remain unconvinced of the benefits of IT. The *UK's* "IT for All" programme, a partnership between the public, private and voluntary sectors, has created 3 000 access centres throughout the country where people can obtain free hands-on experience on how to use IT and what it can offer. While the cost of computers is declining, the cost of telephone access remains a barrier cited by a number of countries in improving access to the Internet and electronic government.

34. *Iceland* provides an interesting example for other countries, with its claim to have the highest Internet access rate of any OECD country at 80 percent (through home and work), while other high-access countries such as those in Scandinavia and the US report levels below 50 percent. *Iceland's* government has focused like others on information provision first, is moving rapidly now to increase on-line services in such areas as tax filing and distance learning, and is increasing the use of teleconferencing for public consultation.

35. Follow-up work to be done in connection with PUMA's pending survey on "Government Use of IT in Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections" will provide a more comprehensive and comparable look at countries' progress in this area.

Other initiatives and tools for implementation of information, consultation and participation policies

36. Approaches to ensuring effective implementation of governments' laws and policies to promote government openness, public consultation and active citizen participation vary considerably across different countries. Nevertheless, some common features can be found in most Member countries. Most questionnaire responses cited the use of ombudsmen -- sometimes also taking the form of commissioners -- appointed to represent citizen rights and to ensure implementation of various laws and policies dealing with government-citizen relations. For example, *Greece's* recent legislation calls the ombudsman "The Citizen's Defender;" *Hungary's* Commissioner of Data Protection and Freedom of Information investigates possible violations of freedom of information and data protection legislation, making recommendations to the government in support of citizen access to government records. Often, separate ombudsmen or commissioners represent different citizens' interests: e.g., ombudsmen for consumers, data protection, privacy, Parliament, and other more general ombudsmen offices that defend citizen interests across the government. These offices respond to citizen complaints, produce reports and recommendations, and help to educate the public as well as government officials regarding citizens' rights.

37. As noted in the previous section, nearly all responses cited an increased use of the Internet and Web sites for disseminating information, as well as for consulting with the public and responding to citizen complaints and questions. Generally the Internet functions as one tool of many; citizens can also obtain information, lodge complaints or pose questions by mail, telephone, fax, or in person. The creation of commissions or task forces with participants representing a range of stakeholder interests and expertise are also a common institutional structure for obtaining balanced policy input.

38. Polling research is also growing in popularity as a tool for broadening consideration beyond stakeholder groups and seeking to identify the broader public interest. A growing number of countries are

relying upon this technique to determine citizens' views on government and public services (e.g. *Austria, Canada, Denmark, the EU, France, Italy, Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, UK* and *USA* cited use of such surveys). *Italy* and the *UK* have both established standing panels of a representative cross-section of several thousand citizens whom they consult periodically regarding their views (on the impact of communication campaigns in *Italy* and on public sector programmes and reforms in the *UK*). 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.

39. Countries that use such surveys indicate that they do not provide a sufficient basis for obtaining and taking into account citizen views. Outcomes are subject to manipulation -- opinions change depending on how a question is asked, and depending on the related information that citizens are given. One government official suggested that it is sometimes necessary for the government to fund polling research to counter or supplement information from media surveys that may provide misleading indications of public views. However, governments generally indicate that more detailed and deliberative consultation is also necessary to educate the public, and build support and "buy-in" for policies so that they may be implemented effectively. A key challenge in such initiatives is the need to obtain input not only from the stakeholders most interested in the outcomes (e.g. NGOs, experts, programme users and employees), but also the general citizen who may not have an immediate personal interest in the policy. Thus, many countries are seeking to develop innovative ways to promote more deliberative, representative and ongoing consultation with citizens (see Promising Practices below).

40. The Canadian and Danish findings -- that those who use services and who are most involved are most likely to have positive attitudes -- point to a dilemma for national governments. On the one hand, the widespread trend towards devolution of services to local government levels has provided greater opportunities for local democratic input and in many cases strengthened government-citizen relations. On the other hand, as national governments find themselves delivering fewer and fewer government services and with reduced overall responsibilities, they have diminished opportunity for direct contact and relevance to the citizen, particularly in the realm of programme service delivery. This lack of direct service contact also presents a challenge for building public confidence in *European Union* institutions.

