

Beyond Civil Society
Public Engagement Alternatives for Canadian Trade Policy



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
I. INTRODUCTION	4
II. THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT	5
Benefits of Public Engagement	6
Concerns about Public Engagement	7
III. EXISTING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN CANADIAN TRADE POLICY	9
Canada’s Involvement in International Trade Agreements	9
Public Consultation in Canadian Trade Policy	9
Assessment of DFAIT’s Public Engagement Efforts	10
IV. ALTERNATIVE TECHNIQUES OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT	12
Public Deliberation Workshops	12
Online Public Deliberation	13
Student Education Programs	15
Media Outreach	16
V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	17
ENDNOTES	18

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The changing dynamics between citizens, government, and international trade require that Canadians become more engaged in the development of national trade policy. Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) has identified citizen engagement as an integral part of its policy agenda, but engagement efforts thus far have focused mainly on businesses and civil society groups. Engagement of the general public has generally been limited to one-way consultations with seemingly little effect. Considering the increasingly important effects that international trade agreements have on public life, trade officials need to better engage not only civil society groups, but also all Canadians. This paper suggests that, if used properly, public deliberation workshops, online public deliberation, student education programs, and media outreach can enable trade officials and concerned citizens to establish a more mutually beneficial relationship.

The paper begins by discussing the importance of public engagement, demonstrating why Canada needs to engage the public in trade policy. Effective public engagement restores democratic power to ordinary Canadians, enabling them to better exercise their roles as responsible citizens. Politicians and bureaucrats are empowered to better understand their constituents' interests and preferences. Civil society groups gain a greater forum in which to present their concerns and cooperate with government. Public engagement can even protect business interests, by reducing public conflict and safeguarding against future risks. Despite their benefits, public engagement programs have not been actively incorporated into trade policy development. This reluctance can be attributed to concerns about the fundamental nature of public engagement, the preferences of the Canadian public, and the specific conditions of trade policy.

The second section reviews DFAIT's current public engagement efforts, assesses their effectiveness, and identifies opportunities for improvement. Government efforts thus far have mainly been limited to consultations. Most efforts to solicit external input are directed at businesses and civil society groups, and opportunities for public involvement are inaccessible to many, not fully explained, and limited in scope. DFAIT has not demonstrated how public input influences trade policy, and it has not announced long-term plans for how it might better engage the public.

After demonstrating the need for improved public engagement, the paper presents four alternative techniques that might help address the current shortcomings. Public deliberation workshops, online public deliberation, student education programs, and media outreach are identified as the most feasible and effective opportunities for better engaging the general public in trade policy development. The benefits and challenges of each technique are discussed, and case studies are used to illustrate how each might be implemented. Public deliberation workshops offer the best opportunity for trade policy-makers to directly engage a wide range of Canadians. Online deliberation is more complex than deliberation workshops, but it has greater potential to institutionalize public engagement as an integral part of policy development. Student education programs represent one of the most underutilized and practical mechanisms for generating public awareness and discussion. Media outreach is a necessary precondition of all forms of public engagement, as it is the most wide-reaching way to inform the public and encourage people to engage in trade deliberation.

Finally, the last section summarizes the report findings and proposes the following recommendations for how DFAIT and civil society might promote stronger public engagement in Canadian trade policy:

Recommendations for DFAIT

- ➡ Supplement stakeholder consultation meetings with deliberative workshops for the general public.
- ➡ Supplement one-way online consultations with online public discussion boards.
- ➡ Develop and distribute educational curriculum on trade issues, in collaboration with interested organizations.

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- ➡ Prepare balanced radio, television, and print media content on trade issues, in collaboration with interested organizations.
 - ➡ Implement and publicize evaluation and planning of public engagement activities.
 - ➡ Publicly demonstrate how input from public engagement influences trade policy development and decisions.

Recommendations for Civil Society

- ➡ Develop and test innovative approaches for public engagement.
- ➡ Encourage DFAIT to adopt new methods for engaging the general public.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to a 2002 public opinion survey, less than 30% of Canadians are highly confident in their government's ability to protect national interests when negotiating international trade agreements.¹ Half of all Canadians feel that public protests against Canada's participation in trade agreements "are about valid points that a great many Canadians care about." Although over 70% of people believe that it is highly important for the government to consult average Canadians on international trade issues, over half of all Canadians have low awareness of these issues.

According to Canada's Minister for International Trade, Pierre Pettigrew, this information underscores the "confidence of Canadians" in the benefits of international trade.²

This paper will suggest that such findings instead indicate that the general public has been inadequately engaged in international trade policy. Although Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) has identified citizen engagement as an integral part of its policy agenda, efforts thus far have mainly consisted of meetings with civil society groups and limited public consultations. Considering that trade agreements are having increasingly profound effects on public life, trade officials need to better engage not only civil society groups, but all Canadians. DFAIT needs to move beyond stakeholder consultation and better enable the wider public to participate in and contribute to trade policy. This paper will propose to improve public engagement by using public deliberation workshops, online public deliberation, student education programs, and media outreach.

