

Executive summary

These are guidelines for any individual or organisation interested in designing, planning, and implementing a citizen participation process. The guidelines walk the reader through ten practical steps, and detail eight different methods that can be used to involve citizens in policy making. This publication is illustrated with good practice examples.

Citizen participation has intrinsic and instrumental benefits. It leads to a better and more democratic policy-making process, which becomes more transparent, inclusive, legitimate, and accountable. It enhances public trust in government and democratic institutions by giving citizens a role in public decision making. By taking into account and using citizens' experience and knowledge, it helps public institutions tackle complex policy problems and leads to better policy results.

Ten-step path of planning and implementing a citizen participation process

Citizen participation processes should be organised only when there is room for meaningful citizen participation in the decision-making process. A ten-step path was developed to provide guidance along the way:

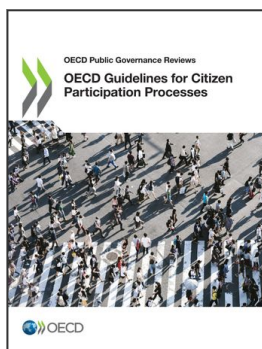
1. **Identifying the problem to solve and the moment for participation:** The first step when planning a citizen participation process is to identify if there is a genuine problem that the public can help solve. If there is, then the problem needs to be defined and framed as a question. Citizens can be actively involved in any of the stages or throughout the policy cycle: when identifying the issue, formulating policy, making decisions, implementing policy, or evaluating it.
2. **Defining the expected results:** A clear understanding of the expected outcomes or results of the participation process is needed to define the desired inputs or contributions from citizens and the impact they will have on the final decision.
3. **Identifying the relevant group of people to involve and recruiting participants:** Different types of groups can be involved in a participation process, such as a broad group of citizens from diverse backgrounds, a representative group of citizens, a particular community based on geography or other demographic characteristics, as well as stakeholders, ranging from non-governmental organisations to businesses or academia. Different strategies can be employed to recruit them – an open call, a closed call, or a civic lottery.
4. **Choosing the participation method:** Eight citizen participation methods and their characteristics are compared and described to help choose the most applicable one in a given situation: information and communication, open meetings/town hall meetings, civic monitoring, public consultation, open innovation, citizen science, participatory budgeting, and representative deliberative processes.
5. **Choosing the right digital tools:** Digital tools can allow citizens and stakeholders to interact and submit their inputs in different ways. They should be chosen to facilitate the participation method.

Policy makers should keep in mind the existing “digital divides”, plan for technical, human, and financial resources needed to deploy digital tools, and choose tools that are transparent and accountable. When possible, digital tools should be chosen alongside in-person methods.

6. **Communicating about the process:** Public communication can help at every step of the way – from recruiting citizens, to ensuring the transparency of the process, to extending the benefits of learning about a specific policy issue to the broader public. Constant, clear, and understandable communication that uses plain language is most effective.
7. **Implementing the participation process:** There are general considerations that concern the implementation of any participatory process: preparing an adequate timeline, identifying the needed resources, ensuring inclusion and accessibility, and considering a citizens’ journey through a participatory process.
8. **Using citizen input and providing feedback:** The inputs received as part of the participatory process should be given careful and respectful consideration and used as stipulated in the beginning – with clear justifications if any inputs or recommendations are not used or implemented. Communicating to participants about the status of their inputs and the ultimate outcome of their participation helps to close the feedback loop.
9. **Evaluating the participation process:** Through evaluation, the quality and neutrality of a participatory process can be measured and demonstrated to the broader public. Evaluation also creates an opportunity for learning by providing evidence and lessons for public authorities and practitioners about what went well, and what did not.
10. **Fostering a culture of participation:** A shift from ad hoc participation processes to a culture of participation can be supported by embedding institutionalised participation mechanisms, multiplying opportunities for citizens to exercise their democratic “muscles” beyond participation, and protecting a vibrant civic space.

Guiding principles for quality citizen participation processes

The methods of citizen participation outlined in these guidelines rely on principles of good practice to ensure their quality: **clarity and impact, commitment and accountability, transparency, inclusiveness and accessibility, integrity, privacy, information, resources, and evaluation.**



From:

OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/f765caf6-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2022), "Executive summary", in *OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/b62638d4-en>

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