ASSESSING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

DISCUSSION PAPER

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1. Starting the conversation

We know that citizen engagement is at the heart of a strong democracy. It enables governments to deliver policies and programs that respond to citizens' needs and helps to build trust in government systems and processes.

So, it's important that we understand how well governments are conducting engagement activities. It's not enough to know that more government agencies are engaging citizens on questions of policy and service delivery. We need to understand how effective their processes are, and the impact achieved.

In this discussion paper, we draw on our experience of monitoring and evaluating initiatives across the social services to start the conversation about ways of assessing citizen engagement in Australia to inform ongoing improvement.

While some agencies are inviting data and reporting on their processes well, it's not always clear who was consulted, what they said, and how the findings informed the final program or policy. Transparent reporting on engagement activities means identifying the reach and demographics of people engaged, analysing the findings by cohort, and providing a line of sight between feedback and the final program or policy. Transparent reporting supports agencies to evaluate the impact of their work, ensures decision making is transparent and responsive, and builds public trust in government. It also contributes to Australia's international commitment to more democratic and open government.

Note: The paper does not address what government actions should or shouldn't involve public consultation, nor the type of engagement that is appropriate (from information and consultation through to collaboration and empowerment[1]).

2. Citizen engagement in a global context

There is more to democracy than holding free and fair elections. A sustainable democracy seeks to uphold fundamental civil, political and economic rights; ensure checks on government; maintain an impartial and transparent administration; and support **public participation**.[2]

Despite the often-gloomy media portrayals of 'democratic decline' and 'a global wave of populism', recent research shows that democracy has in fact made significant progress over the past 40 years. Looking at the data for 155 independent countries from 1975–2015, the study, by International IDEA, found global increases in the number and quality of elections, greater respect for fundamental rights, more checks and balances on government (including

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[1] https://www.iap2.org.au/About-Us/About-IAP2-Australasia-/Spectrum
[2] International IDEA. 2017. Global State of Democracy 2017: Exploring Democracy's Resilience – Chapter 1. Page 10.

judicial independence and media freedom), and **greater citizen engagement**.[3] While this is not the case in all countries, the data show that globally, countries are continuing to make efforts to safeguard democracy.

One important example of international efforts to safeguard and sustain democracy is the Open Government Partnership (OGP). The OGP is an international initiative to 'secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance'.[4] Launched in 2011 by eight founding governments, the OGP now has 70 participating countries. To become a member, countries must deliver a national action plan and report on their progress towards being more transparent, accountable and responsive to citizens.

Australia joined the OGP in 2013. In 2015, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet began public consultations to develop its National Action Plan 2016–18. The Plan includes 15 Commitments across five areas:

1. transparency and accountability in business
2. open data and digital transformations
3. access to government information
4. integrity in the public sector
5. **public participation and engagement**.

The Plan recognises the importance of citizen engagement to ensuring a transparent, accountable, responsive and, ultimately, democratic government. It commits the government to 'improving the way the Commonwealth engages with the public on policy development, service delivery and decision-making'.[5]

Citizen engagement is at the heart of open government. It puts people at the centre of decision-making, ensuring governments develop policies and programs that respond to citizens needs and contexts. But how do we know if this is being achieved?

3. Citizen engagement in Australia

We scanned NSW and Commonwealth public consultation processes since 2016, to determine whether it would be possible to assess the effectiveness of engagement processes, based on publicly available information.

We found that where reporting on engagement was done well, agencies:

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[3] International IDEA. 2017. Global State of Democracy 2017: Exploring Democracy's Resilience – Overview.

[4] Open Government Partnership. 2018. About OGP. https://www.opengovpartnership.org/about/about-ogp

[5] Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. *Australia's first Open Government National Action Plan 2016–18: Ministerial Foreword.* https://ogpau.pmc.gov.au/australias-first-open-government-national-action-plan-2016-18/ministerial-foreword

- identified the reach and demographics of people engaged
- analysed findings by cohorts
- made clear how and where the findings informed the final product.

Three examples of effective engagement and reporting processes are outlines below.

