



## National Level Participatory Programmes - Public Engagement-

*This article presents three different case studies conducted by members of the Steering Group, local and national experts and OECD Secretariat. These studies will give us insights on how to better engage the public in the national policy programmes.*

### 1. Finland

#### Citizen Participation Policy Programme

The Citizen Participation Policy Programme was described in the Government Programme in 2003 as a national democracy project. It was aimed at the central, regional and local levels; focused on agenda setting and policy options; and lasted from 2003-2007. Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's Government adopted a new co-ordination tool aiming at more horizontal and strategic government policy making. The participation policy programme was one of the four key-horizontal programmes that the government launched.

The Ministry of Justice, which is responsible in Finland for arranging elections and democracy in legislation, was given the co-ordinating role in the programme. Other ministries that were involved in the programme were Education (civic education and research, sports, cultural and youth work), Interior (municipal affairs) and Finance (public management). The Minister of Justice assisted by a programme director with a small staff at the ministry headed the programme. The task was to develop the totality of the programme, although responsibility of the activities resided with the ministries. Compiling an annual Government Strategy Document strengthened the programme's cohesion. Meetings were held to enable representatives of the various projects to present their activities to each other and build mutual co-operation. ■

#### ▲ Four Sub-sectors of the Programme

The general objective was approached in the Citizen Participation Policy Programme through four sub-sectors:

1. Schools and other institutions of learning support growth to **active and democratic citizenship** in accordance with the principle of lifelong learning. Besides Finnish citizenship, EU and world citizenship must also be taken into consideration in education.
2. The legal and administrative prerequisites for the operation of **civil society** are favourable and up to date from the perspective of civic activity. The third sector has sufficient research, training and development services.
3. Traditional and new channels for **citizen participation** are developed in such a way that they support the full involvement of citizens in the activities of communities and society. Administration has the necessary tools and the kind of attitude it needs to be able to interact with citizens.
4. **The structures and practices of representative democracy** function well on all levels of decision-making, and they take the changes that are taking place in everything from knowledge society to globalisation into consideration. ■

^ **Interaction between citizens and administration**

The policy programme pointed out that there is a need for innovative development to ensure that the new opportunities to participate and exercise influence are opened up to individual citizens and groups of them. New methods must be developed in such a way that they function effectively also from the perspective of administration and are not excessively time-consuming.

The work in the field of strengthening citizen government connections had started already at the beginning of the decade as individual projects. Now these projects are continuing and being further developed as part of the policy programme.

During the programme:

- The permanent State Secretaries of the ministries signed a declaration on “administration’s general principles concerning consultation of citizens”. The Ministry of Finance is monitoring the implementation of these objectives by a yearly questionnaire to the ministries. The signatories also included the association of local and regional authorities and representatives of individual municipalities.
- A guidebook on consultation of citizens was drafted for civil servants and office holders. Strategies on civic organisations were required of all ministries.

- A study on the use of information networks for consultation of, and participation by, citizens was conducted. The study also reviewed the potential of digital TV as a channel for citizens to exercise influence. The state administration discussion forum was renewed and the development of electronic consultation was continued.
- The SAG<sup>1</sup> group, through which co-operation between Swedish-speaking organisations and various ministries takes place, promotes consultation of civic organisations at various stages of the preparation of decisions. Special attention was paid to the initiation and early stages of preparations.
- The principles for evaluation of communication by the State administration were developed as a project run by the Prime minister's office. Monitoring of public opinion is one of the evaluation criteria in the revised set of principles. ■

#### ▲ Main Results

- The information basis of the democracy is being ensured and a framework for administration of democracy has been established.
- Research on civic education has been strengthened and the share of citizen participation in teacher training has been increased as well as the share in schools.
- The overall picture of the importance of civil society was developed and some major development projects are on the way. For example, the conditions required for activities of public utilities, voluntary work and peer assistance are being explained, for example, in relation to taxation and putting services to tender.
- New initiatives have been created for the consultation and participation of citizens in decision-making.
- Amendments to the local Government Act will improve the ability of municipals councils to direct the activities of municipal concerns, as well as clarify the position in the market of municipally owned commercial undertakings. ■

#### ▲ Postscript- Democracy Indicators

The Citizen Participation Policy Programme has also created democracy indicators to monitor the state and development of Finnish democracy. The indicators cover the following topics:

- Election and party democracy.
- Participatory democracy and social capital.
- NGO participation.

