

PART III

Chapter 35

**Democratic Innovations:
Open Space Event**

by

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Around 20 people from 13 countries met as part of the “Open Space” event held on the afternoon of Friday 27 June 2008, following the official closure of the OECD/Slovenian Government International workshop on “Building Citizen Centred Policies and Services.” This event was endorsed by (but was not officially part of) the preceding workshop.

What follows is a personal perspective, as I cannot hope to capture the details of all the rich discussions that we generated in a short period of time. Several reports have already been uploaded to the website of the event www.webjam.com/oecd_openspace and I hope that others will follow and that the conversations started in Ljubljana will continue online.

Why hold an Open Space event?

The two reasons for holding the event were to expose the participants to a different – and more participative – way of working, as well as giving participants the chance to develop ideas they had as a result of the international workshop. An online forum was set up in advance of the day to identify key areas for discussion.

The stated purpose of the “open space” event was to: “provide a space for open and equal discussion between conference attendees and members of the Slovenian civil society organisations, allowing participants to take forward actions they have identified previously, develop partnerships of interest, and build ownership of conference outcomes.”

The event was a partnership between Umanotera – The Slovenian Foundation for Sustainable Development and Involve – a not for profit foundation based in the United Kingdom. Umanotera’s role was to co-ordinate with the Slovenian Ministry of Public Administration, identify Slovene participants for the event and run a meeting of Slovene participants in advance to present the OECD report, co-ordinate Slovenian input and motivate participants. Involve set up the online space where participants could log their ideas for sessions to run. We also facilitated the workshop on the day and wrote this brief report of the event.

Highlights

A wide range of interesting topics were proposed by the participants. In the end the following sessions were held:

- Exploring Instruments for Community Empowerment.
- E-Democracy Lessons from Slovenia and elsewhere.
- How to improve citizens’ awareness of the implementation status of the Millennium Development Goals.
- Building Global Coalitions of NGOs for the 2009 Copenhagen Summit on Climate Change.
- Creating a Global Democracy Index.

Box 35.1. About “Open Space”

“Open Space” Technology is a participative meeting approach, developed in the 1980s by Harrison Owen. A feature that distinguishes Open Space from many other methods is the amount of responsibility and power over the agenda given to the participants.

An open space event has a central theme or question, but no fixed agenda (in this case the theme was the same as the workshop, namely “Building citizen-centred policies and services”). The participants set the agenda based on their areas of interest and self-organise in breakout groups, reporting back at the end of the event.

Open space has four fundamental principles:

- “Whoever comes are the right people.”
- “Whenever it starts is the right time.”
- “When it’s over, it’s over.”
- “Whatever happens is the only thing that could happen.”

There is also one “law”:

The “law of two feet”. (If participants find themselves in a situation where they are not learning or contributing, they have a responsibility to go to another session, or take a break for personal reflection.)

These principles help create an environment where participants feel empowered to take joint responsibility for the successful conduct of the meeting. Open Space has successfully been used by hundreds of organisations across the globe, in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

For more information about Open Space, please see:

www.peopleandparticipation.net/display/Methods/Open+Space.

The discussions covered a broad range of topics. Groups ranged in size from two people to seven but in all cases participants appeared to have had very useful conversations. Indeed in some cases the smaller groups were most effective, as people with high levels of specialist knowledge could work together at the same level.

Some of the innovative ideas discussed on the day included “Dating for democracy” – the idea to draw on the successful principles of dating sites when designing online engagement, and the idea of involving citizens in monitoring implementation of targets – such as the Millennium Development Goals – by measuring how many years countries are lagging behind the UN targets.

Participants found the chance to share practical experiences across national contexts very useful; for example, the ways in which different countries are dealing with political apathy, public distrust and the digital divide when engaging online.

Other benefits were new contacts. Many participants mentioned that they would stay in touch after the event and develop joint projects together. It was also a good opportunity for local civil society organisations from Slovenia to interact with colleagues from other countries and from international organisations.

It was a privilege to be able to facilitate the session and I would like to thank all of those who took part in the Open Space Event and helped make it a success. I hope the event has contributed to building successful international partnerships for democratic innovation.

