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**SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 1ST SESSION OF THE PUMA EXPERT GROUP ON GOVERNMENT
RELATIONS WITH CITIZENS AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

This document provides a summary of the key points and conclusions of the first session of the Expert Group on Government Relations with Citizens and Civil Society, held on 13-14 December 2001.

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**SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 1ST SESSION OF THE PUMA EXPERT GROUP ON
GOVERNMENT RELATIONS WITH CITIZENS AND CIVIL SOCIETY**

13-14 December 2001

1. The *Expert Group on Government Relations with Citizens and Civil Society* met on 13 and 14 December under the chairmanship of Mr. Daniel Trnka, Administrative advisor in the Czech Ministry of the Interior. This was the first session of the new Expert Group with broader responsibilities, whose work is based on that of the former PUMA *Working Group on Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections (1999-2001)*. The meeting brought together the representatives of 19 Member countries (one of whom participated exceptionally via telephone conference) and an expert in the field of new ICTs.

2. The purpose of the meeting was to define and launch a number of new activities in 2002 in order to follow up the recent publication of the report "Citizens as Partners" of the previous *Working Group on Strengthening Government-Citizen Connections*. Three topics identified by this report were examined: a) the opportunities and limits of on-line consultation; b) tools and methods for evaluating governments' efforts to inform, consult and engage citizens in policy-making; c) frameworks for engaging civil society organisations (CSOs) in policy-making.

3. In its presentation, the Secretariat reiterated the great interest raised by the publication of the *Citizens as Partners* report, the end result of the previous Working Group's efforts. It is of great importance to **translate the products** (report, handbook and policy brief) into the various national languages for their **better dissemination** in Member and non-Member countries. It emphasised the need to share the experience acquired and to exchange information not only in the Expert Group's meetings, but also outside them by having the various Member countries produce regularly updated documents (policy briefs, case studies, etc.). The Secretariat also stressed the importance of sharing this experience with non-Member countries. It reported on recent meetings in which it had presented the Working Group's results to some Member and non-Member countries.

4. During a "**tour de table**", the participants briefly presented the recent initiatives taken in their respective countries with a view to consulting citizens and CSOs, (in particular on-line), and involving them in policy-making and evaluating the efforts being made by governments to inform, consult and actively engage citizens in decision-making. This discussion made it possible to distinguish a number of characteristics and identify the expectations and objectives of the various Member countries:

- **The reasons** for governments' interest in on-line consultation, evaluation and involvement of CSOs in policy-making **vary across countries**, and the following were mentioned: the quality of public services, policies and regulations (e.g. Italy, United Kingdom, Sweden), greater transparency and democracy (e.g. Mexico, Slovak Republic, Norway, Netherlands).
- During their presentation, the members made a distinction between **traditional tools and electronic tools** of consultation and participation and underscored the **complementary nature** of these tools.
- Few countries (e. g. Finland, Germany, Sweden, Korea, United Kingdom) had taken initiatives in the field of evaluation and had done so mainly on a pilot basis. On the whole, **evaluation is only in its initial stages**.

The participants also agreed on the following points :

- It is necessary to **define** terms (such as civil society and CSOs) accurately before undertaking any in-depth study.
- Some members of the Expert Group insisted on **limiting** strictly the scope of the Expert Group’s investigation to the three topics envisaged for work in 2002 in order to improve the quality of its results.
- It is important to **exchange regularly information** on good practices and on the initiatives being carried out in their respective countries.

On the basis of these expectations, the Secretariat identified four general objectives for future work:

- 1) To carry out work concurrently on all three study topics (on-line consultation, evaluation and government/CSO relations), but at a different pace for each one (timetable to be determined).
- 2) To define priorities **within** each of these three study topics, in the light of the diverse priorities expressed by the members.
- 3) To seek to establish working definitions accepted by all members of the Expert Group.
- 4) To address the three topics being studied in the broader framework of **representative democracy**, i.e. how does the active participation of citizens and CSOs contribute to strengthening representative democracy?

I. Opportunities and limits of E-consultation

Discussion

5. Drs Pauline Poland, Advisor in the Netherlands Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, presented the report on the “E-democracy” project launched in connection with the GOL International Network (Government On-line, www.governments-online.org) and the main conclusions of this report, entitled “On-line Consultation in GOL Countries: Initiatives to Foster E-Democracy”.

6. Participants then discussed a number of key issues:

- The members of the Expert Group recognised the need to consult civil society in order to improve decision-making and thus the quality of public policy. They also considered that ICTs make possible a better dissemination of information and **facilitate consultation** of civil society.
- Delegates also mentioned a number of tensions and **risks** inherent in the consultation of citizens and OSCs: the role of Parliament in representing citizens’ interests; the use of the information gathered by government by political parties or interest groups; the risk of a continuous on-line plebiscite; the problem of security and accessibility raised by the use of ICTs. Members also raised the issue of the definition of the **target public** and the **quality of anonymous contributions**. Some participants stressed the importance of structuring the public debate (e.g. by a moderator).

- Consultation raises the issue of governments’ **commitment** with respect to the results obtained and also of its purpose: is E-consultation merely used to gather information for decision-making or does it imply a commitment on the part of the authorities? What leeway do the consulting authorities have regarding the results of the consultation? How should civil society’s expectations of consultation be managed?
- On-line consultation should be based on **collaboration** between government and experts, but also between government and **Parliament**.

7. Professor Ann Macintosh (observer), of Napier University (UK), summed up the four key problems involved in on-line consultation:

- 1) Ensuring that the contributions of civil society are based on correct information.
- 2) Determining the types of contributions sought.
- 3) Analysing the contributions received.
- 4) Providing feedback to citizens.

