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Policy | brief

DG CONNECT's Stakeholder Engagement Strategy

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Background and Context: Consultation and Engagement

Common wisdom states that broader stakeholder engagement will improve transparency, enhance accountability and legitimize EU policymaking processes. The shift toward directed stakeholder engagement is relatively new. Until the 1997 Amsterdam Treaty, all EU stakeholder consultations were conducted on a voluntary basis. Amsterdam changed this situation by including a clause that the Commission should "consult widely" before formally launching policy networks. Despite these efforts to improve existing practices, a perceived democratic deficit was seen as alienating EU politics from its citizens. Declining voter turnout in European elections was often cited as evidence towards this effect.

The Commission reacted to this criticism with a 2001 White Paper on European Governance which argued strongly that European institutions needed to improve their transparency and accountability. This White Paper spurred several initiatives in the field of stakeholder consultation - foremost of which was the creation of the European Commission and Civil Society (CONECCS) database for Consultation (Shahin, 2006). The idea behind the creation of this database of not-for-profit civil society organisations alone was that consultation during the drafting phase of policymaking would become more transparent if more information was made available for a wider range of self-selected actors. Consequently, such a database could be used to prove that open processes had been carried out. However, such Commission-wide initiatives were not easily aligned with the tacit knowledge, existing databases, and processes that had been gathered in individual DGs, or even at the project, policy, and Unit-level. Note that CONECCS was closed down around 2008, in favour of the newer – and far broader – European Transparency Initiative which enabled stakeholders to have their say on key as-

How do we ensure that public policy represents the interests of all, rather than a select few? How will we ensure it draws upon the best insights and talents of key stakeholders? The European Commission's DG CONNECT recently announced the results of its Stakeholder Engagement Survey, which is designed to 'provide empirical results and feedback about existing practices and signal gaps and challenges for action in the area of stakeholder engagement.' (Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology, Stakeholders Unit D4, 2013, p.4). The survey launched a new round of reflection on the Commission's relations with its stakeholders by asking respondents to reflect on the way in which they interact with DG CONNECT. The strategic objective is to see how ICTs can be used in novel ways to enhance support for policymaking from stakeholders in the EU. The Stakeholder Engagement Survey makes a start at answering critical questions about use of ICT as a tool to build 'smarter policy' as part of DG CONNECT's wider step toward defining a strategy for stakeholder engagement. This IES Policy Brief welcomes this current work-in-progress, and outlines some of the challenges that may await the European Commission as it seeks to exploit the full potential of ICT in stakeholder engagement. It provides an initial analysis of the results of this first Stakeholder Engagement Survey, and concludes that whilst many things have changed with regards to tools that policymakers can use to elicit input into policymaking, certain challenges have remained very much the same.

pects of transparency in the European Union (http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/eti/index_en.htm).

The Commission took another important step in 2002 with the communication on General Principles and Minimum Standards for Consultation (European Commission, 2002). These Principles were deliberately left out of a formal legal framework in order to encourage the sharing of best practices without the need for rigid procedures that could divert attention improving the quality of policy proposals. The communication did not preclude further initiatives in the field of stakeholder consultation, and indeed deliberately left room for individual DGs, such as CONNECT, to improve their own stakeholder engagement practices.

Whilst Commission activity seems to be highly dynamic, we should not forget that the EU's other institutions also have their own engagement agendas. Bodies such as the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, as well as the European Parliament exist to represent European citizens and inform the policymaking process. With this in mind, the debate on engagement with the European Commission should be seen as support for the technical and administrative space in policymaking, rather than a political discussion concerning on the European Project in general terms. In this case, engagement can only be made on specific policy issues.

Challenges for Online Stakeholder Engagement

Before the introduction of Internet-based tools, stakeholder consultation or engagement was primarily performed via face-to-face meetings and traditional postal correspondence. Despite supposedly good intentions, this method of working resulted in the over-representation of well-organized interests that could afford to closely follow and engage with developments inside the "Brussels Bubble".