NSW Ageing Strategy

The NSW Ageing Strategy 2016–2020 is the NSW Governments commitment to support its ageing population to live longer and participate in, contribute to and be included in their local communities. In 2016, the NSW Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) renewed the Strategy to ensure it was informed by and met the needs of older people and key partners across the state.

FACS consulted more than 4,300 older people through a state-wide 'listening tour' in 10 locations, a public survey, a roundtable with private sector representatives, focus groups with older people from Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and consultation with other government departments.

To demonstrate how the invited data informed the Strategy, a summary of the key findings is included at the beginning of the Strategy. More detailed findings related to each of the Strategy priority areas are also included, as well as the needs of particular population groups. This helps draw a line of sight between the needs and opportunities raised by stakeholders and how they informed the Strategy.

NSW Disability Inclusion Action Plans

The NSW Disability Inclusion Action Plans are the NSW Governments' renewed commitment to disability inclusion planning. Under the *Disability Inclusion Act 2014*, all local councils and NSW Government Departments, and some government agencies were required to develop a Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP) by end July 2017.

A review of a random sample of 15 DIAPS showed that most councils reported on the channels they used to engage citizens (most used surveys and face-to-face workshops) and the demographics of those engaged (including local service providers, council staff, and people with disability) and included summaries of the consultation findings. Some also included the raw survey data or direct quotes throughout. For 12 out of the 15 reviewed, there was a clear line of sight between the invited data and the action plan.

The transparent reporting of the DIAP consultation process was supported by the development of Planning Guidelines, which suggested four key action areas to guide consultations, and a template Plan, that included a chapter for agencies to summarise the results of consultations. While this ensured consistent and clear reporting, there may be a risk in pre-defining the outcomes of the consultations, without a process for reporting on issues raised that did not align with the four key action areas.

Engage DSS

Like other government agencies, the Department of Social Services hosts an online platform for individuals and organisations to share their views on current policies or projects open for public consultation, and to view the outcomes of previous consultations: Engage DSS. Depending on the policy or project, citizens can view the public submissions, consultation summary reports, and the final policy or paper to see if and how their feedback was used.

The NDIS Quality and Safeguards Framework is one positive example. To provide input on the Framework, citizens could attend public or provider consultations in accessible venues at major cities across Australia or use the online submission portal or discussion forum. A summary of Framework, FAQs and a consultation paper were provided online. The consultation paper was also available in Easy Read to reduce technical language and ensure people with cognitive disability or from CALD backgrounds could participate.

Following analysis, citizens could access the consultation report, an 80-page summary of the key findings from the process, and the final Framework. There was a clear line of sight between the Framework and the consultation data – each element referenced relevant findings. Where issues were raised that were out of scope of the Framework, these were documented in the consultation report and managed through appropriate channels.

Success of this process was supported by the requirements for development of government regulation, including regulatory impact statements.

The benefits of transparent reporting

While government agencies are welcoming public input into their plans, policies, programs or projects – through online submission processes or face-to-face consultations – it is not always clear who was consulted, what they said, and how the findings informed the final program or policy (or not).

More transparent reporting on engagement processes would:

- support agencies to evaluate the impact of their work
- enable organisations to make use of invited data to support social change (for example, if the information about the challenges people with disability face in their local communities collected through the NSW Disability Inclusion Action Planning process was accessible to organisations applying for NDIS Information Linkages and Capacity Building grant funding, this could support targeted improvement activities)
- make the evidence base for decision-making clear and demonstrate government responsiveness
- increase stakeholder and public understanding and trust in the process and in government more broadly.

To conduct and report on engagement better, we outline a conceptual framework for assessing the quality and impact of engagement processes below.

4. Assessing engagement

Recognising that engagement is a cornerstone of open and representative government, it's important to assess how well governments conduct and report on their engagement activities. Reporting on the rationale, methods and outcomes of engagement activities ensures that participation is meaningful and useful and can be used to inform future improvements.

Understanding monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are key and improving the quality and impact of citizen engagement.