For more information please see:

www.webjam.com/oecd_openspace

www.involve.org.uk

www.umanotera.org

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	11
Executive Summary	13

Part I

Focus on Citizens: Public Engagement for Better Policy and Services

Chapter 1. Why Invest in Open and Inclusive Policy Making?	21
Chapter 2. Open Policy Making: Work in Progress	31
Chapter 3. Inclusive Policy Making: The Next Step	45
Chapter 4. Evaluation Improves Performance	57
Chapter 5. Leveraging New Technologies and the Participative Web	65
Chapter 6. Principles to Support Practice	77

Part II

Case Studies in Citizen Engagement

Introduction	83
Regional and Urban Development	89
Chapter 7. Building Future Scenarios for Regional Development in Northeast England, United Kingdom	91
Chapter 8. Public Engagement to Achieve Self-Sufficiency in New Brunswick, Canada	97
Chapter 9. Public Involvement in Urban Renewal in Trondheim, Norway	105
Chapter 10. Improving Quality of Life in Distressed Urban Areas in Bremen, Germany	111
Chapter 11. Building on a Participatory Community Summit in Port Phillip, Australia	119
Local Participatory Budgeting	127
Chapter 12. Participatory Budgeting in Çanakkale, Turkey	129
Chapter 13. Participatory Budgeting in Buk-gu, Korea	135
National Level Participatory Programmes	143
Chapter 14. The Citizen Participation Policy Programme, Finland	145
Chapter 15. The Environment Roundtable, France	151
Chapter 16. The Forest Dialogue, Austria	157
Chapter 17. Standardised Surveys on Voter Behaviour, Switzerland	161

Building Capacity and Tools for Engagement	167
Chapter 18. The Online Participation Project, New Zealand	169
Chapter 19. Developing Professional Standards for Citizen Engagement, The Netherlands	177
Chapter 20. Building Government's Capacity to Engage Citizens, United Kingdom	185
 Part III Practitioners' Perspectives: Why Now, How and What Next? 	
Introduction	195
Why Now? The Case for Citizen Engagement	197
Chapter 21. Why Should Governments Engage Citizens in Service Delivery and Policy Making?	199
Chapter 22. Public Engagement Is a Must in a Multi-Stakeholder World	207
Chapter 23. Calling All Politicians: Take Your Citizens Seriously, or Be Marginalised	213
Chapter 24. And the Winner Is Trust and Credibility	219
How? Engaging the Public Effectively	225
Chapter 25. Participate, but Do so Pragmatically	227
Chapter 26. The Next Challenge for Citizen Engagement: Institutionalisation	231
Chapter 27. Internal Communication: The Problem and the Solution	235
Chapter 28. Leveraging Technology to Engage Young People	239
Chapter 29. The Privacy Implications of Public Engagement	243
Where? How Context Shapes Practice	249
Chapter 30. Social Partnership in Ireland: A Problem-Solving Process	251
Chapter 31. The Right to Know in Mexico: The Challenge of Dissemination	257
Chapter 32. Participation at the Municipal Level in Italy: The Case of Bologna	261
Chapter 33. People's Participation in Korea: Formality or Reality?	267
Which? Exchanging Experience and Perspectives	271
Chapter 34. Building Citizen-Centred Policies and Services: A Global Snapshot	273
Chapter 35. Democratic Innovations: Open Space Event	281
Chapter 36. Are You Listening? Youth Voices in Public Policy	285
What Next? Shaping the Future Today	293
Chapter 37. The Future of Open and Inclusive Policy Making	295
Chapter 38. Globalised Democracy	299
 Annex A. Legislation and Policy Measures for Open Government	 303
Annex B. Oversight Institutions for Open Government	311

Annex C. Members of the OECD Steering Group on Open and Inclusive Policy Making (2007-2008)	315
Annex D. Civil Society Respondents to the 2007 OECD “Questionnaire for Civil Society Organisations on Open and Inclusive Policy Making”	317
Annex E. Glossary	320