The first section of the paper will discuss the meaning and importance of public engagement, demonstrating why Canada should engage the public in trade policy. The second section will review the current public engagement efforts of DFAIT, assess their effectiveness, and identify opportunities for improvement. The third section will present four alternative techniques of public engagement that might help address the current shortcomings. Each technique will also be illustrated by a case study of a public engagement program that has already been implemented in Canada. The final section will discuss the paper's main conclusions and recommend how DFAIT and civil society groups might promote stronger public engagement in Canadian trade policy. The research findings are based on a review of government and civil society reports, website texts and commentary, academic literature, and discussions with representatives from civil society groups.

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Public engagement is a cornerstone of responsible democratic governance. It moves beyond traditional methods of public relations or consultations by creating opportunities for the open exchange of ideas, mutual learning, and informed, representative decision-making. This section will provide an overview of what constitutes public engagement, and then discuss some of the benefits and critiques of public engagement in trade policy.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to define exactly what is meant by the “public” and “public engagement.” Although a variety of definitions exist, this paper will define the terms as follows:

The Public – All citizens and residents of Canada, irrespective of any involvement in organizations or groups.

Public Engagement – The process of informed dialogue and deliberation between the public and decision-makers, with the purpose of involving the public in policy development.

Public engagement is based on the logic that deliberation between decision-makers and the public benefits both parties. It allows the public to gain an understanding of government decisions and policies, while providing bureaucrats with input to help them design and implement better policies. Effective public engagement requires not only deliberation, but also the provision of appropriate information and resources in advance.

Although public participation and consultation may be part of public engagement, they are distinct concepts. Public participation allows the public to take part in some aspect of policy development, but it does not specify what role the public will play, to what extent public input will be considered, or the level of interaction between the public and decision-makers. Public consultation involves the collection of public views and opinions, but it does not require deliberation or two-way exchange of ideas.³

Public engagement is also distinct from civil society engagement, although the two concepts are often used synonymously. DFAIT has focused much of its public consultation work on civil society groups, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), unions, and church groups, at the expense of the general public. Trade agreements affect all Canadians, however, and public engagement should therefore reach out to a wider audience. By extending public engagement beyond civil society, trade officials can also address problems of representation. Civil society groups do not necessarily represent the views of the wider public, and it is often difficult to determine exactly whom civil society groups represent.⁴

DFAIT is not alone in overlooking the wider public, as civil society groups have also focused more on increasing civil society engagement than public engagement. The civil society recommendations from the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) Quito Ministerial illustrate this position by calling for “opportunities and mechanisms for public participation that allow the consideration of interests and positions of non-governmental actors.”⁵ Although civil society groups are justified in seeking greater representation, strong engagement of the general public is also in civil society’s best interests. Civil society groups derive power from popular support, and an engaged public allows civil society groups to address a broader constituency. If civil society is advocating for greater transparency and openness on the part of trade negotiators, this inclusion should extend beyond interested organizations, which are often already aware of and involved in trade policy. Just as governments do not have a monopoly on good ideas, neither do civil society groups.

Recent research has suggested that the changing relationship between citizens and government is leading to a crisis of democracy. Electoral participation is declining and public alienation is increasing, weakening the bond between citizens and government.⁶ Research conducted by the organization Public Agenda indicates that citizens now have less concern for government policy, less of a voice in

policy development, and less of a stake in the political system than in the past.⁷ US political scientist Robert Putnam has suggested that the declining role of civic networks and interactions has fueled this decline in political engagement.⁸ Other studies have concluded that although the concept of democracy does not appear to be losing its appeal, the institutions and mechanisms of democracy are becoming increasingly detached from ordinary citizens.⁹

Public engagement is a means of reinstating this connection between the public and government. By becoming involved in the process of policy development, citizens can develop greater trust and interest in government institutions. Most Canadians have been marginalized from such involvement, however, by insufficient public engagement efforts and the exclusive expert dialogue that dominates trade discourse. This approach stifles public interest and fails to address the “gray areas of issues that most people experience in their daily lives.”¹⁰ Public engagement offers an opportunity to overcome this trend of increasing public alienation from government.

Benefits of Public Engagement

Effective public engagement benefits the public, government policy-makers, civil society, and even business. It restores democratic rights and power to ordinary Canadians, enabling them to better exercise their roles as responsible citizens. Politicians and bureaucrats are empowered to better understand their constituents’ interests and preferences. Civil society groups gain a greater forum in which to present their concerns and cooperate with government. Public engagement can even protect business interests, by reducing public conflict and safeguarding against future risks. The points below further explain some of the most commonly identified benefits of public engagement.

Strengthens Democracy

By engaging in trade policy, citizens are encouraged to exercise their democratic rights and government policy becomes more representative. Openness to the public enables citizens and taxpayers to better assess government policy and make informed decisions when voting. Insufficient public engagement limits the power of citizens to participate in democratic government.

Increases Accountability

Public engagement ensures that trade officials and policy will remain more accountable and responsive to public interests. By linking the public with decision-makers, citizen confidence in and support of trade policy is strengthened and trade officials are held more responsible for their actions.

Improves Policy Quality

Active public engagement results in better decisions and better policies. It allows trade officials to be more cognizant of different opinions and ensures that policies will have gone through a more thorough process of revision and review before being approved. The public brings additional skills, knowledge, concerns, and ideas to the table and can suggest solutions that might not have otherwise arisen. Enhanced deliberation helps refine policy decisions, and it should therefore be welcomed, not merely tolerated.

