Chapter IV. Institutionalizing Citizen Engagement

In Canada, and around the world, very few governments, departments or large organizations have institutionalized citizen engagement. Most citizen engagement initiatives flow from a desire to attain specific policy goals and are limited in time and scope. This chapter briefly discusses the need for and the benefits of institutionalizing citizen engagement.

Institutionalizing citizen engagement has both structural and cultural components. First, it requires that citizen engagement becomes a regular, to-be-expected component of the policy development processes. Second, and equally important, the public and policy makers, both of whom are currently somewhat skeptical about citizen engagement, need to be convinced that citizen engagement processes and their results are of value and are a legitimate part of policy development and democracy.\(^{11}\)

According to Turnbull and Aucoin\(^{12}\), there are four criteria necessary for the institutionalization of public involvement.\(^{13}\)

1. **Public involvement is a core element embedded in the policy process:** Rather than remaining an occasional project, citizen engagement needs to be incorporated in policy development to the same degree that experts, stakeholders and interest groups are currently consulted. Greater trust can be built in the political process if members of the public do not perceive these efforts to occur only when it is convenient and instrumental to a larger political agenda.

2. **Public input is given substantial weight in policy development processes; it cannot be a “token” effort, in perception or reality:** As previously discussed, faith in the current consultative process has largely been eroded because citizens feel like their voices are not heard, that their opinion has been sought after a decision has been made or that the consultation process is in place simply to appease public desire for a say. If one of the overarching goals of citizen engagement is to renew faith in political process, then it is absolutely essential that this point be given substantive consideration throughout the planning and execution stages so as to not repeat past mistakes.

3. **The commitment to institutionalized public involvement is government-wide as opposed to concentrated in certain departments:** Many barriers to widespread adoption of citizen engagement are the result of prevalent false assumptions that citizens cannot grasp complex scientific and social problems, and that they are unconcerned with matters that do not directly affect them. As discussed, there is both a cultural and structural project ahead if citizen engagement is to be implemented across governments.

4. **The efforts to institutionalize public involvement include the public service and parliament:** Both the public service and parliament have different but complementary roles to play in institutionalizing citizen engagement. MPs could potentially use citizen engagement as a tool to maintain contact with their constituents, to better inform them of emerging policies and to better equip themselves to debate policy issues. Parliamentary committees and local constituency offices could use citizen involvement exercises to enable citizens not only to provide input but to dialogue with MPs on policy matters.
There are a variety of methods and tools to choose from when planning a citizen engagement initiative (Chapter VII provides further elaboration). The selection of method and tools depends upon one’s objectives, context, available resources, timeframe, capacity and other variables. Institutionalizing citizen engagement holds its own set of considerations. In Chapter VIII, two case examples are provided of institutionalized citizen engagement.

For further reading:

Carolyn Bennett is an MP in Toronto who has utilized citizen engagement extensively in her work. Read more about it in her document entitled: Citizen Engagement. 2004. Available at: www.carolynbennett.ca/issuePosting.cfm?ID=9&CFID=15429929&CFTOKEN=49682052.

