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# An intercountry survey of participatory practices used for Open Government Partnership National Action Plan development

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**Abstract.** This paper maps the participatory process applied during the development of open government commitments by twenty-nine Open Government Partnership countries. It investigates the role and perceived value of e-participation practices and their relationship to inclusive interaction with stakeholders. The insights of the paper on the perceived value of the tools and methods used and the main impediments to the open government commitment creation process may help governments more effectively design their public participation efforts and increase the level of civic engagement in policy making. Although the results of this analysis derive from activities related to open government reforms, they may also be applicable to introducing participatory public policy formulation approaches in a broader range of policy domains.

**Keywords:** open government, public policy co-creation, e-participation, Open Government Partnership.

**Track:** General E-Government & Open Government

## 1 Introduction

This paper attempts to map participatory practices that are used by governments when designing public policy, specifically open government commitments. It analyzes public participation practices and tools that have been applied by twenty-nine governments that were active in the Open Government Partnership (OGP) during the development of National Action Plans (NAPs) with specific commitments on open government issues.

The presented practices have been applied to support an effective dialogue between government and civil society for policy formulation. Successful ones can be used as a tool to strengthen public accountability and transparency in government operations in

an era characterized by an erosion of trust in government [1]. The analysis of the perceived value of the applied practices along with the identification of the main impediments to the process may also help governments more effectively design their relevant public participation processes and increase the level of public participation in policy making.

Although the results of this analysis derive from processes related to open government reforms, they may also be applicable to introducing participatory public policy formulation approaches in a broader range of policy domains.

### **1.1 The concept of participation in public policy making**

Embedding the principle of participation in public policy making is not a new concept. Arnstein [2] introduced in 1969 the “*ladder of citizen participation*” outlining different levels of citizen participation ranging from pretextual to truly meaningful. Medimorec [3] added a level, “codetermination”, in which citizens co-decide, usually with politicians and administrators. The concept of participation evolved to Manzini’s “*map of participation*” [4] which further describes the involvement of different actors in the design process along with their interaction. In light of research that points to a loss of social capital [5] combined with and a decline in trust of government [6], civic engagement is seen as a necessary prerequisite and central component of vital democracies.

The most common approaches to citizen engagement include: electoral approaches (running for office, volunteering at campaigns), legislative and administrative information exchange approaches (public hearings), civil society approaches (participation via volunteer organizations, social clubs, and other forms of association) and deliberative and consensus-based approaches (joint action across sectors of society, classes of people, or types of individuals) [7].

An open, participatory approach to government is suggested to restore legitimacy to government and improve trust in its operation by enhancing accountability [8, 9] and attenuate corruption [10]. By consulting with citizens, government can improve transparency, access and service quality [11].

Enabling meaningful civic participation is seen as a fundamental requirement of well-functioning democracies and should be a priority for governments [12]. The OECD recognizes three levels of participation: information provision, which although a one way flow from the government to a two-way interaction that enables citizens to provide feedback; and active citizen participation, in which citizen’s engagement is requested for defining and shaping policies leaving the final decision under the responsibility of the government [14, 15].

An alternative citizen participation spectrum is offered by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) [16] with five levels: 1) Inform, which entails providing the public with the necessary information on a given issue; 2) Consult, describing efforts at getting simple feedback from the public; 3) Involve, which describes efforts to engage with the public in more interactive ways to more deeply address their concerns; 4) Collaborate, which entails a meaningful partnership with the public in each aspect of the decision making process utilizing co-creation methods; and 5) Empower, a stage that includes co-creation activities and puts the final decision-making in the

hands of the public as well [17]. The IAP2 public participation spectrum [18] is used by OGP to classify the quality of public participation.

## **1.2 E-participation in public policy making**

There is significant evidence that the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) can expand opportunities for civic engagement and increase opportunities for people to participate in decision-making processes and service delivery [19]. For these purposes e-participation can be defined as the “*process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy, decision-making, and service design and delivery to make it participatory, inclusive, and deliberative*” [20].