Safeguards against Externalities and Market Failure

Regular public engagement can identify environmental and other market externalities that might otherwise be overlooked. By focusing attention on controversial elements in advance, public scrutiny can prevent future problems from arising. Trade policies should be put under the spotlight by “providing ‘competition’ to governmental views and by subjecting the prevailing wisdom to ongoing and rigorous review.”¹¹

Enhances Policy Legitimacy

If people are involved in policy deliberation, they will have more faith in the legitimacy of the policy. Without strong public engagement, citizens may feel manipulated and suspicious, which hinders effective dialogue and can generate resentment and distrust.¹² The failure of the Multilateral

Agreement on Investments (MAI) offers a valuable lesson – because negotiations were conducted largely in secrecy, the agreement was seen as illegitimate by the public and subsequently rejected.¹³

Reduces Conflict with Civil Society

Public engagement can alleviate conflict with civil society groups and trade opponents. Civil society groups have expressed great frustration at the lack of appropriate public engagement, and this has been an important motivation for the public protest and campaigning against Canada's participation in trade agreements.¹⁴ Furthermore, DFAIT's 2002 Public Opinion Survey indicated that 35% of Canadians have become more opposed to Canada's involvement in international trade agreements as a result of public protests.¹⁵ Meaningful public engagement helps address civil society concerns, enabling more productive multi-sector cooperation and generating public support.

Protects Business Interests

By reducing public protest, public engagement provides security to business and market interests. Past public protests have been shown to drive down stock prices and result in significant market losses, for three main reasons.¹⁶ First, firms from certain industries (e.g. large multinationals, environmentally abusive firms) are associated with the negative fallout from protests and are punished by investors. Second, investors may suspect that these firms are more vulnerable to future boycotts, regulation, or disputes, further driving down stocks. Third, uncertainty stemming from public protest may result in more cautious and constrained overall investment.

Concerns about Public Engagement

Despite their benefits, public engagement programs have not been actively adopted by trade officials. Researchers such as Stephen Coleman and John Gotze have identified several reasons for this reluctance to engage the public, mostly related to concerns about the fundamental nature of public engagement, the preferences of the Canadian public, and the specific conditions of trade policy.¹⁷ The following sections will discuss these concerns and suggest ways in which each might be addressed.

Public Engagement Does Not Represent All Canadians

Certain groups are over-represented by public engagement efforts. Participants are more likely to have pre-existing interests, be more engaged in civic affairs, and be more motivated than the average Canadian.¹⁸ Although it is true that public engagement does not necessarily represent the entire public, unequal representation can be minimized by proper design. Government must pay special attention to ensure that participant selection best represents the diversity of public perspectives.

The Public Is too Large to Truly Engage

Public engagement can not be conducted on a scale large enough to engage most Canadians. Public engagement does not, however, need to enable direct democracy, whereby all citizens are involved in policy-making. If used instead to strengthen representative democracy, it can enable elected and appointed officials to better understand and represent the interests of their constituents.¹⁹ Furthermore, alternative techniques of engagement can involve a greater number of people than traditional public hearings or small meetings, as will be demonstrated later.

Public Engagement Will Usurp the Power of Politicians

Politicians' mandate as representatives and interpreters of public opinion is threatened by public engagement. If politicians are expected to independently gauge public interests, public engagement can be seen to infringe upon their power. Rather than threatening political authority, however, public engagement should be viewed as an opportunity for politicians to become better informed and strengthen their legitimacy. Ultimately, politicians maintain their decision-making power – public engagement mainly helps them make better decisions.

Canadians Are Not Interested in Being Engaged

Considering the low turnout for many public consultations and declining electoral participation, it appears that the public does not want to be more engaged in policy-making. Although not all Canadians are necessarily interested in trade policy, over 70% do believe that the public should be consulted.²⁰ The current low levels of public input may be more indicative of inadequate and inappropriate engagement mechanisms than of a disinterested public.

Trade Agreements Do Not Concern Most Canadians

Trade agreements are foreign policy issues and do not affect most Canadians.²¹ Trade agreements are not simply foreign policy, however. They involve trade-offs that affect *domestic* industries, consumers, workers, and the environment differently, and as such they have significant public implications. Certain affected groups, especially businesses and civil society groups, are already organized and actively advocating for their interests, while the interests of consumers and the general public are underrepresented. As trade talks move beyond discussion of tariffs, trade barriers, and other strictly economic issues, the need for public engagement becomes even more pronounced.²²

Trade Policy is too Technical for Most Canadians

Most Canadians are too uninformed to understand the technical nature of trade policy.²³ While it is true that many Canadians are not highly literate of trade issues, they are voicing their beliefs on trade agreements nonetheless. The question is whether people will comment on trade agreements through opinion polls, one-way consultation, and public protests, or through public engagement and deliberation mechanisms that serve to inform participants. An uninformed public illustrates the need for more, not less, public engagement.

Trade Negotiations Require Secrecy

Trade talks require secrecy because they are highly sensitive and often involve delicate negotiations and compromises.²⁴ Public engagement does not, however, necessitate the full disclosure of delicate information, but merely opportunities for Canadians to discuss issues and policies that are already public.

