Open Data, Transparency and Citizens' Participation: EU and Local Projects
20th October 2016

Speakers: Tanja Lahti (Project Manager at City of Helsinki, Finland), Pavol Lacko (Aliancia Fair Play, Slovakia), Simona De Luca (Team Manager of Open Coesione, Italy), Weijer Vermeer (Communications Advisor Digital & Public Diplomacy EU2016, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands)

Moderator: Anthony Lockett (European Commission, DG Human Resources and Security)

The use of open data in public administration was the point of departure for this workshop, particularly in terms of how it links to democracy, transparency and citizen participation. While it has many advantages in the form of efficient delivery of public services and often helps boost transparency of decision-making processes, open data usage also brings certain challenges with regard to civic participation. Taking these aspects into account, the workshop asked why open data practices are important, how we should approach it in view of creating social and economic value, and how to make connections between local, national and EU practices.

The workshop began with a presentation by **Tanja Lahti**. Open data and transparency in public services are priorities for the city of Helsinki and the main theme of the Helsinki Strategy Programme 2013-2016, which aims to promote an enterprising and functional Helsinki. Ms. Lahti emphasised that both the city of Helsinki and wider region have had good experiences of open data usage and that it has been particularly valuable in enhancing government efficiency, transparency and democracy, as well as boosting business and innovation. Many of the projects encompassed by this strategy also have a strong bottom-up perspective, which is valuable in creating trust among citizens.

A prominent example is the electronic document management system (Ahjo) which has had an open API since 2013, thus making it possible to create new applications and services based on real-time decision-making data. While the use of open data in this manner has clearly enhanced transparency in decision-making processes, a key message from Ms. Lahti's presentation was that open data in itself is not enough: we also need to re-think and re-design public services from a user point of view in order to increase citizen participation. Helsinki has tried one way to address this through the initiative called 'Open Space and Open Dialogue', which takes place on a bi-weekly basis and is open to everyone to discuss decision-making processes.

Moving on from the city context, **Pavol Lacko** shared insights on open data practices from a civil society perspective. He began by noting that Slovakia was the first EU country to make publication of all official contracts and public files mandatory, which brought with it both improvements with regards to transparency and implications for citizen participation. On the one hand, the open data initiative and publication of contracts was beneficial for watchdog organisations and journalists, as it

enabled investigations into illegal, uneconomical and unethical management of public funds. On the other hand, the huge volume of publications now made available also posed a number of challenges.

Firstly, it was difficult to search for specific documents as so many files had been published. Secondly, and more importantly, the majority of the citizens were either not aware of the existence of the public files or they did not know how to read them, as they were often too technical and cryptic. As such, Mr Lacko stressed that in order for open data to be useful citizens need to be able to understand it, which is why teaching the public about open data is of utmost importance. A telling example in this regard is the publication of contracts on road construction between different regions in Slovakia, an area in which a large proportion of EU funding had initially been misused. Once journalists and civil society organisations had made the public aware of the mismanagement and enabled them to understand the contracts, pressure was brought to bear on the authorities to improve the situation.

The next speaker was **Simona De Luca**, who presented an Italian open data initiative in the form of a web-platform. The platform is part of the OpenCoesione project and aims to inform the public how cohesion policy is implemented and how local, regional, national and EU funds are used to improve citizens' daily lives. The overarching goal is to use open data to actively promote civic engagement, and so far more than 1 million projects have been registered.

One successful project carried out within this framework is the 'OpenCoesione School', an innovative and interdisciplinary educational project aimed at high school students that combines the use of open data with storytelling to raise awareness on how cohesion policy affects their own neighbourhoods. Teaching citizens about open data has been a key element of success, using methods including MOOCs, distance learning and support by territorial networks of cohesion policy experts.

One contribution to the OpenCoesione School was a project in Locri, whereby students collected open data on a project that was completed but not yet in operation. Prompt civic engagement such as meeting with the mayor and writing local newspaper articles resulted in concrete action with a view to finalising the project when the municipality published a call for the management of the new youth centre. Finally, Ms. De Luca emphasised that while open data is vital as a first step it needs to be complemented by civic participation in order to yield the desired effect of fostering greater trust within communities and societies.

The final speaker was **Weijer Vermeer**, who elaborated on the value of open data for the Dutch government at both the national and international level. The issues of transparency and citizen engagement were key priorities of the recent Dutch EU presidency, and open data was seen as providing an interesting way of communicating these issues. Within this context, Mr Vermeer mentioned an open data campaign launched by the Dutch government with the broad aim of making decision-making more transparent as well as increasing citizen participation and inclusion by making the data understandable.

The campaign consisted of offline and online app competitions and the '*un*conference' Transparency Camp Europe (TCampEU). In total, the competitions generated 75 contributions that aimed to make decision-making processes more transparent as well as adding value to the daily lives of European citizens. The top 13 were subsequently invited to the TCampEU. All of the projects were carried out in collaboration with civil society organisations and an Impact Hub Network, which meant the outreach was very good, especially on social media where #TCampEU was trending on Twitter for a day.

From this point of view the campaigns were considered a success, but Mr Vermeer also emphasised that the campaigns were limited in that they only reached an audience already interested in open data, and that the remaining challenges are to reach the 'ordinary citizens' and to keep the momentum from these campaigns going.

The questions from the floor that followed also addressed some of the challenges that open data brings with it. Starting with implementation, there was a general consensus among the panel that it is easier to use open data in projects on a local level than on the national or international level. Second, not all data is useful for citizens and there are instances where data should not be made open, for instance in security matters. That being said, the main point arising from the discussion was that open data is here to stay and that it is a valuable asset for enhancing transparency in decision-making. However, in order to make it more attractive to citizens and increase their engagement, open data needs to be redesigned so that citizens can better understand its impact. As a final note, **Anthony Lockett** mentioned the EU Open Data Portal, which takes into consideration what the demand for open data, and how this can be better fulfilled.