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<sup>1</sup> SAG : Scientific Advisory Group

- Citizens' views on citizenship and their own opportunities to influence.
- Attitudes towards political institutions and actors.
- Criteria of informed citizenship. ■

### **What are the democracy indicators based on?**

To produce comprehensive and reliable democracy indicators, a variety of data sources and measures are required. These include an established system of collecting results of election opinion polls and questionnaires aimed at NGOs, political parties and educational institutions.

### **Why are democracy indicators needed?**

There is plenty of demand for information about democracy. Civic discussion calls for clear and reliable information that creates a sufficiently firm basis for the formulation of opinions and decisions by citizens in the context of their own active role in society. Political and government decision-makers need information that is relevant to society's development and in concrete problem-solving situations.

Democracy issues include key elements that cannot be properly illuminated without measurable indicators. Many questions typical of democracy discussions are formulated in quantitative terms. Which development trends can we observe in people's attitudes towards democracy? What is the rate of those participating in "non-traditional" political activities among the population? How representative among the public is the often-detected negative attitude towards politics? Which factors explain the drop in election turnouts?

Finland is not highly ranked internationally in comparisons of the availability of wide-ranging empirical data on politics and society. Most developed western countries have access to data that has been collected and developed for considerably longer and more systematically than in Finland. For example, election research (which is vital for the monitoring of democracy development) is still in its infancy in Finland, when compared with other Nordic countries.

### **Who will create the democracy indicators?**

The research work will be carried out by academic researchers and financed by the Ministry of Justice. Independent research institutions, selected on the basis of experience and appropriate competitive tendering, will collect each set of research data.

International co-operation networks and international comparability are vital tools for research into Finnish democracy.

### **How will the democracy indicators be used?**

Creation of indicators and collection of data on the basis of them is not an end in itself. Work related to democracy indicators can only be regarded a success when they have been utilised to produce data that is relevant to research, decision-making and civic discussion.

Data is collected on key issues related to both democracy research and to practical problems with democracy, ensuring that long-term monitoring of Finnish democracy is served as appropriately as possible.

Fundamental democracy indicators will be published as easily understandable and concise tables and graphs on a dedicated democracy website ([www.kansanvalta.fi](http://www.kansanvalta.fi)). In addition to summaries intended for the public and media, a main academic report and briefer publications in journals will be created on each topic. ■

## **2. France**

### **Environment Roundtable**

The aim of the Government's Environment Round Table (the *Grenelle de l'environnement*) was to hold public consultations, through a dedicated website and 15 or so decentralised public meetings. In the end 18 public meetings were held and the Internet forum was extended by two days.

This initiative followed the practice, begun in France 25 years ago, of consulting the public in the fields of environment and sustainable development. According to Ms. Bettina Laville of the State Council (*Conseil d'État*), this consultation falls within the Environmental Charter, Article 7 of which states: "Every person has the right, under the conditions and limits defined by law, to have access to the information about the environment held by the public authorities and to take part in the preparation of public decisions that have an impact on the environment".

This consultation process was unique, however, in that it no longer consisted of giving the public an opportunity to react to a specific planning proposal, but instead offered the public the chance to approve or reject proposals that were themselves the product of collective effort and the deliberations of five colleges of national working groups. In this respect, it was the first consultation to claim to satisfy the requirements of Article 6, paragraph 4, of the Aarhus Convention, which recommends that the public be consulted before decisions are made: "Each Party shall provide for early public participation, when all options are open and effective public participation can take place." ■

## ^ Roundtable Process

The Environment Round Table process was organised in two parts. The first part took place in three phases:

- **Mid-July – end September 2007:**

Five collegial bodies were set up, made up of trade unions, employers, non-governmental organisations, local authorities and public service representatives;

Six working groups, dealing respectively with climate change, biodiversity, environment and health, sustainable production and consumption, environmental democracy, and environmental growth and economic instruments. This phase ended with each working group drawing up proposals.