III. EXISTING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN CANADIAN TRADE POLICY

DFAIT has acknowledged the importance of public consultation, but its current public engagement program could certainly be improved. The government's efforts to involve the public in trade policy development have focused mainly on civil society groups and one-way online consultations, with seemingly little effect. This section will provide an overview of DFAIT's current public engagement efforts, and assess their success and limitations. In doing so, it will illustrate why alternative means of public engagement are necessary.²⁵

Canada's Involvement in International Trade Agreements

Canada participates in a wide array of international trade agreements through its Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. DFAIT is mostly responsible for conducting negotiations and addressing trade disputes related to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA). The department is also heavily involved in negotiating the FTAA and overseeing smaller bilateral and regional trade agreements. Through these agreements, DFAIT works to create new opportunities for the expansion of trade in goods and services, and to manage the role of trade in international development and Canadian society.

Public Consultation in Canadian Trade Policy

According to DFAIT, the main goal of its public consultations on trade is to "reinforce public awareness and understanding of the importance of trade, and ensure that citizens' priorities and interests are reflected in the development of trade policy objectives, policies and positions."²⁶ Currently, a mix of online consultations, public surveys, stakeholder meetings, and advisory groups are used to inform and engage the public in Canada's trade policy agenda. Online one-way consultations are the main means of collecting public input, although little information is made available about how much input is collected or how it is used. Much of the public consultation aims to engage specific stakeholders and special interest groups, rather than the general public. Although other types of public engagement have been used for different foreign affairs issues, the following sections will only discuss public engagement efforts directly related to Canada's involvement in international trade agreements.

Public consultations

DFAIT's main technique of soliciting input from the general public is written consultations, in the form of brief online notices with requests for public comments. Located in the *It's Your Turn* section of DFAIT's *Trade Negotiations and Agreements* website, each notice includes links to background documents and additional information explaining the topic. Public comments are collected via email and post, and they are not made public. With the exception of one consultation (*Canadian Citizens' Views on Trade with Least Developed Countries*), DFAIT has not commented on the results of online consultations or revealed how many people submitted comments. For this one exception, less than 40 submissions were reportedly received over the one-month consultation period. In 2002 DFAIT conducted 13 written consultations, on issues ranging from an Environmental Assessment of the FTAA to bilateral free trade discussions between Canada and countries such as the Dominican Republic and Israel.

In 2001 and 2002, DFAIT also conducted national public opinion surveys to collect information about public concerns and interests. The results of these surveys were made available on the *It's Your Turn* website. In addition to information posted on the *Trade Negotiations and Agreements* website, DFAIT publicizes trade policy news in the federal government's *Canada Gazette* newspaper.

Stakeholder consultations

In addition to these efforts to engage the general public, DFAIT has also led several initiatives to consult with special-interest groups in person. Between June and October 2000, 12 multi-stakeholder sessions were held in individual provinces and territories on the subject of Canada's position in the

WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) negotiations. Each consultation included a government report on the state of the GATS negotiations and subsequent collection of comments from the attendees. Over 300 organizations and individuals attended the meetings, including representatives from community-based organizations, public interest groups, labour, business, local governments, and consumer associations.

The other main effort at stakeholder consultation was the Trade and Development Roundtables of the summer of 2002. Four brief roundtable discussions were held in different regions of Canada to consult with representatives from government, NGOs, academia, and the business sector on the WTO's Doha Development Agenda. Meetings allowed for limited discussion of specific topics, and summaries of the consultations were posted online.

In addition to the GATS and Trade and Development consultation campaigns, DFAIT has occasionally organized isolated multi-stakeholder consultations on specific topics. Since 1999, four such consultations have been held with a variety of representatives from the public, private, and non-profit sectors.

Sectoral Advisory Groups

DFAIT's most institutionalized means of collecting external input are its 12 Sectoral Advisory Groups on International Trade (SAGITs). Since 1986, SAGITs have advised the Minister for International Trade through an open exchange of ideas and information. Each group represents a specific industry sector, such as Apparel and Footwear or Information Technologies, and is comprised mainly of senior business executives, with some representatives from industry associations, labour and environment groups, and academic institutions. Members are appointed by the Minister for International Trade, and each group meets three to four times per year. Neither lists of members nor minutes or reports from SAGIT meetings are made publicly available.

Assessment of DFAIT's Public Engagement Efforts

While DFAIT has launched a variety of new engagement programs in recent years, its efforts thus far have mainly been limited to consultation with a narrow range of groups. The majority of consultation meetings are with business representatives, through the Sectoral Advisory Groups, and opportunities for public involvement are inaccessible to many, poorly explained, and limited in scope. DFAIT has not demonstrated that public input influences trade policy, and it has not announced long-term plans for how it might better engage the public. These issues are discussed in more detail below.

Who is the "Public"?

While DFAIT explains that it is reaching out to "Canadians," "citizens," and the "public," most of the government's trade engagement efforts have focused on businesses and civil society. DFAIT has not defined who exactly is the target for its public consultation efforts, or acknowledged that the public is not a homogenous entity. By interpreting "the public" as mainly businesses and NGOs, DFAIT has overlooked Canadians who are not part of organized interest groups. This trend is especially important in light of the existing trade awareness and engagement gaps. In 2002, people whose annual income was over \$80,000 were twice as likely to be highly literate about international trade as those who earned less than \$20,000, and a similar gap existed between those with and without a university education.²⁷ By neglecting to identify and target Canadians who are most in need of engagement, DFAIT has legitimized the status quo, in which trade policy is largely the terrain of the wealthy elite.