The potential for ICT-enabled approaches to engaging with stakeholders to foster greater knowledge exchange and build better policy is one of the most vibrant topics in the area of eGovernment. The key topic that we raise, however, is not so much one of building ICT tools, but rather how ICT is used in the processes to make better policy, specifically through enlarging the base of inputs into these processes. Are technological tools being deployed in a manner that genuinely engages a representative array of stakeholders, rather than just usual suspects? Does it really stimulate new ideas, rather than present a new forum for rehashing the old? Can it really result in, dare we say, wiser, more representative policy?

Use of the Internet for two-way engagement with citizens started at the turn of the Century. The 2001 launch of Interactive Policy Making (IPM) represented the Commission's first concerted attempt to harness the power of the Internet to better understand the needs of citizens and enterprises. Since its launch, IPM used an online survey management system - via the web portal Your Voice in Europe - to host over 370 public consultations. This portal represented an attempt to help streamline existing processes of consultation by means of a web-based questionnaire available in all official languages of the EU (Shahin, 2008).

The world of ICT-based consultation has changed greatly since the launch of IPM. One of the most profound changes has been the exponential growth of all kinds of online social networks, often referred to more generally as social media. The massive popularity of social media is credited with stimulating more equal forms of interaction. Whereas in the past, the Internet – to paraphrase Manuel Castells - represented an environment of mass-communication-to-one it is now one of mass-self-communication (Castells, 2011). Simply put, technological advances like social media provide the opportunity for citizens across Europe to voice their views and concerns.

Paradoxically, this new ease of internet-driven communication presents new challenges for EU Directorates in terms of stakeholder engagement in that it has dramatically raised citizens' expectations in terms of interaction and dialogue with the European institutions. When institutions set up frameworks for engagement, 'listening' is potentially not enough: feedback and subsequent involvement for respondents is also necessary.

In July 2012, a separate stakeholder unit was created at DG CONNECT with the express remit to develop a stakeholder engagement strategy for the entire DG. The creation of this unit is a strong indicator of the continuing interest of the Commission to improve its stakeholder consultation activities. The role it will take in policymaking within the DG is still developing: the elaboration of a Stakeholder Engagement Strategy is the first of its major milestones.

External Stakeholder Survey: Results

Of the 1256 respondents to the survey, 40% were from acade-

mia: a not-entirely surprising fact that this group of stakeholders are overrepresented in the survey population. Far more remarkable is the fact that 30% of respondents had never been in contact with DG CONNECT. Indeed, it was the first time approximately 15% of those who participated in the survey had even heard about the existence of this DG.

Our superficial assessment of the External Stakeholder Survey's results shows that traditional forms of interaction (mail, telephone, conferences, website) are unsurprisingly the preferred engagement modes amongst already established stakeholders, namely academics and business representatives – or groups that have traditionally been dominant in the area of stakeholder consultation. Civil society, on the other hand, seems to be more inclined to argue in favor of an increased use of new communication technologies like social media. Conclusions to be drawn from this are unfortunately limited - it is not clear whether this says more about the reticence of traditional stakeholders to open up to broader engagement, or the assumption from these stakeholders that social media is not a productive way to broaden engagement channels.

With regard to policy delivery, a number of respondents expressed an expectation that DG CONNECT exercise digital leadership. One might therefore rightfully ask whether this expectation also holds for the activities deployed by the stakeholder unit. Qualitative comments from survey respondents also revealed a perceived need to improve coordination internally and with other DGs.

One of the clearest divides, and potentially one of the most fascinating, is in the reasons which stakeholders choose to interact with DG CONNECT. By reading between the lines of the survey's responses, it is possible to say with some justification that stakeholders appear to be most interested in seeking information rather than searching for ways to provide formalised input into policymaking. Approximately 90% of all respondents identified "seeking information." This finding is by far the highest scored reason for existing and future contacts with the Directorate General.

In addition to the external element of the stakeholder survey, the stakeholder unit also surveyed other units in DG CONNECT on Unit and project-level stakeholder engagement and what they perceive to be best practice. Officials at DG CONNECT tend to think differently about stakeholder consultation than the survey's external respondents: notably, Commission officials at this DG appear to perceive more opportunities in the use of social media than the actual respondents do.

