

Engagement and sustainable development

As more and more ‘wicked issues’ come to the top of the political agenda, there is a growing need for a new model of engagement between government, stakeholders and the public.

If we are to address ‘whole systems’ issues, to acknowledge scientific complexity, and to recognize the potential trade-offs between competing needs, we need to create a space for enlightened dialogue, debate and collective decision-making.

This need is beginning to be recognised in Government. David Miliband and Gordon Brown are exploring a new ‘environmental contract’; the RSA has started a programme of work on ‘pro social behaviour’; and Number 10 is experimenting with new engagement techniques, such as the recent Policy Review Citizens’ Forum. But on their own these might not help develop solutions in a systematic and enlightened way that contributes effectively to policy-making.

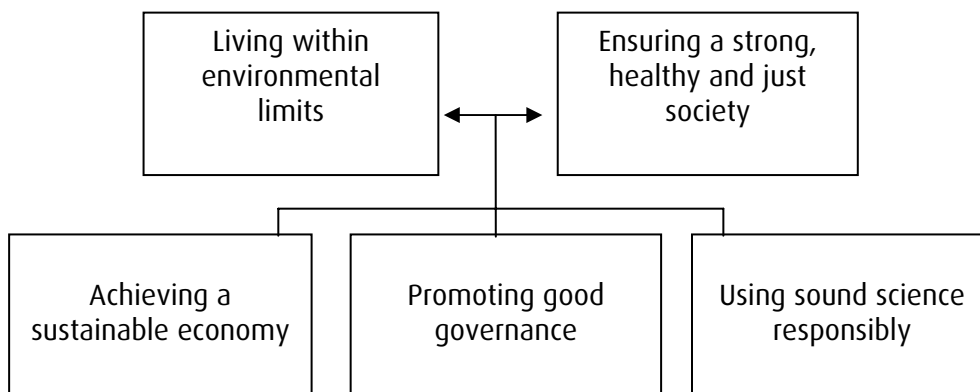
Engagement is more complex than consultation, but, done properly, it can be the means of developing solutions that are acceptable to a much broader public constituency. How do we broaden the scope of engagement, so that it is truly integrated within policy-making? How do we balance public and stakeholder expertise? And how do we scale up the many excellent examples of local engagement to meaningful nation-wide consultation?

As independent advisors, with a work programme dedicated to engagement and good governance, the Sustainable Development Commission would like to contribute its practical and theoretical experience into Government to help meet these challenges.

Good governance and sustainable development

Alongside using sound science responsibly and achieving a sustainable economy, good governance is one of the principles underpinning the UK Sustainable Development Framework *One Future, Different Paths*, and the Sustainable Development Strategies for the four nations. The five principles form a basis for sustainable development policy in the UK, and help guide the work of the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC).

The principles of sustainable development



The SDC places great importance on promoting good governance. Our research, policy and practice point consistently to the need to shift from old style government to governance. In other

words, we need to move from a model where experts decide (and then communicate their decision), to a model where responsibility and ownership is distributed beyond the Government.

At the heart of good governance is the need to engage the public and stakeholders systematically. A two-way engagement process deepens the understanding and commitment of both decision-maker and participant. In doing so stakeholders, citizens and consumers will not only be more prepared to make changes themselves, they will also be much more likely to permit, and not resist, the significant shifts in policy that sustainable development requires.

Some policy consultation exercises are based on a traditional model where a decision has largely been made within Government, announced, and then defended: traditional 'decide-announce-defend' (DAD). This sometimes results in unacceptable decisions that cause difficulties later. An engagement approach is more collaborative, and is an 'engage-deliberate-decide' (EDD) approach. This approach opens political space for decisions.

As more 'wicked' issues come to the top of the political agenda - climate change being an obvious and pressing example - having the tools to deal with complex debate and develop solutions that will be acceptable is going to be critical. The government cannot afford to rely on DAD approaches, or referenda, to engender the understanding and the commitment to action that we require.

