
Government – Community Engagement

A reflection on recent initiatives in the United States and New Zealand looking at how the governments can better engage with their publics¹

In the past year, both the United States² and New Zealand governments have re-examined the way in which they engage with their publics, calling for public opinion into how they can improve the relationship between government agencies and the people and communities they serve.

While each initiative has asked different questions and, it appears, will inevitably come to different conclusions, both centred around the need for government to foster a more collaborative and transparent relationship with the public, as well as strengthen trust between citizens and those who govern them.

In the United States focus has centred on opening up lines of communication and allowing the public freer access to government information; whilst in New Zealand the approach has focused on building more direct interdependent relationships between government agencies and the community and voluntary sector.

Even though the United States and New Zealand appear to have taken very different approaches for tackling similar concerns, each initiative is a worthy example of the way in which governments around the world are re-examining their relationship with their constituents and striving for a more engaged approach to politics and the running of their nations.

Central for both initiatives was the idea that the role of government agencies is no longer to merely inform the public, as passive observers, but to some how engage with them.

This is not a new concept, but it is a concept that has not been fully embraced across all government agencies in either nation, something each respected government is hoping to encourage.

At the United States' Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Community Involvement Training conference, held in Seattle in August 2009, many discussions revolved around community consultation and the need to more appropriately involve citizens.

¹ All comments and observations in this paper are the opinion of the author, made from reading through materials about the two initiatives, discussions with practitioners and her own experiences working for a government agency and spending time as an international fellow with The Kettering Foundation.

² At the time that this report was submitted the United States' *Open Government Directive* had not been released – all information in this paper was gauged from pre-released documents, the White House Open Government website and articles.

However, what this exactly means is not always clear-cut.

During the opening plenary, the Assistant Administrator for EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response, Mathy Stanislaus, stressed the importance of defining the difference between education and consultation.

"Consultation is a two-way street and an exchange of ideas and information," Mr Stanislaus told a room full of hundreds of EPA staff and consultants. "Education implies a one-way street and information giving without response."

This message was quickly reinforced by the Acting Regional Administrator for EPA Region 10, Michelle Pirzadeh, who noted that the way in which the agency named how it relates with communities was a reflection of new attitudes within the agency in how they view their relationship with the public.

Within EPA, the term community relations has, in recent times, been renamed as community involvement; going one step further, Ms Pirzadeh asked whether the next step would be to call this line of work community consultation.

But is consultation enough?

In many cases it could easily be argued that the answer is no.

While the move from education and one-way communication to community involvement and consultation is a positive step in engaging communities, it is not enough and for many citizens "consultation" has become a dirty word.

It has become another box that government agencies need to tick when creating new policy or developing new agendas.

At its heart consultation involves discussion, which is a step in the right direction when moving away from a culture of one-way communication and government agencies telling communities what they need, but discussion is no longer enough.

There is a need for consultation to become interdependent engagement, or collaboration³. Governments need to move away from facilitating conversations with the public – often discarding what they learn – and refocus on building positive relationships and a culture of trust.

One only needs to look at the definitions of engagement and collaboration to see that they

³ In some circles people do not like the term collaboration as it has overtones of the collaboration in Europe with the Nazis – for example, in France where those who worked with the Germans were called collaborators. Therefore, in New Zealand engagement is the preferred term.

are infinitely more appropriate words for governments to be using when referring to the way they need to engage with citizens.

Connection, teamwork, partnership, association, relationship and cooperation are terms that all point to a reciprocal affiliation, something both the United States and New Zealand initiatives hope to encourage.

In the land-of-the-free, President Barack Obama's first official act after his inauguration on 20 January 2009 was to issue a Transparency and Open Government memorandum. In it, he directed the person in the new position of federal Chief Technology Officer to recommend within 120 days actions agencies should take to foster collaboration, participation and transparency in government.

However, 120 days passed with no sign of the aptly named the Open Government Directive, and over ten months since President Obama's memorandum, despite receiving recommendations, largely through online discussion, from agency heads, citizens and federal employees, there is still no directive.