Information for the Informed

The information provided on the trade agreements website is often technical in nature and poorly explained, discouraging uninformed Canadians from engaging in trade policy. Although background information resources are provided for the online consultations, these resources are geared towards readers with prior understanding of trade policy. There is little or no discussion of the trade-offs involved in trade agreement decisions, or of the potential significance of these decisions for other countries. Canadians are not provided with the balanced resources necessary for making informed decisions on trade policy, and the limited information available is inaccessible for many Canadians.²⁸

“Tell and Sell” Consultations

The stakeholder consultation meetings allow ample time for the government to explain and sell its policies, but attendees have little opportunity for open discussion and deliberation. As a result, the consultations mainly provide a forum for attendees to present their existing positions, and there is insufficient discussion of how differing interests and concerns might be reconciled. DFAIT has shown little inclination to engage stakeholders in critical discussion, instead responding to criticism by defending its previous statements. Rather than acknowledge the diversity of interests and concerns, DFAIT often attributes criticism to “incorrect interpretation” and misunderstanding of Canada’s trade policies on the part of the attendees.²⁹ The stakeholder consultations have therefore served mainly as public relations exercises that accentuate disagreement, rather than build agreement.

Limiting the Scope of Discussion

By only soliciting public input on topics of its choosing, DFAIT has limited public engagement on a wider range of issues. The public and stakeholder consultations are generally limited to discussion of steps that the government has already taken or plans to take, excluding deliberation on other issues or policies that external parties may deem more important.³⁰ Rather than requesting public input on the desired goals and priorities of trade agreements, online consultations often request input only on *which* trade barriers should be removed and *which* steps should be taken to increase market access. As a representative of the Canadian Labour Congress noted at a consultation roundtable meeting, “liberalization of markets was accorded disproportionate importance... eclipsing even the issue of the democratic rights of citizens of the Americas.”³¹ The current consultations therefore discourage discussion of many of the most fundamental purposes, implications, and principles of international trade.

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell

The government has made little effort to encourage or attract interest in its public trade consultations. Effective public engagement requires not only that opportunities for consultation exist, but also that the government actively inform the public of these opportunities. Thus far, however, DFAIT has posted information about public consultations on its trade negotiations website but has not made substantial efforts to promote these consultation opportunities. This passive approach has likely contributed to the low number of public comments.³²

No Incentive for Public Input

DFAIT has not yet demonstrated how, if at all, public feedback actually influences trade policy.³³ By not explaining how public input is used, the government offers little incentive for Canadians to contribute their views. If Canadians are to participate in trade consultations they must be sure that their input will be taken into account and used in decision-making.³⁴ The vast majority of DFAIT’s consultations, however, have not produced any statements or acknowledgement of what input was received, let alone how it was used. The few consultation feedback reports that have been posted do not indicate how government policy might change in reaction to input provided. Without evidence that their input matters, Canadians have little reason to participate in DFAIT’s consultations.

No Evaluation, No Direction

Although it has conducted public consultations since the late 1990s, DFAIT has not demonstrated that it is evaluating these efforts or developing a long-term public engagement strategy. Without proper evaluation and planning, the consultations are less likely to improve and may seem insincere to the public. The few existing public summary reports of consultations are prepared internally and written with a strong government bias, minimizing critical comments and over-representing government arguments. Evaluation should instead serve both external and internal functions: to provide useful feedback to the public *and* to help the government improve its public engagement policies.³⁵ By discounting public concerns and not evaluating most consultations, DFAIT has failed on both counts. The lack of proper reflection and planning sends the message that public engagement is not a DFAIT priority, discouraging Canadians from offering their input.

IV. ALTERNATIVE TECHNIQUES OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

As has been demonstrated, the government's efforts to involve the public in trade policy development have room for improvement. Most Canadians are poorly informed about trade policy and do not feel involved in its development, even as they express a greater desire to be heard.³⁶ This inability to adequately involve Canadians in trade policy illustrates the need for new mechanisms of engagement. This section will present four such mechanisms. Public deliberation workshops, online public deliberation, student education programs, and media outreach were chosen as the best alternative techniques because they emerged as the most feasible and effective opportunities for better engaging the public in trade policy development.

The proposed techniques aim to better engage the general public, not to better engage civil society groups or to better consult with the public. While it is certainly important to increase civil society's involvement in trade policy development, these approaches seek rather to increase the involvement of ordinary Canadians – members of the public who do not speak on behalf of civil society groups. Furthermore, these techniques were not chosen for their ability to collect public input and fulfil the requirements of public consultation. Public polling, focus groups, and other consultation mechanisms can be useful for informing government policy, but more interactive techniques are also necessary to more actively engage the public in discussion and deliberation.

Any new public engagement mechanism will require a significant investment of time and money, and this requirement should not be overlooked. Public meetings consume substantial time and resources, and even online engagement entails costly and time-consuming computer programming. DFAIT should carefully assess its capacity before implementing any new public engagement efforts. Despite its demands, public engagement can enable more effective policy development and earn greater public support, both of which can save the government time and money in the long run. While more active public engagement techniques will certainly pose new challenges and difficulties, they should be viewed as opportunities to improve future trade policy, rather than formalities that distract from current trade endeavours.