The benefits of public and stakeholder engagement

From the Government's perspective, public and stakeholder engagement offers the following direct benefits:

- a) **It informs** the public and key stakeholders, not only through direct/indirect provision of information but also by stimulating public **conversations** on key issues
- b) It ensures **acceptable consultation processes** which generate a full and usable understanding of the public's concerns and aspirations around key issues and decisions
- c) It allows the information gained through these processes to increase the **robustness** of the resulting policy, and the likelihood of its implementation.

In addition, an engagement programme would deliver the following strategic benefits in line with the Government's priorities on sustainable development and democratic renewal:

- d) Generate shared **ownership** and responsibility across society for addressing the difficult issues that we face. This will raise the likelihood of successful implementation of sustainable policies, rather than leaving Government in a defensive position searching for 'quick-fix' measures.
- e) Understand how to **engage the nation** in critical, long-term strategic decisions and change that involve significant complexity and uncertainty. Policy-makers will increasingly be presented with complex issues of strategic importance, which need to be dealt with as whole system rather than single issues, taking into account conflicting departmental objectives. A full 'public engagement' programme would enable significant shifts in policy and action.

Delivering effective engagement programmes

To grasp the full range of benefits that engagement can bring, it should not be conceived as a single activity. It is about establishing new relationships in a range of ways throughout the decision-making process, from inception to implementation.

The most usual practice is one-way information exchange - consultation, communications, or both, at one specific point in the decision-making process. This is part of the old style government or DAD approach, and is more about defending than informing decision-making. Symptoms of the weaknesses of this approach are revealed when petitions and judicial reviews occur, and these will become increasingly common as a more demanding public recognise policies that do not deliver acceptable solutions.

Principles for effective engagement

- **Clarity:** (1) ensure that the engagement starts with consideration of the problem to be addressed;—any buy-in to solutions can only follow buy-in to the problem; (2) Have absolute clarity over the aims and the parameters of the engagement; what exactly are you trying to achieve, what level of support (and from whom) are you looking for, what can and can't be changed.
- **Integration:** (1) that the whole programme of relevant consultations, policies, and communication campaigns are joined up in such a way that Government can present a compelling story that makes sense to the public; (2) that the engagement process is a core part of the decision making process, not an add on
- **Independence:** (1) the process is overseen by a balanced and independent 'oversight group', which reviews both the process and content of the consultation; (2) the engagement is designed and delivered by professional independent process experts (3) there is a full independent evaluation of the process, established from the beginning.
- **Layered approach:** (1) The process should fit the needs of the audience. It is possible to layer different engagement activities, addressing different audiences and subjects. For example, technical discussions (such as reactor design or health and safety issues) can be conducted separately and in parallel to other public engagement processes. (2) Ensure clear links between the different layers and methods while ensuring sufficient people are engaged in appropriate ways. Methods include in depth deliberative methods, activities at different geographical scales, scaling up through communications campaigns in mass media and networks, testing findings through opinion polls, experiential exercises, self administered deliberative exercises, fact finding forums and investigations, on line conversations and consultation, building on any 'self started' engagement such as petitions. (3) Ensure engagement is done in phases throughout the decision-making process where possible, enabling each stage to be informed, rather than limiting to one specific point in time.
- **Follow through:** there should be a strong follow through to the engagement/consultation, enabling the nation to find out how the results were used and to take the opportunity to be part of the solution (e.g. making changes themselves).

The role of the SDC

The SDC, as an independent advisor to government, has three roles in relation to government engagement:

Advice - we advise on the design of effective engagement processes as well as promote and trial innovative new approaches that help lead to informed decision-making.

Capacity Building - our capacity building role is designed to enable administrations and departments to increase their understanding of sustainable development and how it influences policy design, as well as increasing skills and confidence in engagement.

Watchdog and Scrutiny- as the UK Government's sustainable development watchdog, and as our critical friend role is being developed in the Devolved Administrations, we are also involved in assessing performance of engagement processes.

Sustainable Development Commission

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