A sampling of promising practices

41. Questionnaire responses highlighted numerous innovations and promising practices. Every country described such practices; those mentioned below do not represent an attempt to select the "best," but rather to provide examples of the range and variety of practices cited. Many others are noted throughout this paper. Those below can be divided into practices focusing on greater openness and transparency of information, better understanding and responding to service users, and efforts to consult and engage citizens or sub-groups of citizens in policy development.

More open government

- The Seoul Metropolitan Government in **Korea** has established an on-line system for accepting citizens' petitions. The total process from petition submitting to decision is open to the public in 27 different areas of metropolitan administration. The system has been recognised internationally as a model for

preventing possible corruption of public officials in the decision process. The mayor of Seoul also hosts open meetings with the public every Saturday to discuss citizen and NGO concerns.

- **Mexico** promotes greater transparency in public transactions through its “Compranet” electronic public procurement system, used by the entire federal administration and all 32 Mexican states for acquisition of goods, contracting of services and public works. [<http://compranet.gob.mx>]
- **The UK** has established a “good practice database” of a wide range of government practices that can be searched across different criteria such as “openness and the provision of information,” and “consulting and involving users and staff.” [<http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/database/database.htm>]

User-focused practices

- **Australia** conducts “value creation workshops” involving staff and users of Centrelink -- an integrated programme of employment assistance and income support services -- designed to draw out information regarding the things they need and expect from the programme. Staff use this feedback, along with independent research, electronic feedback and information obtained from a free telephone hotline, to better understand user needs and concerns as ongoing input into service improvements and the overall service charter.
- **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.
- **Italy’s** Department of Public Administration has started a new initiative to promote innovation and best practices in the area of government relations with the public at central, regional and local levels in all sectors, involving more than 1 400 government units. The programme provides information on conducting surveys, communication campaigns, setting up complaint and redress procedures, etc.

Engaging citizens in policy development

- The Centre for Public Dialogue, a non-profit organisation in **Canada**, has developed a deliberative policy consultation process involving 3-hour issue discussions with groups of 10 citizens at a time. These small gatherings with a neutral facilitator are repeated for the same issue across the country, and results amalgamated to develop an understanding of the range of views held by a representative cross-section of Canadians. Eighteen Canadian governmental departments and agencies are collaborating with the organisation on development of a manual on different consultation tools that could allow more widespread adaptation of this technique across the government.
- **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.
- **France** has established a “National Commission of Public Debate,” which organises discussions and debates around specific environmental issues. The 18-member commission, appointed by the Prime Minister, manages debate through general public meetings, round table discussions around particular themes, response cards, input from a Web site, and a newsletter sent out periodically to summarise the debate and public reactions. So far debate has offered input to decisions on three environmental issues,

but the government is considering expanding its use to other policy areas and undertaking 50 - 100 debates per year.

- **Netherlands** uses a wide range of tools for obtaining policy input -- door-to-door inquiries, marketing-like investigations of citizen views, "panel" discussions, electronic input, and "broad societal discussions" that take place at public meetings all over the country, organised by groups of more or less independent experts.
- **New Zealand** consults with Maori populations by going directly into their communities. This ensures greater participation, an atmosphere conducive to greater dialogue and increased sensitivity to Maori concerns.
- Noting the challenge of engaging youth in policy-making, **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.

42. Common traits that emerge from reviewing such practices are that different approaches are needed for different groups. No single practice will accomplish the objective, but rather a layering of different tools and approaches is needed in order to obtain balanced input into decision-making processes.

Government efforts to evaluate their progress

43. How governments evaluate their efforts to strengthen government-citizen connections was one of the more challenging questions to respond to in the OECD questionnaire. Many countries noted that there was no systematic evaluation undertaken, but that individual policies and initiatives were evaluated on a case-by-case basis. One country response, citing evaluation as a weakness, suggested that more should be done to evaluate country policies and practices to strengthen government-citizen connections, given the increased amount of time and resources being devoted to this area.