Boxes

0.1. Guiding Principles for open and inclusive policy making	17
1.1. Building citizen centred policies and services	26
1.2. Australia: Citizen summits help shape long-term strategy	29
2.1. Civil society organisations: Evaluation of progress in open and inclusive policy making	33
2.2. Civil society organisations: Views on principles	35
2.3. The Netherlands: Code of conduct for professional consultation	36
2.4. Czech Republic: Setting new standards for public consultation	36
2.5. Finland: Building the capacity and culture for public participation among civil servants	37
2.6. Austria: Building capacity for public participation	38
2.7. European Commission: Putting principles into practice	39
2.8. European Commission: Accountability and participation in supranational decision-making	39
2.9. Relevant OECD principles	40
2.10. Constitutional provisions for openness	40
2.11. Italy: Tuscany region guarantees rights to participation	41
3.1. UK: Developing engagement profiles	47
3.2. The Netherlands: Piecing together the profiles of non-participants	47
3.3. Austria: “Children to the Centre”	48
3.4. Austria: Developing a social integration strategy through an inclusive participation process	52
3.5. European Commission: Fostering eInclusion	52
3.6. France: The high school participatory budget of the Poitou-Charentes region	53
3.7. UK: The Innovation Fund	54
4.1. Austria: Evaluation helps government identify people’s expectations and needs	60
4.2. Canada: Building on multiple sources of evaluation	62
5.1. Ministerial meeting charts the course towards an open and inclusive Internet economy	67
5.2. UK: Leveraging the web for a “national conversation”	69
5.3. France: Engaging users in designing online services	69
5.4. US: Intellipedia and Diplopedia	70
5.5. OECD: Designing and launching Wikigender	71
5.6. Portugal: Using a social network site to engage with citizens abroad	72
5.7. New Zealand: The ParticipationNZ Wiki	73
5.8. UK: FixMyStreet.com	74
6.1. Guiding principles for open and inclusive policy making	79
11.1. Vision statement	125

18.1. Why use a wiki?	171
18.2. Wikis in government: Potential risks and mitigations	171
35.1. About “Open Space”	283

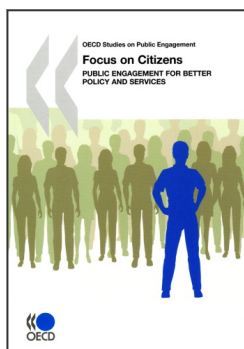
Tables

2.1. Actions taken to apply principles in practice: some examples from OECD countries	38
4.1. Advantages and disadvantages of internal, independent and participatory evaluation	61
II.1. Overview of main characteristics of the country case studies	85
7.1. SHiNE: Key characteristics	93
8.1. The Self-Sufficiency Agenda: Key characteristics	100
9.1. Trondheim urban renewal project: Key characteristics	109
10.1. WiN and Soziale Stadt projects in Tenever: Key characteristics	114
11.1. Port Phillip Community Summit: Key characteristics	120
11.2. Guiding principles for the Port Philip Community Plan Steering Committee	122
12.1. “I Know My Budget” campaign: Key characteristics	133
13.1. Participatory Budgeting (PB): Key characteristics	137
14.1. Citizen Participation Policy Programme: Key characteristics	148
15.1. The Environment Roundtable: Key characteristics	154
16.1. Austrian Forest Dialogue: Key characteristics	160
17.1. Vox surveys: Key characteristics	164
18.1. The Online Participation Project: Key characteristics	170
19.1. Mapping four dimensions of the impact of citizen engagement	181
19.2. Developing standards for citizen engagement: Key characteristics	182
20.1. Building capacity for engagement: Key characteristics	187

Figures

1.1. Policy performance and democratic performance	22
1.2. What are OECD countries’ goals with respect to government?	28
1.3. What are OECD countries’ goals with respect to citizens?	28
2.1. Principles for which greatest progress has been achieved	34
2.2. Principles which are the most difficult to meet	35
2.3. Resources devoted to promoting open and inclusive policy making	37
2.4. Main targets of support for open and inclusive policy making	41
2.5. Identifying the costs for government	42
2.6. Identifying the risks for government	43
3.1. What barriers are people facing?	49
3.2. Why don’t people participate?	49
3.3. Measures to lower barriers for government information	51
3.4. Measures to lower barriers for consultation and participation	51
3.5. Measures to increase uptake of government information	52
3.6. Measures to increase the appeal of consultation and participation initiatives	53
4.1. What proportion of open and inclusive policy making initiatives are evaluated?	58

4.2. Countries have different reasons for evaluating open and inclusive policy making	59
4.3. Countries evaluate a range of factors in open and inclusive policy making . . .	60
4.4. Self-evaluation is the norm.	62
5.1. OECD governments use ICT to inform more than to engage people	70
5.2. OECD governments are exploring new online options to inform and engage citizens	71
5.3. Shifting paradigms: from Participation 1.0 to Participation 2.0.	73
12.1. Mapping participation in Çanakkale city management	130



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