The following pages will describe four possible new techniques, present some of their advantages, discuss issues for consideration, and use case studies of existing or previously implemented Canadian programs to illustrate how each technique might be implemented.

1) Public Deliberation Workshops

Public deliberation workshops are perhaps the most exhaustive means of involving the public. These small, moderated group discussions allow a diverse group of participants to engage in informed discussion and deliberation about government policies. Although they may include presentations, the meetings concentrate mostly on the exchange of views, information, and beliefs between participants. The discussions are led by neutral moderators, who generally serve to focus the discussion on key choices or issues and to facilitate fair and balanced conversation. Moderators do not advocate for or defend any particular positions. Through this process, public deliberation workshops aim to help participants and policy-makers analyze and understand different interests and concerns.³⁷ As the International Association of Public Participation notes, the objective of public deliberation “isn't for someone to win, but rather to make sound decisions.”³⁸

Advantages

Depth of Input – Offers the most comprehensive way to explore and address important issues and difficult choices.

Quality of Input – The resulting public input is more balanced, thought-through, and high quality, because of the opportunity for in-depth discussion.

Direct Engagement – Allows government to speak directly to a wider range of individuals, including those who would not offer their input through traditional consultation mechanisms.

Linking Local and Global – Local concerns can be linked to national and global issues by directly engaging people in their communities.

Issues for Consideration

Small Audience Size – Small workshops are only capable of engaging a limited number of people. Public deliberation meetings should therefore be considered an opportunity to solicit in-depth information from a small sample of the population, rather than a means of engaging most Canadians.

Diversity of Participants – Workshop participants should represent diverse backgrounds and beliefs, in order to promote useful deliberation and best represent public interests. Organizers should strive to include those who are traditionally excluded from consultation efforts.

Selection of Deliberation Topics – Certain issues are more suitable for public deliberation than others, and workshops need to carefully select and frame appropriate issues for discussion.

Financial and Time Commitment – Workshops can be very expensive and time consuming to implement. Civil society groups can share the workload, however, as demonstrated in the case study below.

Timing – At what stage of policy development should public deliberation be conducted?

Case Study – Canadian Council for International Co-operation Globalization Deliberations

In 1999 the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) undertook a pilot deliberation project on the issue of globalization, as part of an effort to develop the public engagement commitment of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The project entailed 33 deliberation workshops and more than 460 participants throughout Canada. Each deliberation was structured as a three-hour meeting in which participants could work through real policy choices and trade-offs, explore their values and beliefs, find common ground, and forge collective decisions. The public input was analyzed using questionnaires before and after each workshop, moderator feedback forms, observation by a documenting observer, and qualitative analysis. Follow-up phone calls and feedback from later deliberations were also used to assess the impact of the deliberations.

The deliberation project concluded that the pilot workshops encouraged new people to engage in globalization debate, enabled participants to identify shared values and principles, helped participants deal with local community problems, and often had lasting impacts. CCIC concluded that deliberations would benefit decision-makers by providing information about public judgment, firmness of opinion, and how public opinions could change. The main challenges identified were accurately measuring the diversity of participants (especially in terms of ethnicity) and balancing between engaging the participants and gathering information for policy decisions.

Source: CCIC, Building on Strength: Collaborating in Public Engagement, Final Workshop Report, 2002.

2) Online Public Deliberation

Online public deliberation applies the principles of public deliberation workshops to the Internet. It uses interactive new technologies to facilitate open online discussion and deliberation. Online deliberation transcends e-government – rather than simply allowing government to deliver online services, it enables a two-way dialogue through which the public can help shape government policy. Likewise, online deliberation is distinct from online consultation – while the latter aims mainly to collect public input, the former encourages the public to critically discuss different policy options and promotes “preference formation rather than simple preference assertion.”³⁹

Online deliberation is not simply a free-for-all discussion. Participants must first have access to balanced information, and clear rules and procedures shape the online discussions. Unlike online polling, deliberation asks participants to consider open-ended questions and allows for flexible discussion. It

gives people extra time to digest different arguments and revise their own positions, usually lasting for at least a month. Besides facilitating dialogue between citizens and government, online deliberation allows citizens to directly interact with each other. Ultimately, online deliberation benefits both the public and government – the public becomes more engaged in civic and government affairs, policy-makers become better informed of public interests, and both learn from the diversity of views and perspectives. According to DFAIT's 2002 Public Opinion Survey, 60% of people who think that public consultation is important also believe that the government should utilize Internet consultation.⁴⁰

Advantages

Reaches More People – Rather than being confined to a meeting room, online discussion boards can accommodate a virtually unlimited number of people. While only one person at a time can speak at public meetings, online deliberation allows multiple participants to contribute at any time.

Reaches New People – Online deliberation makes public engagement more accessible. It allows people in remote communities to access government centres, and the ease of access may attract people who are not sufficiently motivated to contribute to more demanding forms of public engagement.

Cost Savings – Since its main costs are limited to Internet space and website design and management, online deliberation has the potential to save government money and time.

Issues for Consideration

Setting Appropriate Rules – For online deliberation to function smoothly, clear and transparent rules must be communicated to the participants. Procedures about length and frequency of messages, acceptable language, appropriate message content, and other guidelines help create focused, productive, and respectful deliberation.