According to OECD guidelines [21] e-participation is dependent on three main conditions: (i) a clear focus on policies, decisions and governance practices to align them with to people’s needs; (ii) particular attention to the means of interaction – communication channels should be readily made available for people to offer their views and communicate among themselves as peers and with public authorities as partners; and (iii) clear focus on the characteristics of the interaction process between citizens and government to ensure the quality and legitimacy of e-participation efforts [22].

## **1.3 The participation principle in formulating open government public policies**

Open and participative governance has evolved into a central pillar in the effort to modernize public administration at a global level [23]. Formulating public policies on empowering citizens, enhancing transparency, promoting integrity and accountability are central to government efforts for administrative reforms. In parallel, many international, European and national initiatives assist governmental efforts to promote horizontal government policies on Open Government and Innovation [24].

Public policy formulation is part of the pre-decision phase of public policy making. This phase involves identifying a range of policy alternatives and specifying policy tools and solutions to address the challenges within the public policy agenda [25].

One of the most notable initiatives to support the global open government agenda is the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a multi-stakeholder platform launched in 2011, which in 2019 brings together 79 countries that have committed to making their governments more open and accountable [26]. Recognizing that the process of formulating open government policies involves a wide network of stakeholders and policy-makers, OGP promotes effective collaboration between governments and civil society organizations in open government policy making [27].

Each OGP participating country delivers bi-annually a National Action Plan (NAP) [28] which is the product of a co-creation effort between the government and civil society to develop concrete, time-bound and measurable open government commitments. Engaging civil society, citizens, and other stakeholders is considered a core element throughout the developing, implementing, monitoring and reporting processes of the action planning cycle [29].

The action plan evaluation process is comprised of two activities; progress reports produced by country local researchers working for the Independent Reporting Mechanism of the OGP and self-assessment reports produced by the participating governments. OGP's Participation and Co-creation Standards set out requirements for engaging civil society, citizens, and other stakeholders throughout the OGP process. These standards also guide the content to be included in Self-Assessment Reports and include feedback mechanisms, space for co-creation, and facilitating a multi-stakeholder forum [30].

OGP also uses the International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2) "Participation Spectrum" to define the levels of citizen participation in developing an open government action plan. As already mentioned, the spectrum's participation levels are: Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate and Empower — government and civil society make joint decisions [31].

## **2 Methodology**

The methodology of the present study includes analysis of the responses to a survey questionnaire which collected information on practices and tools applied during the development of OGP National Action Plans. These responses have also been compared to the results of the assessment made by the OGP Independent Reporting Mechanism on the levels of participation during action plan creation, as well as indicators such as the IAP2 spectrum for each country.

### **2.1 Participants**

The participants of this study were members of the official network of National Points of Contact (PoC) in OGP participating countries. In each participating government, the PoC is the person responsible for coordinating the government's activities in relation to OGP [32]. PoC's are working-level counterparts to a ministerial-level representative. They are direct advisors to the national representative of each country to OGP and are usually drawn from the civil service of each country. During the development of a National Action Plan, the PoC engages with civil society and other stakeholders and cooperates with Ministries and other government organizations involved in the agenda that emerges during the co-creation process. A PoC also engages with OGP Support Unit to receive information on the OGP Participation and Co-creation Standards and on international best practices that could be applicable to the national policy agenda.

Twenty-nine PoCs responded to the questionnaire which corresponds to 36.7% of the total OGP countries in 2018. The countries represented are: Argentina, Armenia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malawi, Malta, Mongolia, Nigeria, Panama, Paraguay, Philippines, Republic of North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Ukraine.

