

# NEW PATHWAYS FOR CITIZEN AGENCY: OPEN GOVERNMENT NATIONAL ACTION PLANS IN URUGUAY



---

## RESEARCH BRIEF

ANA RIVOIR AND JAVIER LANDINELLI



Cover photo: people by Adiba Taj from the Noun Project. Government by Ralf Schmitzer from the Noun Project. Speech Bubbles by RROOK from the Noun Project.

# TABLE OF **CONTENTS**

- 
- 1 **OVERVIEW**
  - 2 **CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT THROUGH NAPS**
  - 3 **DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND STRUCTURAL  
CHANGE THROUGH NAPS**
  - 4 **DIRECTIONS FOR POLICY**

# 1. Overview

---

The case study research in Uruguay, under the Voice and Chatter project, sought to analyse the creation and implementation of Open Government National Action Plans (NAP) in the country, to explore if and how they have contributed to new pathways for citizen agency. Since 2006, Agency of Electronic Government and Information and Knowledge Society (AGESIC) has led an innovative process, promoting the incorporation of ICTs in public administration. The agency has also spearheaded the development of Open Government National Action Plans from 2011.

The case-study focussed on the creation and implementation of the two-yearly Open Government Partnership National Action Plans (OGP-NAPs), for the years 2012–2014<sup>1</sup>, 2014- 2016<sup>2</sup>, and 2016-2018<sup>3</sup>. The OGP-NAPs seek to improve government transparency, accountability and responsiveness and are developed through a multi-stakeholder consultation process.

The study examined if the ICT-supported citizen engagement processes underpinning OGP-NAPs have transformed democratic governance or whether they remain a superficial exercise to reinforce politically correct visions of open government. The key focus of analysis was the bargaining process among stakeholders – how different actors were able to adapt and collaborate to develop the course of action.

Diverse sources of information, including national statistics, analysis of policy documents, and semi-structured interviews were used for this study.

## 2. Citizen engagement through NAPs

---

Since the first NAP in 2012, open government has evolved from a focus on e-government that was non-participatory, towards a multi-stakeholder, transversal approach to public policies, with its own budget allocation. Through the NAP, an institutionalised multi-stakeholder discussion mechanism – the Open Government Work Group – has been established through a Presidential Decree.

The NAP incorporates citizen engagement in its objectives and has created a model of participatory governance that promotes citizen participation and advocacy. The political will to seek citizen involvement – to understand needs and improve living conditions – is put to action through the implementation of dialogue mechanisms for co-construction of the NAP. Digital technologies are deployed as part of this process.

However, despite the rhetoric in the policy, citizen engagement processes have met with challenges. While all actors involved in the NAP implementation agree that a bottom-up approach in the plan creation process has boosted participation, participatory initiatives in the NAPs have had limited impact overall. Government end efforts seek to engage civil society and citizen participation in public policy, specifically in open data access. However, these new modalities are not widely used nor are they extended to policy processes in all domains.

All actors interviewed for this research believe that explicit political endorsement of citizen engagement is necessary to facilitate interaction with state agencies and offices (this being

---

1 Action Plan Uruguay 2012, (2012).

[https://www.opengovpartnership.org/sites/default/files/Action\\_Plan\\_Uruguay\\_2012\\_1.pdf](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/sites/default/files/Action_Plan_Uruguay_2012_1.pdf)

2 2<sup>nd</sup> Action Plan Uruguay 2014-2016, (2014). <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/sites/default/files/Action%20Plan%20Uruguay%202014-2016%20%28EN%29.pdf>

3 3<sup>rd</sup> Open Government National Action Plan for Uruguay 2016-2018, (2016).

<https://www.agesic.gub.uy/innovaportal/file/6048/1/3rd-open-government-national-action.pdf>

especially true among civil servants who are in charge of coordinating the NAPs processes). However, civil society actors also feel that to really democratise participation, bottom-up processes are very important and necessary.

Gains in the NAP process are based on the fact that plans are co-created and supported by a consensus among state and non-state actors. The process, by and large, reflects trust, extensive dialogue and conflict management. Although, academic actors' involvement in the process is very recent and incipient, it is seen as having a positive implication.

Citizen engagement in the NAP happens through representatives from civil society organisations. While this does tend to limit the participation of a broader range of actors, it provides citizens an avenue to influence the process. The creation of the Open Government Network has increased and diversified the number of civil society organisations taking part in the process, legitimising it and enabling deliberation, but to initiate a process of cultural change within the administration will need time and resources.

The most committed and leading civil society organisations in the process are relatively new; their members are young and use ICTs extensively. They are open to dialogue, their decision making approach is pragmatic and they pursue policy changes with immediate and tangible results. From their point of view, citizen access to information is a right and a necessary condition for effective citizen participation, transparency and accountability.

However, the capacity among civil society organisations to influence the process is asymmetrical. Those with higher organisational capacities, able to accomplish constructive dialogue, and forge relationships with government counterparts are able to co-create commitments, achieve goals and advocate effectively.