- **End September – mid-October 2007:**

The second phase involved a very wide-ranging consultation based on the proposals of these working groups, on the Internet, with the public at large, and through public meetings held mainly in the regions, and also with Parliament.

- **24 and 25 October 2007:**

Two days of negotiations were held in order to draw up positions on four key issues.

This first part of the Environment Roundtable ended with the announcement of the main positions and decisions by the President of the Republic who made 238 commitments, covering a wide variety of fields.

The second part of the Environment Roundtable featured:

- The adoption of a measure that was implemented straight away: the system of variable insurance premiums on privately owned vehicles.
- The setting up of 33 committees charged with drawing up measures designed to ensure that the commitments announced in the fields, for example, of transport, construction, agriculture, consumption, biodiversity, health and waste management are met.
- Follow-up work by these committees, which met every six weeks.

It was to conclude with the drawing up of a draft law containing the first measures to be submitted to Parliament, towards the middle of March 2008.

This was in many respects a novel structure:

- The consultation was based on proposals issued by the working groups, themselves representing different groups of actors in environment and sustainable development.
- It was a State initiative in liaison with the mayors of the host towns.
- It allowed the broadest possible cross-section of the public to take part.
- It was designed to be “objective”, and to involve the professionals in public debate.
- A member of the State Council (*Conseil d’Etat*), Ms. Bettina Laville, was appointed to ensure that the discussions were transparent and the summaries neutral. ■

#### ^ Citizen Consultations

During the Environment Round Table, a number of citizens’ consultation processes were held. Meetings were held in the regions from 5 to 22 October 2007. Citizens also had from 28 September to 14 October to comment on and put forward amendments to the proposals drawn up by the six working groups, via the online forum.

All citizens could take part. All they had to do was send a request to the prefect’s office (*préfecture*) of their area of residence. Summaries of these meetings have been published and are available on the website <http://www.legrenelle-environment.fr/>

Levels of participation were high. In total, over 15 000 people took part in these regional meetings, including elected representatives, economic, social or community actors and private citizens.

The proposals of the working groups were discussed, and amendments put forward. Very often, workshop sessions were organised and chaired by prominent local persons to provide an initial view on the proposals and conclusions of the national working groups. Experts took part in these workshops, first examining and commenting on each of the proposals of the national working groups and then placing them in a local context. Their work was then submitted and discussed at the plenary sessions that were open to the general public. ■

#### ^ Balanced Representation of the Territories

Having considered organising six major inter-regional debates, the Government decided in the end to accept invitations from various towns. The Government chose to include average-sized towns so as to be more accessible to those citizens who are not always well served by the communication links of the major cities, and to reach out to representatives from rural areas. ■

## ^ Assessment

The Laville report drew **three very positive conclusions** from these regional debates:

1. They fulfilled the aim of conducting a **global debate at local level**. While many of the examples used in both the workshops and the plenary sessions were local, the debate was never hijacked by purely local issues that would have undermined the Government's aim to have a genuinely nationwide debate.
2. The **diversity of the regions and their spontaneity of expression** were preserved.
3. The principle of the Environment Round Table was also kept intact: **consensus was sought**, or at any rate, notice was taken of dissent, and the regional forums moreover confirmed the main national trends, except perhaps with regard to eco-taxation and governance.

However, Ms Laville also expressed **three reservations** in her report:

1. The question of time: most of those taking part were disappointed that no more than 17 days had been allowed for consultations at local level.
2. The short timeframe meant that there was no order of priority established among the proposals at the workshops.
3. The level of participation by women in the debates was very low. In a more general sense, it was regrettable that no clear rules had been laid down to ensure maximum diversity among the participants. ■

## ^ Internet Forum

From 28 September to 14 October 2007, citizens also had the opportunity to put forward comments on, and amendments to, the proposals drawn up by the six working groups, via the online website forum. Over 17 days, 14 259 people took part in the forum. By comparison, the number participating in a previous online consultation about smoking was 11 700 (in a consultation lasting four months) and on the minimum service requirement, 3 000 (over two months).