## **2.2 Research sources and procedures**

### **Survey questionnaire on the co-creation of OGP National Action Plans**

An original electronic survey questionnaire based on the OGP Participation and Co-creation Standards [33] and recent literature on co-creation methods and tools [34-37] was created to examine the co-creation approaches that OGP participating countries have applied to develop open government National Action Plans. A pilot study was conducted to verify the validity of the structure and content of the questionnaire. Five officials from OGP, working for the Support Unit and the Independent Reporting Mechanism, examined the questionnaire. The comments provided were taken into consideration for the final version. The online questionnaire was subsequently distributed to the official network of the PoCs in all 79 OGP participating governments.

The questionnaire explored the latest NAP creation period (2016-2018) and aimed to collect information related to the following key factors of the co-creation process: who initiated the co-creation process within government; the profile of participating stakeholders and the level of their contribution; the process objectives in each government; the characteristics of the engagement approach; the co-creation methods and tools employed; the number of participants in the co-creation activities; the impediments to the process; and the perceived contribution of the co-creation process on improving the completion rate of the Action Plan reforms.

### **Use of e-participation methods and tools in the co-creation process**

The questionnaire also aimed to identify ICT-supported methods or tools that were used in the co-creation process. Specifically: use of a virtual platform for stakeholder engagement; use of ICT-supported co-creation methods (including social network analysis, online public consultations); use of ICT-supported co-creation tools (including consultation platforms, social media accounts, mobile contribution application, web discussion forums, online surveys); and value of including face to face meetings versus virtual / distance approaches in the co-creation process.

### **Comparisons between questionnaire responses and OGP assessment results**

OGP evaluates country performance on their action plan creation process using both its Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM) as well as other openly available indicators. OGP then publishes independent progress reports for each participating country via the IRM. For each National Action Plan, the report summarizes the assessment of the development process and the country's progress in fulfilling key open government principles. OGP also releases, in open formats, the data underlying these reports [38, 39]. OGP data include an assessment of how each country has implemented the OGP consultation guidelines and to what extent each government works together with the civil society to develop the National Action Plan. OGP has published co-creation process assessment data for eighteen out of the twenty-nine countries that filled-in the OGP Co-Creation Questionnaire. The responses have been compared to the following indicators derived from already available OGP assessment data: *Level of public influence* using

IAP2 spectrum; “*Open participation*” or “*Invitation only*” approach during consultation; and *Consultation steps followed* via six indicators that represent the main steps to be followed during Action Plan development (Availability of timeline prior to the consultation; Adequate advance notice; Awareness raising activities; Online consultation; In person consultations with the national community; Online publication of a summary of the received comments).

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 Analysis of the survey questionnaire responses

According to the responses to the questionnaire, the surveyed PoCs indicate that in 55 percent of the cases the government itself initiated the Action Plan development process while in 7 countries (24%) the process has been initiated by the government together with the Civil Society. In the rest of the cases (6 countries, 21%), the process was started by a multi-stakeholder forum.

The top identified reasons for using co-creation methodologies are related to strengthening the role of the stakeholders in the process (Engage stakeholders 97%; Increase trust between stakeholders 83%; Identify stakeholder needs 72%; Create a sense of ownership with stakeholders 66%). Raising awareness and communication have also been important factors in the process (Raising the level of awareness on different topics 59%; Improving communication processes 56%). It is worth noting that only one country replied that the required OGP co-creation criteria have been a reason for using co-creation methodologies in the process.

A significant percentage of countries (41.4%) have involved more than 100 participants, while 37.9% have involved more between 31 and 100 participants and 17.2% involved smaller groups of 1-30 people. The participating PoCs (72%) stated that civil society had a high contribution during the co-creation phase (in a scale from *1.Very much* to *5.Not at all*, 1: 48%; 2: 24%; 3: 24%; 4:3%, 5:0%).