<b>Score Card on OGP-NAPs (2012-2018)</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High-level political endorsement and strong institutional location (supported by the Executive branch).</li> <li>• Effective and institutionalised participation mechanisms.</li> <li>• Learning from an innovative participation experience of co-production and co-creation of policies</li> <li>• International acknowledgement of Uruguay's practices.</li> <li>• Citizen engagement in the plans introduces new issues and demands based on citizen needs.</li> <li>• Shifts in public administration from a managerial to a social governance approach.</li> <li>• Incremental inclusion of diverse social actors.</li> <li>• Legitimacy gained from top-down policies.</li> <li>• Plan is sustainable across regime changes.</li> <li>• As participation is voluntary, actors involved are motivated and willing to cooperate.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process remains unknown to the general public and many actors who would benefit from taking part in it.</li> <li>• Scarce budgetary allocation, affecting operational resources.</li> <li>• Continuity of process is vulnerable to political regime shifts (as it is an Executive branch initiative).</li> <li>• A significant number of CSOs are unable to take part in the process, as co-creation and collaboration capacities required are different from that in traditional cultures of participation.</li> <li>• Fragmentation of commitments, failure to weed out minor/fringe priorities when setting commitments.</li> <li>• Government relevant counterparts have been absent from the process and have not shown will to engage.</li> <li>• Government officials do not always commit to participatory processes.</li> <li>• Citizen engagement and the creation of plans takes place in the capital city.</li> <li>• Commitment compliance is voluntary.</li> </ul>

Source: based on stakeholder interviews

### 3. Deliberative democracy and structural change through NAPs

---

The development and roll-out processes of the OGP-NAPs reveal Uruguay's effort to enable new ways of agency in the digital era. The institutional and political commitment to comply with open government principles – engaging a diversity of actors for co-creating policies, enabling access to public information, and improving public service delivery – form the basis of an emergent model of participatory governance.

The NAP is created on the basis of a bottom-up approach. The participatory mechanisms in the process imply a shift in the terms of citizen agency, enabling civil society advocacy to structure the state's policies. The most relevant change this process has introduced is the shift from a representative to a deliberative democratic approach. However, the challenge to engage citizens in public policy beyond the already institutionalised multi-stakeholder participatory initiatives remains, and this is a task that civil society organisations involved in the process need to take up.

Basing our analysis on Giddens' structuration approach (Giddens 1979)<sup>4</sup>, the case study concludes that the actions of social agents taking part in the governance process created by the implementation of OGP-NAPs do not merely reproduce the patterns of the system, but are gradually modifying it, creating adaptations and small transformations in its structure.

### 4. Directions for policy

---

Recommendations for public policy, based on our research, are discussed below.

1. Citizen engagement mechanisms in public policy need to be expanded and improved to deepen social and governmental democratisation. New and innovative civil society initiatives that demonstrate the democratising potential of collaborative methodologies can be adapted and replicated in public administration.
2. Government capabilities to support co-creation and collaborative development of public policies need to be strengthened through a suitable legal framework, financial resources, and spaces of participation for civil society organisations. Towards this, the government in Uruguay needs to:
  - a. Increase ICT-mediated participation to improve the efficiency of NAPs processes.
  - b. Expand participatory mechanisms through training programs for civil servants.
3. Advocacy spaces need to be made available for young actors willing to take part and introduce innovations in the process.
4. All actors involved in the process should continue to work on building further technical capacities as well as trust-based cooperation mechanisms.
5. The government needs to demonstrate the political will to engage citizens and to open up official data in order to strengthen and consolidate ICT-mediated public policy co-creation.
6. Democracy in digital times requires a revisiting of regulatory frameworks. In order to institutionalise, legitimise and facilitate transparent co-creation of policies by civil society organisations, the implementation of the access to public information law needs to be strengthened. A new law on volunteerism is also necessary.

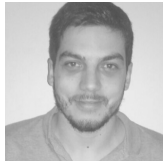
---

<sup>4</sup> Giddens, A. (1979). Central problems in social theory: Action, structure, and contradiction in social analysis (Vol. 241). Univ of California Press.

## Author profiles



**Ana Rivoir** is a researcher and professor at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universidad de la Republica in Uruguay. Her areas of research include information society, policies and inequalities.



**Javier Landinelli** is an associate researcher at the Observatory of Information and Communication Technologies, Faculty of Social Sciences, UdelaR. He is a researcher and teacher at the Interdisciplinary Center for Aging - Interdisciplinary Space - UdelaR.

## About the project

This research has been produced with the financial support of Making All Voices Count. Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. This Grand Challenge focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. Making All Voices Count is supported by the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, and Omidyar Network (ON), and is implemented by a consortium consisting of Hivos, the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and Ushahidi. The programme is inspired by and supports the goals of the Open Government Partnership.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the official policies of Making All Voices Count or our funders.

## Research coordination team

Lead Researcher: Anita Gurumurthy

Research Associates: Deepti Bharthur & Nandini Chami

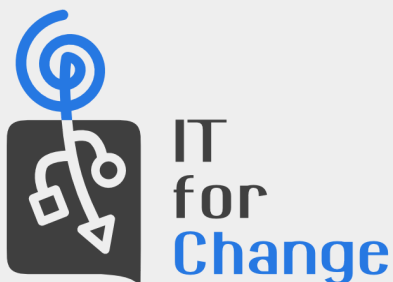
Translation: Carolina Veiga

Design - Deepti Bharthur & Swati Mehta

Editorial Support - Swati Mehta



Copyright: Research outputs from this project are licensed under a Creative Commons License Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4).



MAKING ALL  
VOICES COUNT

A GRAND CHALLENGE  
FOR DEVELOPMENT