So successful was it that Jean-Louis Borloo, Minister of State, Minister of Ecology and Sustainable Planning and Development, decided to keep the forum open until Sunday 14 October 2007 (it had originally been set to close on the evening of 12 October). Summaries of the forum discussions are also available on the website. ■



#### ▲ Overall Assessment of the Consultation

The public consultation through the Environment Round Table attracted around 15 000 people to the regional debates and more than 300 000 visits to the dedicated website, who made over 14 000 contributions.

Despite the short time available both for assimilating the proposals of the national working groups and for review in the workshops, and despite the vagueness of the rules governing the discussions, the regional debates generally proceeded in a very open manner.

To a large degree, the public reaffirmed the consensus reached in the national working groups and reflected the same areas of disagreement. ■

### 3. Switzerland

#### Standardised Surveys on Voter Behaviour

One particularity of the democratic system in Switzerland is the extensive political rights at local, cantonal and federal level. By means of different co-decision tools – at the federal level, principally the *referendum* and the *popular initiative* – the people can effectively take part in the management of the State. At the federal level these political rights are exercised in votes usually held four times a year, with decisions on up to ten to 12 items. Citizens can propose amendments to the Constitution by means of *popular initiatives*. Before such a proposal can be submitted to a popular vote, the signatures of at least 100 000 eligible voters must be gathered within an 18-month period. In some cases, the authorities respond to popular initiatives by submitting an alternative plan or counter-proposal to the people and placing it on the same ballot. For either the popular initiative or the counter proposal to be accepted, a double majority is required (majority of the people and majority of the cantons). *Referendums* are a form of veto, which allow citizens to respond to Acts of Parliament. Decisions concerning amendments to the Constitution or Swiss participation in certain international organisations are, by law, always subject to referendum. In these cases, a double majority is required (majority of the people and majority of the cantons). All other decisions are subject to optional referendums. These decisions are voted on when at least 50 000 eligible signatures are gathered within 100 days of publication. To veto a parliamentary decision in an optional referendum, only a simple popular majority is required. Prior to each vote, every adult citizen receives documentation on the relevant topics and ballot papers by post. The participation rate is usually between 40 and 50 per cent. ■

### ^ Vox Surveys

Since 1977 “Vox” surveys have been carried out after every federal vote. These surveys are conducted in the form of representative samples of roughly 1 000 eligible voters (700 voters until 1987) and take place during the two or three weeks following the vote. The surveys focus on the interest, motivation, and awareness of the citizens on voting matters and on politics in general. The principal points covered during interviews include: general political opinions and habits, political and social affinities, degree of understanding of the items put to vote, the various aspects relating to the decision on how to vote on these items, how the individual’s opinion was formed and, finally, the individual’s appreciation of the importance of what is at stake.

The Vox surveys benefit from the financial support of the Swiss Confederation and private groups and are carried out by a partnership which includes: a private research institute (gfs.bern) and the political science institutes from three universities (Bern, Geneva and Zurich). The private research institute is responsible for the collection and preparation of the data; the analyses of the data are carried out by each of the university institutes in turn. A Vox report giving the results of these analyses is published after each survey. The Vox reports are one of the best developed demoscopical products in Switzerland. They are well-known by politicians and public and widely accepted. ■

### ^ Standardised Surveys and VoxIt Database

Over time, the Vox surveys have changed significantly. This change has been substantial enough to create problems for a user wanting to compare surveys carried out several years apart. The standardized Vox surveys are the result of a project to harmonise Vox surveys carried out after each federal vote since 1977. The work to standardise the most significant variables was begun in the early 1990s in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Geneva. The final work, named VoxIt, produced standardised files and generated a documentation of questions. A system is in place which allows the integration of new surveys as and when they become available. To cover all standard Vox surveys, more than 430 variables have been defined. While any given survey will contain no more than half of these variables, this number demonstrates the successive changes made to the original Vox surveys. From the point of view of the standardisation process, these variables can be divided into three categories. The classification is principally based on the differing sources of the integrated data.