The majority of participating PoCs (69%) stated that the co-creation process improves the content of the action plan (in a scale from *1.Very much* to *5.Not at all*, 1: 55%; 2: 14%; 3: 17%; 4:7% , 5:7%). More than half of the participants (58%) agreed that the co-creation process also improves the level of completion of the National Action Plan reforms (in a scale from *1.Very much* to *5.Not at all*, 1: 24%; 2: 34%; 3: 28%; 4:10%, 5:3%).

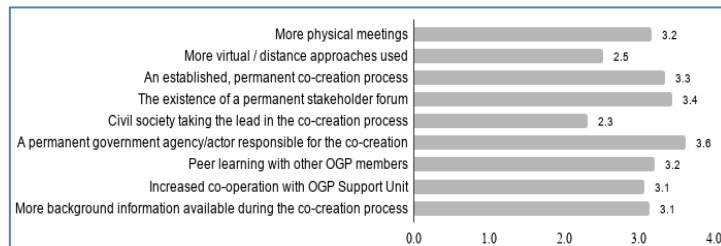
In terms of involving specific stakeholder groups, all PoCs (100%) responded that they usually engage civil society organizations and government departments. PoCs also involve academics (72%), citizens (55%), as well as the private sector and subnational government representatives (both groups at 72%). Parliament (41%) and the OGP Support Unit (38%) were less frequently involved while political parties have been totally absent from the co-creation process in all 29 countries.

Less than half of the countries (38%) have used e-participation platforms to involve stakeholders in the co-creation process. Except for one country that used a financial award scheme for the most active participating civil society organization, no rewards were used for co-creation participants.

The most frequently used co-creation methods include: SWOT workshops (43%), strategic roadmaps (29%), Living Labs (29%), appraisal interviews (14%), Personas (14%) and social network analysis (14%). To support the co-creation methods, the following tools have been primarily used by the countries included in the survey: Social media (83%), Crowd-mapping (35%), Mobile contribution applications (26%), Mind maps / Collaboration maps (17%), Issue cards (13%) and Motivational matrices (13%).

The participating PoCs indicated that the main impediments in the co-creation process have been the limited resources (66%) and the lack of time (52%) on the part of stakeholders as well as the difficulty in engaging stakeholders (38%). Other impediments include discontinuities caused by government changes and the electoral cycle (28%), difficulties in achieving consensus (21%) and a lack of trust in the effectiveness of the co-creation process (17%).

The OGP PoCs have also been asked to assess the significance of key factors in the co-creation process. The existence of permanent structures and processes, specifically the existence of permanent government agencies responsible for co-creation as well as the existence of a permanent stakeholder forum have been highlighted as key factors for the effectiveness of the process as shown in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1.** Assessment of key factors in the co-creation process (Five-point Likert scale: 0=not important, 4=very important)

Almost a quarter of countries introduced ICT-supported methods in the OGP action plan co-creation process (24%). The main e-participation methods used are online public consultations and social network analysis. Less than half of the countries (38%) have used virtual platforms to engage with stakeholders but more countries have used e-participation tools (69%) in the co-creation process. The main e-participation tools used are social media (68%) and mobile contribution applications (21%). Some PoCs have also reported the use of web discussion forums (4%), online surveys (4%) and consultation platforms (4%).

PoCs report that use of a virtual engagement platforms does not make a significant contribution to NAP content quality. The countries that used a virtual platform, (38% of the total) reported 1: 55%; 2: 9%; 3: 18%; 4:9%, 5:9% while the rest reported 1: 56%; 2: 17%; 3: 17%; 4:6%, 5:6% (in a scale from 1.Very much to 5.Not at all).

Adding face to face meetings during the co-creation process is reported by most PoCs (86%) as being of importance, more so than including virtual approaches in the co-creation process (55%).



