

AVOID THE CITIZENWASHING TRAP: PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR PUBLIC OFFICIALS RESPONSIBLE FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Are you planning to organise a public consultation, hearing, focus group, survey, or even a citizens assembly? Read these dos and don'ts before getting started.

✓ DO

✗ DON'T

DO acknowledge the benefits of public participation.

Prioritise public input in decision-, ensuring it has real impact, even if it challenges vested interests or political goals.

DO spread the net wide.

Identify all those who have an interest and involve them, where necessary, through outreach. Aim for the broadest and most representative participation possible (especially of affected communities and marginalised communities).

DO keep people safe.

Incorporate from the design stage a plan to preserve anonymity, safety, wellbeing, and privacy of private citizens participating.

DO share a plan with participants.

Define and outline the purpose, scope, and expected outcomes of the process setting clear expectations for both policymakers and participants, especially regarding how the views collected will impact real policies.

DO be informative.

Ensure information is non-biased, available and accessible. Adapt formats of information to people's needs. Invest in capacity-building initiatives that empower citizens to better understand the issues at hand.

DO be flexible.

Employ a mix of participatory methods and formats to accommodate different preferences and enable broader participation.

DO make time.

Allocate a bare minimum of 8 weeks for consultations, ideally more, allowing time for independent expertise to be gathered, studies to be made, etc.

DO be ready to compromise.

Accept there might not be consensus. Integrate the conclusions and recommendations even if they are inconvenient to you. Respect the democratic process and participant's knowledge and commitment.

DO follow up.

Let the outcomes be reflected in actual political decisions. You asked – now you need to implement the answers.

DO stay engaged!

Ask participants for feedback about the process and how it might be improved. Share how their input is impacting policymaking in real-time.

DON'T fake it.

By holding a participatory process after the decision-making is already in a final or advanced stage.

DON'T gatekeep participation.

By starting a public participation process without advertising it to anyone, or, even worse, only to a small group of selected stakeholders.

DON'T play with fire.

By leaving participants exposed to potential harassment or intimidation or pressure, thereby compromising the ethics and legitimacy of the process.

DON'T be mysterious.

Don't invite participation without giving a comprehensive and clear overview of the process, timeline or impact.

DON'T make it an uphill battle.

By holding out on any relevant information, providing documents full of industry jargon, presenting biased information, not providing translations into relevant languages.

DON'T be rigid.

By proposing a format that is exclusionary i.e. that only takes place during the working week or far away from where participants live.

DON'T turn it into a race.

By giving short participation deadlines, thereby excluding most potential participants.

DON'T fudge the input.

Don't cherry pick, misrepresent, or dismiss results all together.

DON'T let the effort (not to mention tax-payers' money) go to waste.

By letting the process stand by itself and ignoring the responsibility for concrete policy follow-ups.

DON'T be dismissive.

Participants have put time and energy into the process. Ensure they know their value by keeping in touch.

Further resources:

- [OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes](#)
- [The REAL DEAL Handbook: Frameworks for citizen engagement in the European Green Deal](#) and upcoming publications to be found at the [Real Deal](#) website
- Case studies: [Citizenwashing - the greenwashing of democracy](#)
- EESC [Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward](#)