Yet, there appears to be hope coming from those working on the directive, with suggestions that the Chief Technology Officer and Office of Management and Budget are being careful in ensuring that the new directive is not rushed and that they get it right the first time.

Under the directive, the government will continue to build a set of web platforms to foster a more open government and allow the public to access information more freely; and it is thought that the delay in the release of the report is in part due to new requirements and new resource investments it will outline for government agencies.

Prior to the release of the report Chief Technology Officer Aneesh Chopra said, in September 2009, that the Open Government Directive would outline steps federal agencies need to take to "hardwire the capability" for transparent, collaborative, participatory government into their processes.

"This will not be another check-the-box exercise for some paperwork activity," Chopra told an Excellence in Government event in May. "This needs to be built in to the core DNA of how our government operates."

However, as one technology commentator, Aliya Sternstein, who has been blogging about the initiative on nextgov.com, points out not everyone is as optimistic about the directive.

"Some advocates in the open government community say they are frustrated and disappointed, knowing there's something ready to be seen and knowing it's not out,"

blogged Sternstein on November 26.

Despite this frustration about the delay of the directive, there is still an understanding that good governance can take time and that they delay may indicate big changes to come.

Hopefully these changes will help President Obama's initial statement in his January 21 memorandum come to fruition and put any speculation about the directive to rest.

"We will work together to ensure public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration," stated President Obama.

"Openness will strength our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in Government."

Almost 14,000 km from Washington DC, at the southern reaches of the Pacific, New Zealand has also been grappling with issues of government-community engagement, but has taken a different approach in looking at how to improve this relationship.

While the focus in the United States appears to be centred on information accessibility and new technology, the New Zealand government has focused on building a stronger interdependent relationship with communities, directly engaging with the community and voluntary sector.

Many government agencies have statutory requirements to consult; yet, as is also evident in the United States, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the emphasis needs to refocus on engagement and working co-dependently.

Over the years people have grown more and more frustrated with "consultation" and the way in which government agencies neglected to really engage with communities, and instead used the consultation process as a way to "tell" people what they need and tick a box.

To engage with the public means much more than to just consult; it sets up a wider framework for discussion encompassing information provision, partnerships, and support for community decision-making.

In tackling this need for greater government-community engagement, a national forum was held in New Zealand's capital, Wellington, in mid-2007, bringing together community and voluntary organisations and government agencies.

Participants at the forum called for the public service to improve consultation processes and create a more respectful and collaborative culture of engagement, leading to the establishment of the Building Better Government Engagement (BBGE) reference group

to provide advice on ways to enhance central government engagement with citizens and communities.

Made up of members from government and non-government backgrounds, the reference group set out to explore how central government could better effectively engage with citizens and communities, recognising the interdependence of government and communities in achieving the best outcomes for their society.

The group's consultation, via online discussion, written submissions and face-to-face forums, with members of the community and voluntary sector and government agencies, along with a report from the Association of Non-Governmental Organisations of Aotearoa (ANGOA), led to a Ministerial cabinet paper being presented to Parliament outlining the need for stronger community-government relationships, and effective community engagement, which would in turn enhance community capacity to address issues, strengthen trust in government, improve government transparency, and create better informed and more sustainable policies.

One of the main recommendations in the cabinet paper was that a national forum be convened to discuss the development of a Relationship Agreement to replace the 2001 *Statement of Government Intentions for an Improved Community-Government Relationship*, which outlines the government's commitment to building strong and respectful relationships with the community and voluntary sector.

On 11 November 2009, the Prime Minister, Ministers, members from the community and voluntary sector and government agency staff met to discuss the way forward in improving government engagement across all sectors of the population. This led to the Office for the Community and Voluntary sector setting up further meetings for February 2010 to follow up on issues discussed in the forum.

From these recent activities, it appears that better engagement is on the horizon for the New Zealand government and their public, starting with building stronger relationships between agencies and the community and voluntary sector, which directly serves and supports the people.

Both the United States and New Zealand governments saw that they had a problem with the way in which they were relating with their publics; there was a need to foster greater trust, participation, transparency and engagement.