### 3.2 Comparing questionnaire responses and OGP assessment results

Out of the 29 countries participating in this study, 18 participating countries have thus far been up assessed by OGP under the five levels of the IAP2 spectrum. They are classified in Table 1:

**Table 1.** IAP2 Level of public influence in the co-creation process of OGP countries

IAP2 level	Countries
Inform	No countries
Consult	Jordan, Lithuania, Malawi, Malta, Netherlands, Serbia
Involve	Armenia, Czech Republic, Italy, Sierra Leone
Collaborate	Brazil, Chile, North Macedonia, Mongolia, Paraguay, Romania, Ukraine
Empower	Greece

Comparing IAP2 levels with the use of e-participation tools reveals that of those countries belonging to lower IAP2 levels (Consult and Involve) half (50%) have used e-participation tools while 75% of the countries in the upper IAP2 levels (Collaborate and Empower) have done the same.

OGP PoCs have been asked to indicate whether the co-creation process improves the content of the Action Plan<sup>1</sup>. Half of the countries (50%) belonging to the lower IAP2 levels (Consult and Involve) stated that the process improves the content of the Action Plan (in a scale from *1.Very much* to *5.Not at all*, 1: 40%; 2: 10%; 3: 30%; 4:10%, 5:0%). A higher percentage (75%) of the countries belonging to the upper IAP2 levels (Collaborate and Empower) agreed that co-creation improves the content of the Action Plan (1: 50%; 2: 25%; 3: 13%; 4:0%, 5:13%).

When asked if the co-creation process improves the level of completion of the included commitments, 40% of countries in the lower IAP2 levels (Consult and Involve) responded positively (1: 30%; 2: 10%; 3: 50%; 4:10%, 5:0%). More countries (63%) of the ones belonging to the upper IAP2 levels (Collaborate and Empower) have done the same (1: 13%; 2: 50%; 3: 13%; 4:13%, 5:13%).

PoCs have also been asked to assess the contribution of civil society organizations during the co-creation phase. Half of the countries (50%) belonging to the lower IAP2 levels (Consult and Involve) agreed that CSO's contributed highly (1: 30%; 2: 20%; 3: 50%; 4:0%, 5:0%). Most of the countries (88%) of the countries belonging to the upper IAP2 levels (Collaborate and Empower) agreed on the significant contribution of the CSO's in the process (1: 25%; 2: 63%; 3: 0%; 4:13%, 5:0%).

Regarding possible impediments to the co-creation process, half of the countries (50%) that are classified under the upper levels of public influence (Collaborate, Empower) have identified "*Difficulties in achieving consensus*" as an impediment to their

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<sup>1</sup> All the results reported in this section of the paper are on a scale from 1: Very much to 5: Not at all, unless otherwise specified in the text.

process. On the other hand, no countries (0%) from the group of countries belonging to the lower IAP2 levels (Consult and Involve) recognized this impediment.

In terms of accessibility of the stakeholders to the consultation process, the 18 participating countries that have been assessed by OGP are classified under two relevant categories as follows: *Open Participation*: Armenia, Brazil, Chile, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Paraguay, Romania, Serbia, Sierra Leone and Ukraine, while *Invitation Only*: Czech Republic, Jordan, Malawi, Malta, Mongolia, Netherlands.

For countries that limited the process to invited stakeholders, the perceived contribution of the civil society organizations is lower compared to countries that applied open consultation procedures (responses for open participation are 1: 33%; 2: 50%; 3: 17% and for invitation only 1: 17%; 2: 17%; 3: 50%; 4: 17%).

Out of the countries responding to the survey that have been classified by the OGP (18 countries) on their completion of the prescribed six consultation steps (timeline availability; advance notice; awareness raising; online consultation; in person consultations; summary of comments) most (67%) have followed all six.<sup>2</sup>

According to the OGP assessment, all countries have performed in-person consultations. (timeline availability: 78%; advance notice: 94%; awareness raising: 72%; online consultation: 83%; in-person consultations: 100%; summary of comments: 78%).