Monitoring is often a part of evaluation but by itself is not evaluation and is less in-depth than evaluation. Monitoring is an ongoing and systematic process for checking progress, using readily available data. It requires a plan that sets out intended outcomes and data sources; a system of collecting and reporting on data; and support from stakeholders to collect and use the data.

Evaluation is a type of applied research to determine the 'merit, worth and value of things'. Evaluation can have many purposes – accountability, learning, and program improvement and knowledge building. Unlike monitoring, evaluation is generally undertaken to answer key questions to inform decisions at critical times. Effective evaluation involves an investment of time and resources, and different approaches to evaluation will be appropriate in different contexts.

When it comes to assessing citizen engagement, monitoring would enable government to track how well engagement is being done and support transparent and responsive processes. It would allow government to refine and track their processes as they go to respond to emerging needs. Further, evaluation could help government demonstrate accountability, build the evidence base about how engagement works, and strengthen future engagement processes.

Understanding the use and impact of data

Data collected through engagement, or 'invited data' can be used in different ways. We believe that conceptions of evaluation and research use may be helpful in understanding the potential use and impact of engagement:

- **process use**—policy makers learn from the process of data collection itself (e.g. about the needs of the target group and how to engage them)
- **instrumental use**—the data *directly* informs decision-making about the policy or program
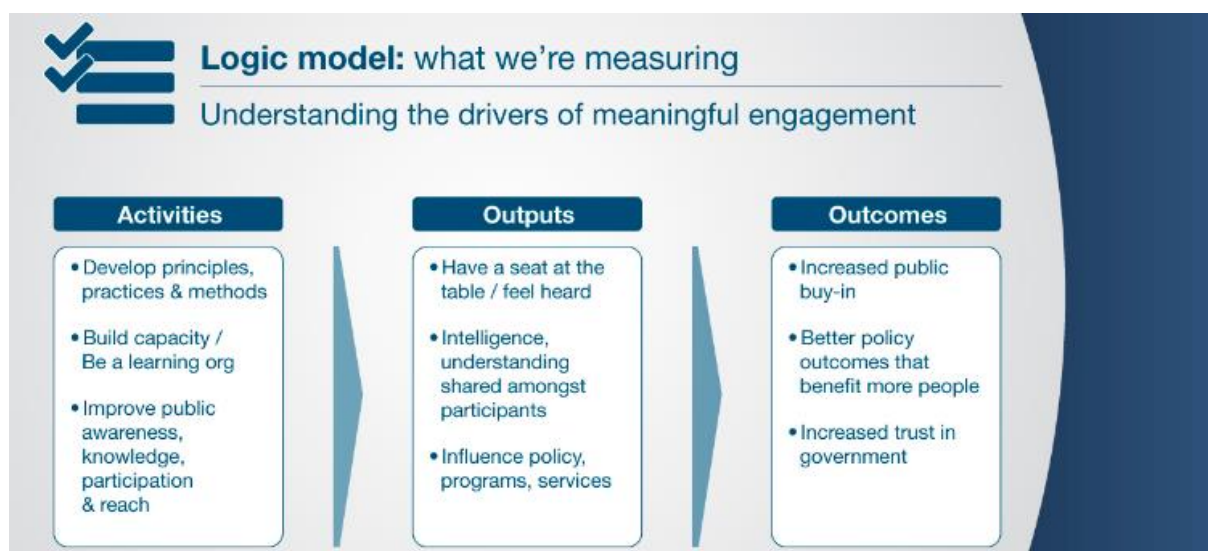
- **conceptual use**—the data generates new knowledge about the subject and related issues and impacts that could inform future policy making, planning and service delivery
- **influence**—beyond use, some point to 'influence' to understand how data leads to better societies. This framing underscores the multifaceted, broad and sometimes unintended ways that data can inform decision making. Data may have behavioural, motivational, cognitive or general influences at the individual, interpersonal or collective levels.[6] In the case of engagement, 'influence' could translate to the impact of engagement on citizen's trust in government or on the strength of democratic systems and processes more broadly.