Moderating the Discussion – Skilled moderators are crucial to facilitating discussion. Moderators can communicate and enforce rules, ensure equal opportunity for participation, steer discussion, and summarize key points. Proper moderating is necessary to generate mutual learning and influence policy.

Involving Policy-Makers – To ensure policy impacts, government officials need to participate in discussions. If decision-makers are visibly involved in the deliberation, other participants will take the exercise more seriously.

Who is Represented – Online deliberation excludes those without computer access. Although Internet coverage is becoming more universal, online deliberation is most likely to attract better-educated, more affluent Canadians.⁴¹ It therefore needs to be made as inclusive as possible, to minimize discrimination and digital exclusion.

Case Study – Dialogue on Foreign Policy, Internet Discussion Forum

DFAIT's Dialogue on Foreign Policy was a national public engagement and consultation dialogue that ran from January to April 2003. In addition to traditional consultations, the program included an online discussion forum where Canadians could deliberate on a variety of foreign affairs issues. Although the dialogue was hosted by DFAIT, it focused on general foreign policy and was not directly associated with the public consultations on trade agreements and negotiations.

The basis for the online deliberation was "A Dialogue on Foreign Policy," a discussion paper released by the Foreign Affairs Minister. The paper presented the key foreign policy issues and challenges faced by DFAIT, and Canadians were subsequently invited to answer related questions. All participant answers were posted on an online discussion forum, allowing people to respond to and discuss previously posted comments. Independent moderators and DFAIT editors summarized public comments in weekly bulletins, allowing newcomers to become familiarized with the debate. At the end of the dialogue, these bulletins were used to prepare a final report from the discussion forum. The Foreign Affairs Minister was then responsible for reporting to the public and government on the findings from the entire dialogue. The website received over 40,000 visits and 2,000 replies.

Source: DFAIT, *A Dialogue on Foreign Policy* website, www.foreign-policy-dialogue.ca, 2003.

3) Student Education Programs

By encouraging schools to discuss international trade in their curriculum, the government can lay the foundations for long-term public engagement. Although trade policy has traditionally been considered too technical for classroom education, trade agreements are increasingly influencing a wide range of societal issues, and as such they should be covered in student curriculum. Through student education programs, government can directly prepare educational curriculum or support other organizations to develop and share their own resources. By educating students on trade issues, schools can provide opportunities for students to critically discuss, evaluate, and engage in government policy.⁴²

Canadians must first acquire the necessary knowledge and participation skills before they can effectively engage in government policy development. By incorporating discussion about government policy in classroom education, teachers can establish long-term habits of civic engagement. As the government's Climate Change website (see case study) notes, "Today's children and youth have to live with the results of the decisions we make today. They need to know about climate change..." They also need to know about trade agreements.

Advantages

Direct Engagement – As with public deliberation workshops, student education programs allow participants to directly engage with each other, and possibly with policy-makers, on policy directions.

Diverse Participants – Because students represent the demographic composition of their communities, classroom education is one of the best ways to reach the full diversity of the Canadian population.

Early Exposure – Research indicates that civic education is most effective in adolescence.⁴³ By engaging students about trade policy from an early age, schools can establish life-long habits of political involvement.

Captive Audience – Unlike with other means of public engagement, school education programs do not need to attract their participants. Because they are already organized in school and accustomed to learning, students can be a highly receptive target population.

Issues for Consideration

Learning Level – Perhaps the biggest disadvantage of student engagement is the educational level of participants. Curriculum should be sensitive to students' limited knowledge and awareness of trade issues.

Education, not Indoctrination – Student engagement programs should not be used as government promotion, but rather as opportunities to promote balanced and informed decision-making. By presenting accurate information and discussing a wide range of views, education programs can allow students to reach their own decisions on trade policy.

Case Study – Government of Canada Climate Change Workroom

As part of a national effort to inform the public about climate change, the Government of Canada has launched a student and teacher education campaign. The program develops and supports teacher tools and student exercises aimed at generating public education on climate change. Online resources explain how a variety of classes and subjects might integrate climate change materials and discussion into their regular curriculum. The government has also prepared and is distributing a free teacher's kit, which includes information on climate change and classroom lesson ideas.

To further facilitate the integration of climate change into school curriculum, the government has created the Climate Change Action Fund (CCAF). The Fund offers financial and technical support to Canadian organizations for the development of classroom materials and resources on climate change. The CCAF helps interested organizations work together to develop and distribute materials and to provide training on climate change education. Materials are prepared for students at all levels, from elementary school to university. The CCAF also promotes each organization and educational project through the Climate Change website.

Source: The Government of Canada, *Climate Change* website, www.climatechange.gc.ca, 2003.

4) Media Outreach

As the main purveyor of news and public information, the media represents one of the most effective ways to inform and engage Canadians. Media outreach can take the form of original media content prepared wholly or partly by the government or simply efforts to encourage media outlets to cover trade issues. Original content such as advertisements, public service announcements, letters to the editor, and televised or recorded debates allows the government more control, while indirect media outreach such as press releases and press conferences can be cheaper and less time consuming.

DFAIT's 2002 public survey indicated that the news media is the main place people look for information on international trade.⁴⁴ By discussing trade agreements in a balanced and accessible manner in newspapers, television, radio, and the Internet, the government can raise public awareness and enable more informed discussion. Raising the profile of trade issues encourages citizens to become more engaged in trade policy deliberation, either through formal government opportunities or with other citizens.