## 4 Discussion

According to the paper's key findings, a participatory, open, public policy design process is usually initiated by the government itself with a view to strengthen the role of the stakeholders in the process. Governments usually engage with stakeholders that represent civil society organizations, government departments and academic institutions while parliaments and political parties are less involved in the process. Most countries decide to design consultation procedures that are open and accessible, instead of limiting the process to invited stakeholders. They manage to reach the fourth highest level (*Collaborate*) in the IAP2 spectrum of public participation which points to a meaningful partnership with between stakeholders in the policy formulation and decision-making process.

Governments recognize the effective contribution of civil society organizations during the co-creation phase, especially in countries with a high IAP2 level of public participation. Some governments do introduce virtual platforms for stakeholders' engagement. However, it is not perceived as a practice that increases the effectiveness of the co-creation process or the quality of the process outputs.

Governments apply various co-creation approaches but the wide inclusion of e-participation practices is comparatively low. E-participation is enabled mainly through online public consultations and social network analysis. E-participation tools used

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<sup>2</sup> The full classification is as follows: 1 step: Malta; 2 steps: Malawi; 3 steps: Jordan, Lithuania; 4 steps: Netherlands; 5 steps: Czech Republic; 6 steps: Armenia, Brazil, Chile, Greece, Italy, North Macedonia, Mongolia, Paraguay, Romania, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Ukraine.

mainly include consultation platforms, social media, mobile contribution applications, web discussion forums and online surveys. It is worth noting that e-participation tools are mostly used in co-creation processes in countries that have reached a significant IAP2 level.

Co-creation processes usually favor in-person meeting approaches such as SWOT workshops, strategic roadmaps and Living Labs. These processes might be assisted by ICT participation tools such as crowd-mapping, mind maps and issue cards but they usually require the participants to be present in the same physical setting.

Governments, especially in countries with a comparatively mature participatory process as indicated by their IAP2 level, consider that co-creation can highly improve the contents of the action plan and the level of commitment completion. Additionally, the existence of permanent structures and processes in the government along with the involvement of a permanent stakeholder forum are considered key factors for the effectiveness of co-creation processes.

Although virtual approaches are considered effective co-creation processes, governments give higher priority to face-to-face interaction with stakeholders to maximize the effectiveness of the process. In a similar vein, limited human resources and lack of time are considered key impediments to such processes – not lack of ICT tools.

Establishing central agencies that are responsible for citizen feedback and participatory process adoption and co-ordination can improve feedback quality, relevance and utility and significantly aid meaningful citizen participation. Participation efforts themselves could be submitted to stakeholders' review and examination and perhaps be co-created through citizen feedback. In some cases, meaningful engagement with citizens could suffer by the use of certain 'arm's length' ICT tools such as surveys, quick polls and others.

The key findings of the paper provide insights into the public participation practices used by governments when designing public policy in an open government setting. They point to a realization by government officials involved in supporting open government commitments and policies that citizen participation is understood not simply as an e-government or e-participation project but as an equal access and direct democracy issue. In such a scenario, meaningful participation and inclusive interaction with stakeholders is considered more important than the availability of ICT tools.

#### **4.1 Limitations and proposed future research**

An analysis of the remaining OGP countries could address limitations arising from the fact that OGP had completed their assessment for a subset of the participating countries in this survey. This could improve conclusions based on comparing data obtained from survey responses and OGP assessment. By the end of 2019 OGP should officially publish all the evaluation reports for the relevant NAPs. These will provide further insights into the effectiveness of the Action Plan implementation in all twenty-nine countries. Future work could focus on further analyzing the data underlying these reports to identify possible associations between National Action Plan development practices and qualitative factors related to the completion and effectiveness of the Action Plan implementation. A follow-up study targeting the remaining OGP countries could also address

the fact that of the twenty-nine countries that responded to the survey the representation of European states is comparatively high (52% of European OGP members, 32% of OGP countries in the Americas, 27% of Asia-Pacific countries and 14,3% of the African OGP countries responded).

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