The VoxIt data combines information from several sources into one file. First, the data integrates and standardises the most significant variables in the Vox surveys. The second type of variable includes specific characteristics of votes and items (i.e.

popular initiatives or referendums), such as the date of the vote, the results of each item, participation rates, slogans of the federal government and the principal political parties. Finally, the standardised surveys include a third type of variable. These variables were designed specifically to synthesize data and to make comparisons from across the range of the available surveys possible.

Taken as a whole, the standardised Vox surveys constitute a relatively complex database. There are at least three reasons for this complexity: first, the data includes a large number of surveys which, from small adaptations to more substantial alterations, have changed considerably over time; second, each survey brings its own surprises (missing variables, inaccurate data, etc.) which further confuse the issue; and last, the process of standardisation itself can at first present a certain amount of complexity. ■

#### ^ Use of the Results

The standardised surveys provide information on voter behaviour. Since every important reform has to be approved implicitly or explicitly by the citizens, detailed information on their voting behaviour is essential for everyone involved in politics (government, administration, parliament, business interest groups, civil society organisations, individual citizens, etc.). When a reform has been rejected by the citizens, the administration, the Government and Parliament have to know the reasons if they are to draw up a second draft with better chances of success. The surveys also show whether citizens have properly understood what is at stake in a vote. This helps the Government to improve its information policy. ■

#### ^ Public Consultation prior to Decision-making

The *consultation procedure*, derived largely from the “facultative” (or optional) legislative referendum of the 19th century, has become an important stage in the legislative process. It is an efficient means of involving the Cantons, political parties and stakeholder groups (civil society organisations, citizens) in the shaping of opinion and decision-making process of the Confederation. It is intended to provide the public at a sufficiently early stage with information on the material accuracy, feasibility of implementation and public acceptance of federal projects. There is accordingly both an informative and a participatory dimension to the consultation procedure, which falls within the scope of the Constitution (Article 147) and the Federal Law on the Consultation Procedure. In addition, there are numerous provisions in the relevant legislation that make it mandatory to consult stakeholders before drawing up standards. There are other forms and instruments for consulting/involving third parties, as well as scope for dialogue between the federal authorities and

third parties (including round tables, popular discussions and public forums), but these are not the subject of explicit regulation.

*Extraparliamentary procedure:* By sitting on extraparliamentary commissions, many organisations on the political/economic scene and in society at large (civil society organisations, citizens) can directly influence the work of government and thus defend their interests effectively.

*Groups of Cantons:* In the Swiss Federation, under the Constitution (Art. 46), the Cantons implement federal legislation. Article 45 stipulates that, in cases specified in the Federal Constitution, the Cantons participate in federal decision-making, particularly regarding legislation.

*Consultation of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs):* The SME compatibility test provides information on the problems that SMEs might face under new legislation. The idea is to ask SMEs about the implications for them of draft legislation. An average of five or six tests are conducted every year for legislative amendments with a potentially major impact on SMEs. The SME Forum is an extraparliamentary committee of experts, comprising company directors and government officials; it discusses Bills or draft Ordinances with a potential impact on SMEs. ■

This is an excerpt from “National Level Participatory Programmes” in the forthcoming publication, *Citizens at the Centre : Public Engagement for Better Policy and Services* by the OECD.

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  - Direct Democracy*
  - The website of C2D – the Research Centre on Direct Democracy- is a very useful resource on this subject (<http://www.c2d.ch/?lang=en>).
  - The website *Plate-forme Eurocité* includes a file in which the primary aspects of direct democracy in Switzerland are simply and clearly described (<http://www.eurocite.ch/dossiers/ddirecte/>).

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