Advantages

Broad Reach – Media outreach can potentially reach more people than any other form of public engagement. It distributes information community-wide and in multiple geographic areas.

Accessible – Many people who would not participate in more demanding public engagement exercises may take the time to watch, read, or listen to media coverage about trade policy.

Issues for Consideration

Accuracy of Information – Because of the media's short attention span and independent agenda, information is not necessarily presented accurately or explained adequately. Neutral facilitation and greater discussion of facts can limit the proliferation of anecdotes, half-truths, and unsupported biases.

Avoiding Polarization – By presenting events such as town halls and debates, the media often focuses on polarized opinions and conflict, which can be counter-productive to public deliberation.

Extending the Reach – How can media programming reach the widest audience possible? Sharing content across television, radio, and newspaper outlets allows media productions to reach more people.⁴⁵

Cost – Press time and space can be very expensive, especially in cities.

Measuring Impacts – While public consultations and other traditional public involvement techniques allow government to collect public input and directly judge impacts, media outreach is largely one-directional. Without public polling or follow-up, it may be difficult to determine the full effects of media coverage.

Case Study – Romanow Report Televised Forums

As part of the preparation for the *Building on Values: The Future of Health Care in Canada* report (commissioned by Roy Romanow), the Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada and Canada's Public Affairs Channel (CPAC) produced and delivered a series of nationally televised Policy Forums. The aim of the series was to raise awareness about challenges to the health care system, so that Canadians would be more informed when participating in public discussion, deliberation, and engagement. At each forum, health policy experts representing different positions engaged in a moderated discussion of key health care issues. After each discussion, Canadians were invited to call the program and ask the experts questions.

The forum topics were:

- *Values: What do Canadians want from their health care system?*
- *Sustainability: Can we afford Medicare?*
- *Leadership: Who should call the shots in Canada's health care system?*
- *Access: What health care rights should Canadians have?*
- *Principles: The Canada Health Act: Lightning rod or beacon?*
- *Innovation: Can innovation save Canadian health care?*

Source: Romanow, Roy (Commissioner), *Building on Values: The Future of Health Care in Canada*, Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada 2002

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As demonstrated, the Canadian government's efforts to involve the public in trade policy development are in need of improvement. New thinking and new mechanisms are necessary to truly engage ordinary Canadians. Four alternative public engagement techniques have been proposed, each of which would enable DFAIT to improve its trade policies and encourage Canadians to reconnect with their institutions of democracy.

Public deliberation workshops offer the best opportunity for trade policy-makers to directly engage a wide range of Canadians. Because they take place in a controlled environment, workshops allow for the most in-depth deliberation and balanced participation of any mechanism. While they can only engage a limited number of people, they may provide the most useful feedback to policy-makers.

Online deliberation is more complex than deliberation workshops, but it has greater potential to institutionalize public engagement as an integral part of policy development. As the Dialogue on Foreign Policy illustrated, online discussion forums can enable a greater number of Canadians to engage in policy deliberation, in a more efficient and less demanding manner than deliberation workshops. Online discussion forums could eventually become standard components of all major policy decisions. Once institutionalized, programmers and policy-makers would have more opportunity to address problems of access, representation, and policy use.

Student education programs represent one of the most underutilized and practical mechanisms for generating public awareness and discussion. With diverse groups of participants already mobilized in schools, the government can promote more widespread public deliberation by providing schools with appropriate resources and curriculum. By encouraging students and youth to think about trade policy, schools can foster early habits of civic engagement. Public engagement through schools may therefore be one of the key steps for restoring the long-term connection between citizens and government.

Media outreach is a necessary precondition of all forms of public engagement, as it is the most wide-reaching way to inform the public and encourage people to engage in deliberation. Without better media exposure of trade issues, most Canadians will likely remain uninformed and uninterested in contributing to trade policy.

The decline in civic engagement and increasing importance of international trade agreements require that Canadians become more engaged in the development of trade policy. Although the Canadian government has not yet actively involved the general public in international trade issues, new mechanisms offer the opportunity for improvement. If used properly, public deliberation workshops, online public deliberation, student education programs, and media outreach can enable trade officials and concerned citizens to establish a more mutually beneficial relationship.

Recommendations for DFAIT

The Minister for International Trade and other trade officials could improve public engagement efforts by better recognizing current shortcomings and implementing new mechanisms:

- ➔ Supplement stakeholder consultation meetings with deliberative workshops for the general public.
- ➔ Supplement one-way online consultations with online public discussion boards.
- ➔ Develop and distribute educational curriculum on trade issues, in collaboration with interested organizations.
- ➔ Prepare balanced radio, television, and print media content on trade issues, in collaboration with interested organizations.
- ➔ Implement and publicize evaluation and planning of public engagement activities.

➔ Publicly demonstrate how input from public engagement influences trade policy development and decisions.

Recommendations for Civil Society

The responsibility for engaging the public does not rest with government alone – civil society groups must also do more to involve ordinary Canadians in trade policy.

- ➔ Develop and test innovative approaches for public engagement. Once demonstrated by civil society groups, new public engagement mechanisms may be more attractive to the government.
- ➔ Encourage DFAIT to adopt new methods for engaging the general public.

ENDNOTES

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