Invited data can also raise issues that are out of scope—done well, processes should ensure these are forwarded to the relevant managers or agencies.

Developing a monitoring and evaluation framework

A sound monitoring and evaluation framework is generally built around a logic model – a one-page diagram that identifies how an initiative is intended to work and the outcomes it is supposed to achieve at different stages. Indicators of success can then be defined for outcomes at each level of the logic.

A logic for citizen engagement produced by the Government of Canada provides a starting point for understanding how increased citizen engagement may lead to increased trust in government.[7] It suggests that if people are aware of the opportunities to participate, have the information they need to contribute, feel their input was heard and will be used to shape decision-making and learn from and discuss the views of others, then governments will develop policy with greater buy-in and better outcomes, leading to increased trust in a government that is responsive to citizens' needs.

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[6] Mark, M. and Henry, G. (2004). The mechanisms and outcomes of evaluation influence. http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.595.1063&rep=rep1&type=pdf
[7] Government of Canada. (2018). Does principles engagement lead to increased trust? https://open.canada.ca/en/blog/does-principled-engagement-lead-increased-trust

Monitoring engagement

Monitoring engagement processes will help organisations to understand:

- how much was done, for example, the number of people engaged
- how well it was done, for example, whether a representative sample or the target group was reached
- whether anyone is better off as a result, for example, whether citizens felt listened to and are confident issues raised will be effectively addressed.

The following indicators could be tailored to individual engagement processes. These also align with the OGP guidelines for effective consultation.

- **Visibly**
  - People are aware of opportunities to engage.
  - The process was open to the public or affected citizens.
  - The process was effectively promoted, using multiple channels or targeting affected citizens.
- **Information**
  - People have accurate and timely information to make an informed contribution.
  - There was enough time to engage in the consultation, including ensuring time for member-based organisations to consult their members to make an informed contribution.
  - Information is in a format that is easily digestible.
- **Accessibility**
  - The engagement process is inclusive of hard to reach groups.
  - Multiple channels of engagement are offered (e.g. online, face-to-face).
  - Accessible information is provided e.g. Plain English, multiple languages, multiple formats.
- **Reach**
  - The affected citizens are reached. In some cases, it may be appropriate to aim to engage with a representative sample.
  - Diverse cohorts are reached.
- **Participation**
  - Type of input citizens provided (e.g. an online submission, a workshop).
- **Efficiency**
  - The costs and resources were managed efficiently.

Evaluating engagement

Evaluation can assess not only what was achieved but how it was achieved. However, there are a number of factors that may impact how engagement data is used. On the demand side, factors include:

- the political climate and significance of the decision to be made
- leadership and commitment to using the data
- organisational culture
- the broader sociocultural climate

On the supply side, factors include:
- timeliness of the engagement
- credibility of those managing the engagement
- breadth of consultation
- informed consultation.[8]

Evaluation of citizen engagement processes can help agencies and citizens understand the direct impact (or 'instrumental use') of the process on the final product, as well as process and conceptual use. To do this, evaluation would consider who was engaged, what they said, how they felt about the process, how deliberative the process was, whether their views informed the final product (or where the final product differs to consultations findings, if a rationale is provided), and any broader influence of the data on policy, as well as the factors affecting use and influence.

Evaluation could also assess the indirect impact of the process on building a stronger democracy. Taking a systems-approach over the long-term, evaluation could assess whether the engagement process contributed to enhanced government decision making. It could assess whether citizens, including diverse groups, felt listened to and empowered by the process and, as a result, have greater trust in government. It could also assess whether the process supported more transparent, accountable and responsive government systems and processes. Additionally, a meta-evaluation across all government engagement activities would help to assess the contribution of engagement to and enriching representative democracy.

If you're keen to better understand the quality and impact of an engagement activity or discuss how to approach self-evaluation, you can contact Ruby at ruby.leahy.gatfield@artd.com.au or call 02 9373 9926.

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[8] These factors draw on the on the literature about the factors that we know affect use of research and evaluation, as there are likely to be overlaps with this and the use of engagement data.

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