

EUROPEAN OPEN GOVERNMENT LEADERS' FORUM

PARTICIPATION AS A
KEY TO BETTER POLICY-MAKING

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EUROPEAN OPEN GOVERNMENT LEADERS' FORUM Participation as a key to better policy-making Milan, 5 February 2018

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The European Open Government Leaders' Forum was organized by the Italian Government and the City of Milan, together with the Open Government Partnership (OGP), with the goal of generating new political support for open government and strengthening commitment to action. Over the course of one day in Milan, the Forum gathered from across Europe members of Governments, policy-makers, senior civil servants, high-level experts, Civil Society Organizations as well as representatives from the European Union and the OECD. Agenda and multimedia material are available on the [Forum's webpage](#).

The Forum took place on the first day of the Italian Open Government Week (5-11 February) that in 2018 will go global for the first time with events taking place worldwide in the week of May 7.

The role of civic participation for better policy making and improved public governance systems was the focus of the Forum. A series of interactive discussions took place to share experiences and better understand how participation can effectively restore trust between public institutions and citizens, foster innovation and improve public services. A show case of participation best practices at local level was available throughout the day. The discussions were centered around three pillars.

WHY DO WE NEED PARTICIPATION?

Participation is of crucial significance to the legitimacy and future of democracy in Europe: it is fundamental in order to move our representative democracies towards participatory democracies and to promote active citizenship.

New frontiers of participation are needed to ensure that citizens feel a genuine sense of empowerment to shape public policies which respond to their concerns. The problem of trust has even surfaced in countries that are quite open, and have traditional consultation

mechanisms. Citizens do not just want to have their say during elections every few years, or only engage in traditional consultation processes which can be manipulated by special interest groups or choreographed to arrive at predetermined conclusions.

There are many challenges on the road to a more inclusive and effective participation of citizens; from the difficulty of establishing an engaging narrative between private and public actors, to the complexity of removing cultural barriers to participation. Arguably, citizens tend not to get involved when they perceive that “things are okay”, and rely on elected representatives. Such behavior can however promote an increasing detachment from complete and sound information.

Moving beyond representative democracy towards an effective participative democracy, with a culture of participation, is key to reestablishing trust between citizens and institutions at local, national and European level. Through participation, today’s distrust in public institutions may be reversed and, at the same time, the quality of ideas and initiatives aimed at the betterment of society might be enriched. Civic dialogue can connect formal processes to informal means of participation, such as protests, petitions and social media activity. This in turn can reduce the need for localized protests driven by a sense of imbalance in representation, a particularly prominent issue in the case of major infrastructure projects.

The aim of participation is to increase trust, promoting a sustainable balance of interests, mutual understanding and credibility among different actors. This participation is built on the desire to proactively collaborate; the ability to speak plainly; the motivation to listen; the capacity to understand; a willingness to respect different views and needs. It is also built on transparency in decision-making processes from early stages and the willingness to monitor, re-assess and adjust policies.

HOW DO WE IMPLEMENT PARTICIPATION?

Discussions on effective participation highlighted the importance of transparency of processes, goals and results; structures that enable people to access information in a timely and meaningful way; and identifying, including and motivating interested citizens to provide detailed and relevant feedback on specific issues. Taken together, these are catalysts for meaningful participation policies and they address the risk of participation exercises becoming biased and of private interests taking advantage of participatory tools.



Participatory budgeting, digital innovation in legislative and policy processes, and public debate are tools that can be implemented at all levels of government. It is important to use the right kind of tools and channels that best suit the target groups and adapt to the overall policy context: in this way there is greater potential for participation, even more so at the local level.

Vulnerable groups are easily overlooked in participation and it is imperative for them to be included in public dialogue (for example, youth, women, minorities and refugees). One of the new frontiers for participation in Europe should be to focus on the inclusion of marginalized groups in order to mitigate the risks of radicalization, which can be fueled by exclusion and grievances.

A current shift in direction is from an open government to an open State where adequate levels of transparency, participation and accountability are required from all the public governance actors (judiciary, legislature and government). Open government and participation policies need to be institutionalized and embedded in a country's governance culture, with adequate dedicated human and financial resources.

It is fundamental that a culture of openness is built - not only in the public sector, but also within civil society organizations, the private sector and the media, demanding the same level of transparency, integrity, accountability and opportunity from all groups. Continued efforts from all groups and actors are needed to implement participatory policies in an effective and meaningful way.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR PARTICIPATION?

In addition to inclusivity, two other new frontiers for participation include direct citizen engagement and deliberative democracy. Direct citizen engagement should allow people to participate directly in policy matters that shape and affect their lives; deliberative democracy allows citizens to engage in deeper dialogues on complex policies, debate tradeoffs, make compromises, and use facts to shape decisions that affect them.

The future of participation also seems oriented towards an increasing reliance on digital innovation and the need for our democracies and governance systems to change and adapt to the digital age. Care needs to be taken so that digital tools and solutions are accessible, understood by citizens, and built and used for the general interest.



The future of participation relies on co-creation processes that combine both online and offline collaboration. In order to promote such practices, it is fundamental that digital innovations promote simplification and do not increase the digital divide. Co-shared physical and digital places might help in promoting a wider understanding of digital innovations.

To facilitate the uptake of participatory policies and digital innovations, investment in education and skills should be increasingly pursued via local, national and European projects. This is especially needed for reaching our youngest generations. The ultimate goal could be to develop a two-way system of participation: not only governments should be able to mobilize citizens, but also citizens should be able to mobilize governments.

A more inclusive and participatory society can have a role in reducing poverty and fostering economic growth. Access to open data and open software can enhance transparency and participation. It can also encourage innovation and creativity.

OGP provides a unique platform for establishing effective dialogue between government and citizens, where an exchange of good practices and innovation is possible. OGP and other international organizations such as the OECD, that recently adopted the Recommendation on Open Government, are essential for the continuous promotion of open government principles and in scaling up participatory reforms across Europe, also within the framework of EU-led policies.