Yet, they have gone about trying to rectify this problem in vastly different ways.

From what has currently been made public, the United States' initiative appears to be more focused on opening up the lines of communication between the government and individual citizens and organisations, but not necessarily encouraging direct

interdependent engagement in the same way that New Zealand's initiative is trying to promote.

The size of the United States, geographically and population-wise, would make any sort of consultation difficult to conduct in a short amount of time. Which is why, one could assume, that feedback into the ways in which government could garner better “public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration”, was limited to online public discussions, and restricted to a short timeframe of one week of public brainstorming followed by a two week discussion phase and a four-day public drafting process.

Begging the question, what about those who do not have access to the internet or were not aware that consultation was being sort?

These factors point to size being a very rational reason for such difference in the approaches taken – yet, should size really matter?

The landmass of New Zealand is the size of Colorado, while the population of the United States is approximately 1.4 times that of New Zealand's, which does suggest that any engagement would be made much easier in the land down under.

However, wouldn't the relative size and population of a nation be counteracted by the increased access to resources and the size of government?

It could be suggested that the difference is not actually the size of the nations, although one cannot deny that it is definitely a factor, but also the deeper roots in the way the government and people already relate to one to another, and have learnt to interact in the past.

This is not a criticism on the way in which the United States has chosen to re-examine the way the government can become more transparent, participatory and open; nor is it meant to be a cheerleading exercise for the New Zealand government.

However, what this paper is trying to do is open up a discussion into why the two nations went about tackling the same fundamental issue in very different ways, and if perhaps there needs to be another prior-step taken in analysing the already established relationship between the government and the public and, if so, what needs to be addressed.

The distance between the government and public in New Zealand is very short, many government employees are closely linked with community organisations and, vice-versa, many members of the community and voluntary sector are contracted by agencies or consulted on the every-day working of the government.

The people have direct access to their members of parliament; as a former public servant and external academic researcher I can attest that reaching out to and meeting with ~~Ministers and~~ members of parliament is a very realistic task.

This relationship being government and the public is not perfect, the need to re-examine New Zealand's *Statement of Government Intentions for an Improved Community-Government Relationship* is testament to this, but it does suggest that there is already a relatively good and easily accessible flow of information sharing and engagement already established.

From an outside perspective, and perhaps even a local perspective, the distance between government, federal and state, and the public in the United States is like looking across the Grand Canyon. You can see the other side and you really want to get over there, but there is this massive abyss in your way and there is no way around so you have to go through. You could get to the other side with a lot of perseverance, time, energy and help from others, but will you?

Now, one might argue, is this not the exact reason why President Obama issued his memorandum on Transparency and Open Government the very day after his inauguration and why the nation (or at least those who are aware of the initiative) is now eagerly awaiting the release of the Open Government Directive?

Yes and no...

The directive is a fantastic opportunity to help make the government and public in the United States more interdependent and the distance between the two much shorter. However, the focus that appears to be coming out from the, yet-to-be-released, directive is primarily centred on giving people information.

This is not to say that making information more easily accessible is not a positive action, as this can help make government more accountable to the public, but it is rather reminiscent of past one-way communication and education focused government-community relationships.

Obviously the exact proposals from the Open Government Directive will not be known until the report is publically released, but early signs do point to it being very focused on using new technology to allow the public access to government information – that ticks the box of creating (or at least the illusion of) transparency, but I question whether it makes for a truly more participatory and collaborative government?

At the beginning of the New Zealand initiative, people called for the public service to improve consultation processes and create a more respectful and collaborative culture of engagement, leading to public consultation, national forums and the proposed

development of a new Relationship Agreement to replace the *Statement of Government Intentions for an Improved Community-Government Relationship*. Actions that appear to be answering, or at least attempting to answer, the initial request for improved government engagement with citizens and communities.

Will actions produced from President Obama's Open Government Directive answer his initial request to "ensure public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration"?

Only time will tell, but it does appear that a distinction needs to be made between creating transparency and openness and creating a more participatory and collaborative government relationship with communities.