To these can be added other issues that participants would like to see addressed in future work, such as evaluation, definition of the target public, management of contributions and their incorporation into decision-making, monitoring of consultation and lastly the role and value of “e-consultation” in comparison to “traditional consultation”.

8. It was recommended to carry out **research on specific projects** implemented or being prepared in the field of e-consultation in the various countries.

Future work

9. The session’s discussions of on-line consultation resulted in the following decisions:
- An expert will draft an analytical document on the issue of on-line consultation.
 - Each country will be responsible for supplementing this framework document by providing brief papers describing a specific case illustrating important aspects of e-consultation. This enriched framework document will be used as the basis for the Expert Group’s discussions in June 2002.
 - The Secretariat will inform national Parliaments of work planned by the Expert Group on on-line consultation by the government. It will examine with them the possibilities of making a comparison with the on-line consultations conducted by legislatures.
 - In the interest of efficiency and cost-effectiveness, the Expert Group’s work will be available to the E-Government Working Group. Both study groups will exchange information and will draw upon each other’s work. The analytical document on on-line consultation will be reviewed at the meeting of the E-Government Working Group in March 2002.

Next steps

- 1) *January-March 2002*: Preparation of an analytical document on on-line consultation. Document forwarded to the members of the Expert Group for their comments.
- 2) *11-12 March 2002*: Review of the analytical document at the “e-government” meeting.
- 3) *March-June 2002*: Member countries illustrate the analytical framework with specific national cases.
- 4) *June 2002*: Meeting of the Expert Group. The Expert Group decides on future work on the basis of the framework document.

II. Evaluation of government efforts to inform, consult and engage citizens in policy-making

10. During the discussion on evaluation, participants described recent experiences and future plans in the field of evaluation in their respective countries and highlighted some lessons learned and key issues, such as:

- There are two types of evaluation: evaluation of **impact** and evaluation of **procedures**. Since the former varies across countries and is more difficult to carry out, the Expert Group should focus its efforts on the latter.
- Evaluation differs depending on the objectives pursued: strengthening citizens’ trust, improving public policies, enhancing policy transparency, etc. It is also important to prepare a **list of objectives**.
- It seems desirable to involve citizens and CSOs in evaluation processes. This raises two key issues: **representativeness** and **scope of participation**. It is necessary to define the target public involved in the evaluation process and to determine at what phase of the process this target group should become involved (when the evaluation is launched or throughout the process?).
- Evaluation requires a gradual, empirical and **rigorous approach**. It is necessary to ensure the **quality of the evaluations** conducted.
- It is necessary to **identify pilot evaluation projects** in Member countries.
- In addition to preparing a list of good practices, **practices to be avoided** should also be identified.

Future work

- It was decided by common agreement to commission an evaluation expert to prepare a general framework for identifying key issues in the evaluation of government efforts to inform, consult and engage citizens in policy-making. This expert should be an evaluation practitioner rather than a theorist, and should preferably have experience in assisting a national government to implement an evaluation programme.

- Each country will forward information on initiatives in the evaluation field. These initiatives will also be examined by the evaluation expert.

Next steps

- A draft analytical document on evaluation will be sent to participants during **the second quarter of 2002** for discussion at the Expert Group's meeting in June 2002.

III. Defining frameworks for engaging CSOs

11. The Secretariat presented the PUMA case study on the Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, known as the Aarhus Convention, which examines the involvement of civil society organisation (CSOs) in **international policy-making**. Participants recognised that the 1998 Aarhus Convention was an exceptional case, which illustrated a number of good emerging practices. They agreed that the Expert Group should carry out work on government efforts to engage CSOs in both **national and international** policy-making (e.g. in the field of international trade).

12. Next, the members of the Expert Group described the procedures and measures adopted in their respective countries for involving CSOs in **national** policy-making. A number of frameworks have been established to involve CSOs at the national level either formally (e.g. the 1998 Compact on Relations between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in England, and the 2001 Accord Between the Government of Canada and the Voluntary Sector) or informally (e.g. consultation with CSOs in preparation of EU accession in the Slovak Republic). During the discussion, the main concerns of participants were as follows:

- **The involvement of CSOs** in policy-making is essential for strengthening **democracy**.
- It is necessary to **define** what is meant by “CSOs” (are social partners such as trade unions included in this definition?).
- The issue of **feedback** is crucial: it is necessary to ensure the **continuity of the partnership** with CSOs.
- The participation of CSOs raises the issue of **representativeness**: in particular, it is necessary to determine the target group that should participate in national and international policy-making.
- The conditions for **independence** of CSOs must also be maintained.
- In the light of the above priorities, work on CSOs will proceed by stages in 2002.

Future work and timetable

- **Preparation of a plan of work and collection of comparative data on involvement of CSOs** in both national **and** international policy-making: during the first half of 2002, each country **will forward information** to the Secretariat on the initiatives being implemented and the procedures adopted to involve CSOs and enhance their participation in national and/or international policy-making.

- **Dissemination and discussion of the Expert Group's results with CSOs** in each Member country: at the invitation of the latter, the Secretariat could organise **information and discussion meetings with CSOs** of their respective countries. Specific proposals were being considered. Canada had organised a meeting of the Secretariat with representatives of civil society in November 2001 (which also included discussions with Canadian members of parliament and senior government officials responsible for relations with citizens in ministries).
- Organisation of a **round table** in spring 2002, to which the members of the Expert Group and a **representative of civil society** from each of the Member countries will be invited (the government of the Czech Republic raised the possibility of hosting this round table). Representatives of government and civil society from Central and South-Eastern Europe will be also invited. The results of discussions will make it possible to identify the expectations of both groups (government/CSOs) regarding improvement of their mutual relations and will provide guidance on future work. A summary record of this round table will be reviewed at the Expert Group's meeting in June 2002.