44. Public opinion polls, cited in the section on implementation, play an important role in judging how citizens are reacting to different initiatives. The *UK's* "People's Panel" and the *EU's* "Eurobarometer" surveys, for example, provide a way to evaluate changing citizen attitudes toward government policies and services. Tracking of access to Internet sites and electronic comments provided by citizens provides an additional gauge of citizen reactions.

45. More in-depth evaluations may be undertaken by Parliamentary Committees (e.g. in *Finland, the UK*), by ombudsmen (e.g. *Hungary, Norway*), or through special evaluation projects, cited by *Canada, Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands*. A major example of this is *Denmark's* 5-year "Power and Democracy Project." A group of researchers has been commissioned by the Danish Parliament "to illuminate the function of democracy in broad terms, including the influence of organisations, movements, and economic power structures in society, as well as the consequences of internationalisation as far as transparency of decisions, influence and power in society." *Finland* also has an ongoing tradition of evaluating its public management reforms, and is currently conducting an evaluation of its Participation Project.

Issues for further consideration and follow-up

46. 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.

47. 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 that require rapid action, 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 technology** 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?

48. Analysis of the above issues and questions could be developed further through additional country case studies and follow-up questioning of country contacts. A related question is whether there is sufficient common ground to develop a common set of principles, recommendations, or lessons learned regarding effective approaches to public consultation and active citizen participation. *Canada's* questionnaire response provided a list of such "lessons learned" (See Annex A), which could provide a useful first look at whether a general set of principles such as these may have universal value and application. Would such a set of lessons be adaptable, relevant and useful for all countries, or are they too general or culture-specific to be of great use as a PUMA-agreed recommendation?

49. It is proposed that based on discussion and conclusions to be reached at the working group meeting of 29-30 November, the Secretariat would continue to develop the work on "Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections" in the coming year. Depending upon the views of the working group, this could involve:

- Publishing case studies and country questionnaire responses to date on the PUMA Web site, subject to the agreement of the countries involved (Should a paper publication also be produced, bringing together the preliminary synthesis and initial five case studies?);
- Undertaking additional case studies to the extent that Member countries are interested in participating and identifying policy sectors to be studied;
- Deepening analysis of the first questionnaire results subject to the working group's identification of where additional analysis would be of greatest use and interest;
- Reviewing and analysing the results of the second questionnaire on government use of information technologies to strengthen government-citizen connections, and developing proposals for follow-up work in such areas as the use of IT in policy consultation, comparing government Web sites, and the use of IT in selected policy sectors;
- Developing a proposed set of conclusions or recommendations for review by the working group at a meeting in the spring of 2000. Preliminary results would also be reviewed and discussed by the PUMA Committee at its next meeting in April, 2000.
- Consolidating overall results into a for-sale publication to be issued in the second half of 2000, and a free "policy brief" to highlight key conclusions or recommendations.

50. Additional questions to resolve include whether the OECD should organise or collaborate on some sort of best practices symposium to promote the findings of this activity; and what directions work should take in the longer term. Possible, related future activities in which the PUMA Committee expressed strong interest at its October discussion of the next PUMA Mandate (2000-2004) included such issues as government-citizen connections and trust; improving government effectiveness by going on-line; measures to increase policy coherence; and risk management/risk-related decision-making. All four of these areas could strongly involve issues of government information provision and public involvement. Working group comments on these questions are encouraged.

ANNEX A

Lessons Learned from Canadian Experience in Federal Consultation/Citizen Engagement⁴

The Government of Canada is involved in hundreds of consultations - formal and informal - at any given point in time. Based on the government's experiences to date with traditional public consultation approaches and its preliminary exploration of citizen engagement techniques, a number of lessons can be drawn, some of which are outlined below:

Commitment is Key

Commitment at all levels of the organisation - both to the process and to considering the outcomes - is critical to the credibility of a consultation process. A public consultation process should never be initiated unless there is potential to influence a decision. Internally, the degree of senior management commitment to consultation can also influence departmental attitudes and the allocation of resources to this function.

