# Executive summary

Over the past decade, the Government of Portugal has demonstrated a commitment to placing citizens at the heart of its strategy to improve the design and delivery of public services. In 2021, it released the Guiding Principles for a Human Rights Based Approach on Public Services (hereafter the Guiding Principles), emphasising human rights and participatory approaches for people-centred public service reforms. With 19 ministries and affiliated entities delivering over 1 768 services across sectors and channels, Portugal has a robust public service culture. Since 2018, the government has been decentralising service delivery across 18 regions and 308 municipalities, enhancing local access and scalability.

## Creating the conditions for people-centred services

Portugal has established a strong enabling environment for people-centred and rights-based services. The Constitution and national legislation protect core civic freedoms, including freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly. Policies support the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised groups in society, although challenges remain in addressing discrimination and racism. For example, migrants and refugees, the Portuguese Roma population, and Portuguese of African origin face barriers that hinder equal access to services. While oversight institutions and redress mechanisms are comprehensive, they face insufficient resources and low compliance with their recommendations by public institutions.

While progress has been made in making information accessible to stakeholders and citizens, challenges persist. Despite a comprehensive legal framework governing access to information, both citizens and public officials lack awareness of this right, and implementation and enforcement of legal and institutional frameworks are weak. Freedom of the press is guaranteed by law and generally respected. Yet, defamation laws and cybersecurity attacks on media outlets pose threats to press freedom and access to information. Digital transformation initiatives are a government priority. However, despite a comprehensive legal framework, personal data protection and digital security measures are not sufficient, and implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is presenting challenges for public authorities. While digital inclusion has been high on the political agenda, digital divides remain and inhibit access to online public services for certain groups, such as the elderly.

Legal and institutional frameworks against discrimination could be strengthened by making racist motives and hate an aggravated circumstance for all crimes, simplifying access to redress mechanisms, and increasing public institutions' capacity to counter discrimination, particularly at the local level. Digital inclusion efforts could address barriers to accessing public services related to demographics, income, geography and accessibility. Moreover, improving algorithmic transparency and data governance to ensure data protection, and addressing biases in algorithms, would help unlock the full potential of data-driven technology in the delivery of public services.

## Strengthening stakeholder and citizen participation

Historically, civil society has played an important role in public service delivery in Portugal. While favourable conditions have allowed for a thriving and diverse sector, some challenges impede its ability to operate and perform its crucial societal role. Access to funding is a major obstacle, and the administrative procedures involved in establishing a civil society organisation (CSO) and attaining public utility status are complex and burdensome.

Portugal has adopted legislation to enable CSO participation in different aspects of public life. While the various policy documents encourage participation in their specific domains, efforts appear to be disjointed and the overall national participation agenda lacks whole-of-government coordination and steering. There are few opportunities for stakeholders and citizens to contribute to the design, implementation and evaluation of public services beyond what is legally mandated (providing suggestions, feedback and complaints). In addition, public communication on participation processes has limited reach and participants could be better informed about how their input is used. The inclusion of citizens and stakeholders is not monitored, and most public institutions lack the resources to implement participation processes more broadly. Furthermore, systematic consultations on service accessibility for different groups are lacking.

To strengthen support for the essential contribution of citizens and stakeholders, Portugal could develop an overarching strategy or policy framework. Addressing funding gaps and reducing administrative burdens that hinder CSOs' ability to operate and provide services could be prioritised. Participation could be strengthened through better communication and feedback channels, with a focus on inclusion, targeted outreach, and representation of underrepresented citizens and stakeholders.

## Towards more inclusive, accessible and people-centred public service design and delivery

Portugal has implemented initiatives for proactive and data-driven public services, including the Simplex programme, Citizen Spot and Citizen Shop networks, and ongoing development of ePortugal.gov. The Guiding Principles and Mosaico Common Model for the Design and Development of Digital Services recognise the need to shift to a people-centred and 'omni-channel' service design culture. Emphasising co-ordination, user research and feedback, they aim for a consistent user experience addressing problems with seamless, end-to-end services. When assessed against the Guiding Principles, the two digital services studied - the Digital Mobile Key, Portugal's digital identity solution that allows citizens to access digital services and electronically sign documents, and the Family Benefit for children and young people, a monthly allowance to help families support and educate their children - successfully meet two principles, partially meet five and fall short on two. These findings provide encouragement but also indicate areas needing attention such as promoting citizen participation and designing for vulnerable communities. As part of its national Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021), Portugal has undertaken to transform the 25 most relevant services for citizens and economic actors, which presents an opportunity to integrate the Guiding Principles from the outset and establish a new baseline practice for public servants.

Portugal's use of its protected civic space to harness user input is crucial for an inclusive, accessible and people-centred approach. Portugal should ensure that public servants familiarise themselves with the Guiding Principles, so they become entrenched. Sustaining strong political leadership, developing a shared narrative based on the Guiding Principles and Common Model and equipping multi-disciplinary teams with enabling tools and resources are vital for promoting and incentivising change. Setting ambitious performance targets, facilitating monitoring, and encouraging watchdog initiatives can also help improve responsiveness to feedback and the performance of individual services. Finally, sustaining these efforts will depend on Portugal's ability to demonstrate that it is delivering better services with clear social, economic and political benefits for all.
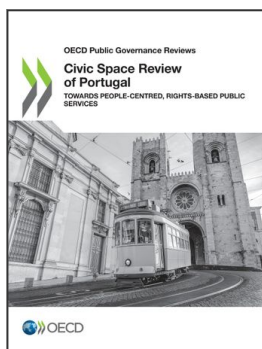
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# Civic Space Review of Portugal
## Towards People-Centred, Rights-Based Public Services

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