The External Stakeholder Survey: Some Critical Reflections

The reinvigoration of direct engagement between the European Commission and Europe's citizens, namely through the creation of the stakeholder engagement unit within DG CONNECT, raises the question as to whether similar units will eventually be created within other DGs as well. In other words, will this new approach to policymaking pervade through to other elements of the Commission? As yet, the question remains unanswered. The creation of a new Knowledge Sharing Directorate within the Commission introduces the potential for more a transversal role with regard to stakeholder engagement – although we must bear in mind that practices that work within one context do not necessarily work within others.

The authors of the Final Report on the External Stakeholder Survey mention that several respondents expressed support for the survey. The survey itself was interpreted (by respondents) as part of the process of 'listening.' Moreover, 78% of those who had been in contact with the DG on at least one occasion before the survey were satisfied with how their communication had been handled. Strikingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, mainly established interest groups (academia and business) are satisfied. Newer media actors and civil society groups seem far less enthusiastic about current practices.

The same patterns manifest themselves when looking at the results regarding satisfaction with the consultation tools used. Media and civil society actors would like to see more efforts being made with regard to social media. At the same time these groups are not satisfied with current efforts to integrate social media into consultation practice. Social media practices are seemingly an emergent and vital element of new ways of making policy, but we should not be too quick to over-exaggerate the current impact. DG CONNECT has obviously taken the idea of digital entrepreneurialism to heart, and is learning – along with the rest of the world – about different ways in which these tools can be integrated into policymaking processes.

Looking closely at the sample, one may ask to which degree the composition of respondents is representative of the wider population. The report is not clear on this point. That 1256 people filled in the survey does not say anything about the ability of the survey to map current stakeholder consultation practice. Related to the issue of representativeness of the sample is the surprising fact that 30% of respondents had never been in contact with DG CONNECT before the survey was launched. This finding may call into

question the methods used to disseminate the survey. Obviously, any survey widely publicised, and open to anyone with internet access, is bound to gather distinct pockets of responses, rather than an overall representative view.

A final reflection relates to the way in which a number of concepts were used. It is important to ask whether the categories used really span the whole spectrum of stakeholders. Yet, the report does not provide clear information on how 'Civil Society,' the 'General Public' and 'Business' are defined. In the same way it is difficult to really know how respondents interpret 'satisfaction with interaction.' Saying that 50% of respondents are satisfied with previous interaction with DG CONNECT does not necessarily tell us anything how "good" or "bad" this score is in relation to the tools used. Respondents, for example, may find government consultation efforts awkward and hard to navigate - particularly in relation to more popular social media sites like Facebook – yet be satisfied that an effort to engage was even made at all. More research is needed.

Concluding Thoughts

DG CONNECT's stakeholder engagement strategy is a work in progress. As such, it would be unfair to judge the merits of the Stakeholder's Unit solely on the activities performed since its launch in July 2012. For the moment, the new unit is trying to establish itself as a valuable new player within DG CONNECT. It is also attempting to understand different ways of conceptualising and actualising stakeholder engagement in the EU. The External Stakeholder Survey is a first step in this direction in that it provides valuable insights into current public sentiment.

It is an exciting time to be following these debates on stakeholder engagement in EU policymaking. Yet, to go from these laudable experiments to use ICT to improve stakeholder engagement to the Holy Grail of criticism-free engagement requires more than a strategy, and certainly more than an inventory of tools and technologies that can be used to engage and interact with external stakeholders. DG CONNNECT's efforts to date are a welcome first step. The next steps are crucial: we need to see how this impulse for new forms of engagement will be turned into more efficient, effective and 'smarter' policymaking, and whether it will work within a broader EU governance context as well. A mandate for the new Stakeholder's Unit if ever there was one.

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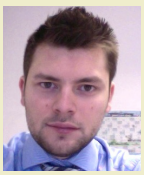

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