

Event

Significant amounts of time and money are being invested in public engagement processes without any evidence that the outputs are being used to improve public policy.

Significance

Governments across the OECD continue to engage publics in various forms of consultation and collective decision-making. This effort has been particularly focused on questions related to emerging, transformative technologies and in many cases is now required by law.

Analysis

Some assert the move to engage the public is a strategic response to a perceived democratic deficit – either grounded in conventional critiques of electoral democracy or derived from broader concerns with legitimate governance – while others suggest it is simply a tactical reaction to widespread controversy.

There is a broad spectrum of mechanisms and methods for public engagement, each with their own strengths and weaknesses. Within this spectrum, the number of participation mechanisms is apparently very large, with various inventories showing more than 100 different types of engagement. To complicate matters, many involve common elements and can be interchangeably named. Rowe and Frewer (2000) suggest an appropriate array of models of public engagement: referenda; public hearings; public opinion surveys; negotiated rule making; consensus conferences; citizen’s juries or panels; citizen’s advisory committees; and focus groups. One additional model – the expert advisory group, often augmented by one or more representatives of the *vox populi* – is also mooted as a proxy for public input. These nine methods encompass the normal range of options used in OECD countries.

Their value depends on their use. Phillips (2009) assesses the nine public engagement models against five objectives. First, none completely maps onto democratic norms. Hence, we cannot offer unambiguous advice to policy makers on which ones would solve the ‘democratic deficit.’ Second, no single system unambiguously offers reflexive decisions that are accountable, responsible and transparent – policy makers inevitably need to choose among those goals or to use more than one mechanism and then figure out how to reconcile any differences. Third, if the goal is to engage ordinary citizens who possess no special expertise, none can vest them with full engagement without offending other objectives. Fourth, the nature of the decision-making criteria (e.g. majoritarian, procedural or utilitarian) pairs more naturally with some types of engagement. Finally, while none of the public consultation methods are truly ethically grounded, mostly because those controlling the levers of power refuse to bind themselves to using public input in decision making, some can retrofit existing institutions by providing greater legitimacy for their decisions (Warren 2009).

Conclusion

Governments often face a challenge in using the output of these public engagement processes in the traditional hierarchy of decision-making in government. New norms of governance demand accountable, responsible and transparent outcomes. There is a need for a better understanding of how public engagement processes can enhance or undercut those goals, depending on how and when they are used.

Phillips, P. 2009. Democracy, governance and public engagement: A critical assessment. Conference on “Publics and emerging technologies: hindsight and foresight,” Banff, October.

Warren, M. 2009. Citizen Participation and Democratic Deficits: Considerations from the Perspective of Democratic Theory. In J. DeBardeleben and J. Pammet (eds.), *Activating the Citizen: Dilemmas of Participation in Europe and Canada*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.