Use of ICT enabled tools for conducting Public Consultations

May 2013

The third video conference of a knowledge exchange series around public consultations was organized on May 21, 2013, by the World Bank Institute and the World Bank Middle East and North Africa Vice-Presidency. The session convened government officials and civil society practitioners from Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia to discuss how to use online tools when conducting public consultations.

Offline in-country conversations

In Jordan, participants stressed the need to learn more about online tools for public consultation given the salience these tools have gained in the region. Participants also suggested that specific recommendations should be given to stakeholders and other relevant agencies providing guidance on how to move ahead with public consultations in Jordan.

Participants in Morocco highlighted the importance of ICT-based public consultation tools. Although most of them were already familiar with the concept, they were also interested in learning more about other kinds of tools such as SMS and radio that could potentially apply to the Moroccan context.

Tunisian participants noted the importance of deepening their knowledge on online tools to improve existing ones and current practices. A representative from the ICT unit, working under the Prime Minister Office, found the presentation very helpful given what has already been done by the government.
Using online tools to conduct public consultations

Luis Esquivel, WBI Operations Officer, welcomed all the participants and noted that the session’s objectives were to provide a better understanding of the various types of consultations tools, particularly online mechanisms.

Matt Leighninger, Executive Director for Deliberative Democracy Consortium, started his presentation by highlighting the impacts of the Internet. First, he noted that the Internet has empowered individual citizens, and overall as a group, by facilitating information and connection to a larger community, but at the same time citizens have less time to spare and have become more skeptical towards the authorities. Secondly, through various platforms, particularly social media, citizen groups get empowered, which allows for new forms of engagement and to reach out to a larger and more diverse population in a sustained way. Mr. Leighninger noted that in order to take advantage of these new capacities, it is important to develop a long-term plan.

On the other hand, the Internet has not changed other important aspects when conducting public consultations such as the need to develop face-to-face relationships and an overall engagement plan. Mr. Leighninger stressed the important role organizations and other groups outside government can play in facilitating the engagement with citizens.

While the Internet could play a catalyzing role for engagement, it also poses a challenge given the gap created by digital technology. Though Internet access is growing around the globe, it is worth noting that people use different hardware and access different places on the Web.

5 Scenarios that can help identify appropriate tools:

1. Get immediate citizen reaction to a particular, well-known issue or decision.
2. Need citizens to reach a consensus on actions.
3. Need new ideas and information from citizens to help government be more effective.
4. Encourage citizens to take shared ownership of an issue as government cannot solve all the problems.
5. Educate citizens on a particular issue, spread information.

Online tools can serve different purposes such as: to provide citizens with information and help them gather data, promote deliberation among citizens on public issues, facilitate the connection and communication with other citizens, help people generate and rank ideas through crowdsourcing, and visualize options, for instance, when promoting participatory budget.

“Communities are as complicated online as offline... it’s important to figure out how to reach out to the citizens”
Matt Leighninger
Finally, Mr. Leighninger underlined that among the common mistakes made when using online tools for public consultations are treating the Internet as a one-way medium rather a mechanism to also receive feedback, not having a pro-active engagement, and not implementing the ideas gathered.

A Q&A session followed the presentation, where participants expressed their interest in better understanding the needs for an enabling environment for public consultations, the tools that could be used when a large segment of the population possesses limited education and knowledge, and how the engagement should be initiated. During this session, Marcos Mendiburu from WBI, also noted the importance of building the capacity of government officials to use online tools; trainings could mitigate reluctance from government officials to employ online tools. In order not to place a burden upon the population when conducting consultations, it was suggested to use the simplest of technologies such as texting and using universities and public libraries which have already the necessary infrastructure. Collaboration between government and civil society, as well as collaboration among different ministries and public institutions is crucial for effective engagement.

When having a group process it is important to have in mind 3 basic elements: to give the opportunity for people to speak about the issue of concern as it will help build understanding between stakeholders, allow people involved in setting the rules of the engagement, and explaining the different options to implement suggestions.

**Next Steps**

At the end of the session Saad Filali Meknassi, WBI consultant, emphasized the importance of reflecting on the learning achieved through the three sessions to prepare for the upcoming face-to-face event on June 10-11, 2013.