Book Review
Citizen Engagement in Public Policy and the Participative WEB

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These two OECD publications address key issues related to citizen participation in government policy making. The first study explores the reasons why and how public engagement is essential in contemporary public policy design and public decision-making processes, and the second examines the process of user-created content through Web 2.0, Wikis and social networking. While one is focused on public policy and the other on citizens’ use of Web 2.0 and on user-created content, both address the role, actual and potential, of participative web on citizen involvement in the public sphere.

“For Focus on Citizens: Public engagement for better policy and services” is organised into three parts. The first part (“Focus on Citizens: Public engagement for better policy and services”) examines the reasons why open and inclusive policy making should be adopted, and explores the use of participative web in public policy. The second part (Case studies in citizen engagement) examines examples of citizen participation in different policy fields: regional and urban development; local participatory budgeting; national level participatory programmes; and on building capacity and tools for participation. In the last part (Practitioners’ perspectives: why now, how and what next?), the book discusses the perspectives of practitioners in different countries about citizen engagement in public policy.

For the authors, open policy making indicates that government offers its citizens the necessary information on key aspects of the policy process, while inclusive policy making means that various social classes are included in all stages of the policy process. The evidence collected points to a number of advantages that result from an open and inclusive approach to public policy: helps government to better un-

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nderstand the needs of different social classes, giving voice to members of the lower social classes that would not be heard in normal circumstances; public policy making can benefit from innovative practices developed in the private sector; governments can more easily motivate citizens and civil society organizations to change their behaviour and reduce costs associated with delays in the implementation stage; greater inclusion means more efficacy, due to decisions based on more and better information, and more equity in the definition of ‘public interest’.

The findings support the argument that public involvement is a condition for effective governance, since, among other reasons, governments seem to be no longer able to deal with the growing complexity of the challenges they have to face, ranging from internal or domestic issues to global environmental challenges, as those associated with climate change. In addition, increasingly more well-informed and more educated citizens tend to further scrutinize government policies and politicians. These shifts require that government work closely with their citizens and other stakeholders. In other words, the results of this OECD research suggest that open and inclusive policy helps to improve public policy making and public services.

However, while it is consensual that open and inclusive government has advantages, the evidence provided indicates that governments tend also to see some risks in this process. For instance, respondents point out, among other potential risks, the following ones: open and inclusive government may well delay the decision making process; the entire process can be hijacked by interest groups; citizens can become confused about the exact role played by politicians in the decision process and the responsibilities that can be assigned directly to them; higher administrative costs; consultation fatigue, with the concomitant risk of diminishing citizens’ trust in government in case of failure of specific policies. Notwithstanding these risks, governments in OECD countries have embraced this concept of open and inclusive government. It seems, from this evidence that it is more or less consensual that democratic governments must now, among other measures, turn public participation a necessary tenet of public policy design and operation, including effective evaluation tools, and extensive use of participative web tools.

As recalled in the book, the OECD adopted, in 2001, a number of guiding principles for the promotion of good practice in citizen consultation and active participation in policy making. Of those principles, member states seem to have privileged, so far, the adoption of legislation ensuring rights of access to governmental information, and measures for the promotion of active citizenship. Among the main difficulties faced in this process, member states pointed the lack of resources and time assigned to these reforms, with the evaluation of public policies being named as the most difficult measure to implement until now.

The second book under review here, “Participative Web and User-Created Content. WEB 2.0, Wikis and Social Networking”, explores, among other questions, the concept of user-created content (UCC), its different forms, key drivers and its social, cultural and economic impacts, as well as its future challenges. The book is organised into seven chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 offer an introduction to the concept of participative web and user-created content and how to measure it. This is followed, in chapter 3, by a discussion of the four types of drivers responsible for the rapid growth of user-created content, and, in Chapter 4, by a description of the main types of user-created content and types of UCC hosting platforms. The next two chapters explore economic impacts (e.g., the emergence of new business models; economic impacts on specific sectors, etc.), and social impacts (e.g., in culture, education and in the field of citizenship, etc.). The last chapter explores opportunities and challenges for users, business and public policy.

Based on the concept of user-created content, defined as “content made publicly available over the Internet, which reflects a certain amount of creative effort and which is created outside of professional routines and practices”,

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the book presents a typology of UCC types (e.g., text; photos and images; music and audio; video and film; and content posted on products), a taxonomy of UCC hosting platforms (e.g., blogs; wikis and other text-based collaboration formats; group-based aggregation and social bookmarking; podcasting; social networking sites; and virtual world content), and identifies the following drivers responsible of UCC growth: technological drivers associated with the expanded use of broadband access and the use of new web technologies; social drivers, related with demographic factors, cultural attitudes towards privacy, etc.; economic drivers associated with the growing interest and involvement of private firms in the media sector, interested in hosting user-created content (e.g. newspapers, TV, Radio, etc.); and legal drivers associated with the adoption of more flexible licenses.

The evidence provided also suggests that, despite the fact that UCC is largely non-commercial, it has economic impacts for numerous non-governmental stakeholders in this field. If in the beginning, UCC has been regarded as a competitor by traditional media and by independent or syndicated content producers, UCC is now seen by traditional media as part of its core business, moving from the creation of on-line content to the creation of facilities for UCC creators to publish their materials. It has also social implications, as a result of an increased democratization of media production, which led to changes in the nature of communication between citizens and between citizens and governments, with the associated risks of exclusion, cultural fragmentation, and security, not to mention the quality of online content.

The rapid increase of user-created content creates new challenges and opportunities for governments and other stakeholders, as well. For example, the need to ensure wide-spread broadband access; the definition of ‘fair-use’ and other copyright issues; the preservation of the freedom of expression for UCC; information quality and accuracy; inappropriate and illegal content; safety, privacy and identity theft in the Internet; and networks security, among other issues.

In sum, the evidence presented in these two OECD publications show why and how citizen participation in public policy design and decision-making is now seen in democratic countries as a basic condition for an effective and efficient government. In addition, the growing use of web 2.0 tools, by citizens and governments as well, and the related emergence and expansion of a more participative web, is changing the way citizens communicate with government in general, and how they participate in public policy design and decision-making, in particular. The exponential growth of user-created content has social, cultural and economic impacts on individual citizens, on the economy, and on government, as well.

Notwithstanding the extensive empirical evidence, on which these two books are based, the development of participative web and user-created contents are relatively recent processes, in particular in public policy formulation and implementation, and for that reason, there are other issues and questions missing on these two publications, which require further empirical investigation in the future, addressed from different theoretical perspectives, and focused also on countries outside OECD membership.
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