About this document

The purpose of this report is to provide options to integrate the principle of inclusion into Canada’s 4th Open Government Plan based on an analysis by Simon Fraser University’s Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. The ideas in this document draw upon a series of interviews with civil society organizations that work with communities traditionally under-served by government, the results of a related literature review, as well as the Centre’s extensive public engagement experience. Funding to produce this report was provided by Canada’s Open Government Team through a professional services contract.

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Introduction

This report proposes strategies for how Canada can further help to embed the principle of inclusion in its 4th Open Government Action Plan, based on an analysis by Simon Fraser University’s Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue. The ideas in this document draw upon a series of interviews with civil society organizations that work with communities traditionally under-served by government, the results of a related literature review, as well as the Centre’s own public engagement expertise. For the purposes of this report, the term “under-served community” is used to describe a community of interest such as LGBTQ2S Canadians, newcomers or women, rather than a geographic community such as a city or town.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Open Government is the “opening up of government processes, proceedings, documents and data for public scrutiny and involvement,” and is “now considered as a fundamental element of a democratic society”. According to Canada’s Open Government Directive, the practical impact should be that Canadians are able to find and use Government of Canada information and data to:

- Support accountability
- Facilitate value-added analysis
- Drive socio-economic benefits through reuse
- Support meaningful engagement with their government.

Barriers faced by Canadians to participation in Open Government cover a range of issues that include, but are not limited to, a low sense of worth due to stigmatization and marginalization, time, social and cultural access, economic access, citizenship, language, issue framing, physical access, safety concerns, transportation, communication ability, technical skills and child or elder care. Narrowing the gap between governments and the public they serve therefore requires providing engagement opportunities that are more inclusive. As stated by Martin Carcasson: “equality and inclusion make up one key set of democratic commitments…we cannot be neutral about whether voices are heard…”

These notions of inclusion are reflected in the Government of Canada’s Public Engagement Principles:

“We engage with people who have a range of views and perspectives that reflect the diversity within Canada. We reduce barriers to participation, whether physical, cultural, geographical, linguistic, digital, or other. We offer a variety of channels and methods through which to engage.”

Key learnings and challenges

As part of its research in creating this report, the Centre conducted a literature review, as well as interviews with organizations across the country that work with three communities traditionally under-served by government information and initiatives, or who otherwise face barriers to participation: women, LGBTQ2S peoples and newcomers to Canada. While these communities are but three amongst a variety of under-served populations, the resulting interviews are only intended to serve as a pilot, with the potential for the government to seek further input with a wider variety of communities. Several organisations interviewed also provide perspectives from an intersectional lens that may be relevant to additional under-served communities.
Literature review

Several findings from the Centre’s literature review can help to inform actions to increase inclusiveness and accessibility in Open Government. The “Open Government Maturity Model” developed by Lee et al. (2012) implies that open participation and open collaboration of the citizenry are essential to achieve greater public value from Open Government. This is because Open Data and Open Information, often considered the historical roots of Open Government, are by themselves insufficient to ensure the full participation of members of the citizenry who may encounter barriers in accessing government services and data, and ultimately to provide “voice” to Canadians. Within Canada’s Open Government Plan, the term Open Dialogue is typically used to denote this form of public engagement.

In the case of Open Data, scholars note the need to provide an infrastructure to support users in making sense of the available data. Open Data can also raise issues of trust and privacy, especially for evolving technologies where previously pseudonymous information could be combined and cross-referenced to re-attach this information to the identities of real people. This issue of privacy is especially relevant for marginalized communities. Good practices in Open Data include providing non-discriminatory access to data so that any person can access the data at any time without having to identify him/herself or provide any justification for doing so, as well as improving “ease of access” and “findability” so that accessing information through websites is not long and tedious.

Some common public engagement failings listed in academic literature include: overly constrained limitations on the scope of public involvement, a lack of representativeness in participants, failure to report outcomes back to participants and a lack of impact on actual policy decisions. Where processes are rushed, transactional and adversarial in nature they can further discourage members of the public to participate in participatory decision-making and lead to further erosion of trust within under-served communities. Proposed steps to improve accessibility in public engagement include mapping barriers and solutions to the communities being engaged, partnering with community-based organizations including libraries, making better efforts at “closing the loop” with participants, and expanding the mandate of the Auditor General to audit participatory exercises.