Manage Expectations

Establishing clear objectives and parameters of a consultation early in the process (in collaboration with participants) helps to bring all players to a common level of understanding and expectation as to the nature of the process and outcomes.

Fit the Process to the Circumstances

A consultation/engagement process should be tailored to the issue, circumstances and participants - e.g. an Internet-based consultation may be an effective approach for engaging youth, but perhaps less appropriate for senior citizens or new immigrants. Similarly, a large-scaled public involvement process may be inappropriate for a minor regulatory modification of relevance to a select number of stakeholders. More importantly, a *range* of approaches may be required to reach a broad cross-section of participants at various stages of a process.

Representative Involvement - Early in the Process

Involving participants who represent a range of perspectives and interests in an issue - *before* key decisions are taken - is critical to the long-term credibility of the process.

Invest adequate time and resources

Meaningful (sincere) consultation takes time and resources - both financial and human. It takes time for stakeholder organisations to consult their members and for the public to become aware of and informed of an issue. In this context, consultation should be viewed not so much as an expense, but more as an *investment* in more informed, accepted and sustainable decisions.

Transparency builds trust

⁴ Excerpted from the Canadian response to the OECD written survey on "Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections".

Openness in terms of both the process and the information provided, is critical to establishing trust with participants in a consultation/engagement process. If certain types of information cannot be shared (e.g. Cabinet confidences), identify these up front.

Keep communications simple, neutral and direct

Communication is critical throughout a public involvement process - from the initial stages of informed participation to the final stages of feedback and announcing a decision. Citizens are capable of contributing in a substantive way to complex issues if they are provided with factual and clear information. The focus should be less on ‘selling’ the message than on supporting informed dialogue and on clearly linking the input to the final decisions.

Horizontal Coordination

With the increased volume of consultations being undertaken by the government, the level of “consultation fatigue” among stakeholder organisations and the public is a growing issue. Collaboration on cross-cutting issues within the federal government, as well as with other levels of government, lends coherence to an issue as well as reduces the strain on participants.

External, Expert Facilitation

Experience throughout the government demonstrates the value of having a neutral, experienced moderator to facilitate meetings. An expert facilitator can not only keep issues and participants on track during meetings, but liaise with participants and forge consensus on issues between sessions.

Accountability

Participant feedback is critical to “closing the loop” on a process and reflecting to participants, how their views were considered in a decision. This can take many forms, for example, a consultation report, a record of participant comments on a project web site, or a press release accompanying a government announcement of a new policy initiative. Linking the “inputs” to the “outputs” of a consultation/engagement process is critical to the legitimacy of the process and to building the foundation for future interaction.

Striking a Balance

There is a delicate balance between a government’s capacity to listen, while providing leadership. Recent public opinion research indicates that, while Canadians do not have expectations that all of their views will be acted on, they *do* expect their government to listen. In fact, “assured listening” is an expressed condition of their participation in a government consultation process.

Evaluate and Learn from Experience

Evaluation tools should be built into a process from the beginning and used to continually assess and modify the consultation throughout. Likewise, the learning from a consultation process should be documented as “corporate memory” and made accessible to colleagues to contribute to a collective and continuous learning cycle.

Building A Culture of Consultation/Engagement

The involvement of citizens has become an increasingly integrated element of decision-making in the Government of Canada. In its 1999 response to the Commissioner of the Environment report, the federal government made a commitment to provide the necessary “consultation building blocks” to support public servants in their efforts to plan and implement effective public consultations. These building blocks include: strong policy guidance; mechanisms to support horizontal co-ordination; skills training and tools; and an evaluation framework for assessing the impact and effectiveness of consultation/engagement processes.

This goal is neither short-term nor the responsibility of any one sector alone. A long-term, collaborative effort is required among governments, external organisations and institutions, and individual citizens to enrich our democratic processes, to create the awareness and capacity for engagement, and to support effective and sustainable relationships.