

Submission on Australia’s first Open Government National Action Plan

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Focus on Commitment 5.2 : Enhance public participation in government decision making

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Preamble

The Australian government decision to seek membership of the OGP comes at an important moment in our history. Many Australians are currently disenchanted with, and feel disenfranchised from the political process. Equally important, and closely related, is that many Australians feel disengaged and dismissive of the processes of public policy development and refinement. Understanding of economic, environmental and social policy settings, and possible alternatives is low, and debate has become shallow and divisive. We believe that independent input by civil society into public policy development is a profoundly important element of Open Government.

We also want to avoid the OGP being seen as just another politicised and illegitimate process.

This leads to two opportunities under the OGP:

- the design of truly 21st century governance for Australia’s OGP, ensuring shared ownership, transparency and accountability of the OGP mechanisms themselves, and
- the chance to develop a truly public focussed policy development capacity within civil society.

About the author

Em Prof Bob Douglas AO (02 62533138) has participated actively in the discussions surrounding Australia's initial plan during the past nine months. Prof Douglas is also a Director of Australia21 for whom he was the co-editor in 2015 of a volume of 39 essays by notable Australians on the topic “ Who speaks for the public interest in Australia?” He is also a founding committee member of the Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy (CAPaD).

Concern with the wording of the current draft plan.

I am concerned at the vagueness of the term "multi-stakeholder forum" and the limitation implied in the draft plan about its role.

If the OGP process is going to achieve the aspirations envisioned for it, the governance will need to be designed in an open, participative way. Issues of political economy, ownership, independence and accountability need to be fully explored.

Accordingly, I propose that instead of an "multi stakeholder forum" that the government should partner with civil society to support a transparent, participative, design process for the governance and reporting mechanisms of the OGP in Australia.

In addition, I think there is a clear need in Australia for an independent Public Interest Council, publicly resourced but led by civil society, which would research, assess and advise policy settings for achieving the SDGs. Its work would inform the public and government about issues of public interest, common good and ecologically sustainable development from the perspective of civil society.

One major rationale for such a body is that the balance has been lost between three actors in society – , business, government and civil society. Business is highly active in defending its interests, highly influential and well-resourced. The public service is increasingly unable, or not expected to, promote or defend the public interest, or does so within very narrow economic parameters. There is an opportunity for civil society to play a stronger role and provide balance, but the existing models for resourcing such a policy role are inadequate.

Proposal: Under Commitment 5.2, amend the Objectives

The following wording is proposed

We will

- a) facilitate an independent co-design process, in partnership with civil society, of the governance, reporting and accountability for the OGP Action Plan and future plans*
- b) provide untied financial support for a feasibility study for an independent, publicly funded and civil society led "Public Interest Council"*

A "Public Interest Council of Australia": How it could work:

An independently developed Public Interest Council of Australia (PICA) could provide a national focus on the environmental sustainability, welfare and well-being of the Australian population and the extent to which the conditions of social life in Australia allow social groups and the individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment. And it would monitor progress in meeting Australia's seventeen sustainability goals.

It could sponsor fora, and conferences, commission surveys and investigations, produce a quarterly newsletter, and seek input from across civil society to understand the status of the various elements of the Public Interest and a Common good. It would be able to work with research bodies and educational institutions to build broader understanding in the community of the nature of Public Interest and Sustainability. It would be at arm's length from government and business and would help to promote a national future which has these issues at its core.

While primarily publicly funded, it might also derive legitimacy as a vehicle of civil society through a an innovative shared funding model (for example" government could match three or four dollars for every dollar raised for its operation by a crowd-funding process..)

Appendix: Definitions and Global Sustainable Development Goals for 2030

Pope Francis in a recent encyclical spoke of the **Common Good** as "*the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment.* **Sustainability** refers to social development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." **Ecological sustainability** refers to the capacity of the environment to enable social sustainability.

Central to the public interest and the common good are the seventeen sustainable development goals endorsed by the United Nations in 2015 for the year 2030. These goals are now in place, having been agreed to for use in all developing and developed nations by the Australian representative at the UN. They are listed below .

Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries

Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*

Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.