Interviews

Participant interviews surfaced a variety of challenges faced by communities not well-served by traditional government programs and engagement initiatives. It is important to recognize that each community of interest, and indeed every individual, may experience a different set of challenges based on their unique context and lived experience. The challenges listed below are therefore not intended to be comprehensive or apply to every circumstance, but instead of provide a sense of common themes that emerged from the interview process.
Challenge 1: Low levels of trust in Government responsiveness or intentions

Communities that have experienced harm through the actions of government may continue to distrust government motives even after harmful actions have ceased. Where community members have low socio-economic status or high amounts of stigma compared to other Canadians, they may feel uncertain how much weight the government will place on their needs in relation to others. These challenges are exasperated when government engages community members or organizations without sufficient time first to build foundational relationships, or where government is not sufficiently transparent to make it accountable to the communities it serves.

Challenge 2: Fear of harm or active discrimination

Some communities continue to face prejudice, stigma or power structures, a history of trauma, privacy considerations, or concerns about personal safety. Fear of discrimination may be directed towards government workers, who may carry explicit prejudice or lack the competencies necessary to establish a safe environment, or towards other members of the public participating in government services or engagement activities. Such fear is relevant for in-person gatherings, but also when providing or accessing government data if doing so might “out” the individual involved.

Challenge 3: A lack of accessibility

Community members may face a variety of barriers that make Open Government less accessible. The include, but are not limited to, a lack of literacy skills, technology, sufficient leisure time to engage, financial means to pay for transportation, childcare, etc., or language abilities in French or English. Many of these barriers correlate with specific under-served communities. For example, social expectations for gender roles often lead to women facing more barriers related to childcare as compared to men.

Challenge 4: Limited resources and other urgent priorities prevent engaging with government

Community-based organizations often serve as intermediaries for governments to deliver services to and receive input from under-served populations. The nature of their work often means that they often operate with volunteers and very limited funding. These organizations and their members may therefore lack the financial resources required to participate in consultations and may need to balance responding to government inquiries with urgent needs related to managing trauma or other time sensitive issues.
Challenge 5: Communities have internal complexity that governments may find difficult to navigate

Governments may sometimes lack adequate knowledge of the internal complexity of a community of interest. Many communities have complex internal dynamics, such that no one person or organization could accurately or legitimately speak on behalf of the entire community. Members within the same umbrella community may have radically different lived experiences that require different approaches and solutions from government, or may require qualitative data to fully characterize. Unless this internal complexity is understood, important distinctions can be missed when identifying stakeholders, designing services, or reporting on data.

Challenge 6: The complexity of government makes it difficult for communities to resolve issues or inform government priorities

Similarly, the internal complexity of government often presents a challenge for community-based organizations and members of under-served communities. Many policy issues span across multiple government departments, or even across multiple jurisdictions which can result in inaction or inconsistencies in data reporting. Some organizations may find it difficult to establish continuity in their relationships with government or to inform the government’s agenda proactively rather than simply responding to government requests. Some organizations may struggle to identify how their input is incorporated into government decision-making, or to track the effectiveness of government programs that affect their constituents. Others, especially smaller groups, may find applying for government funding or information may be prohibitively complex.

Together, these six challenges must inform any attempt to engage under-served communities in Open Government commitments.

Sample commitments and implementation strategies for inclusive Open Government

This section provides examples of two Open Government commitments that might support the issue of inclusivity in the Government of Canada’s 4th Open Government Plan. The first sample commitment, “partner with under-served communities,” focuses on targeted actions and programming while the second sample commitment, “reduce barriers to inclusion and accessibility,” seeks to influence systemic change across a broad range of Departments and Open Government activities. Each is presented with examples of specific implementation strategies and actions. Many of these strategies are informed by ideas raised during the research and interview process. These can be pursued independently or together and are not mutually exclusive. We reiterate here that each community of interest will have distinct needs and a distinct context, meaning that some strategies will be more relevant than others for any given community.
Sample commitment 1: Partner with under-served communities

**Description:** Work with under-served communities, especially those facing stigma, prejudice or structural barriers, to improve access to Open Data, Open Information and Open Dialogue.

**Planned result:** Under-served communities will be active participants in shaping their experiences and interactions with government.

**Example key indicators:**
- Number of community-based organizations that are engaged from under-served communities
- Number of person-hours of accessibility support or engagement provided to members of under-served communities
- Percentage of participating organizations that rank the authenticity of their experience 4 or higher on a 5-point scale

**Implementation Strategy 1A: Partner with and support community-based organizations** and neutral third parties to serve as intermediaries between government and under-served populations.

What this might look like in practice:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Issues Addressed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. Developing an ongoing partnership model with neutral “centres for civic life” such as public libraries, with a goal to host consultations on behalf of the government that engage under-served populations that have relationships with the library (e.g. newcomers learning English).</td>
<td>C1: Low levels of trust C3: Lack of accessibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii. Working with educational institutions, public libraries and similar organizations to support under-served communities in accessing government information and finding government services, especially for populations that face complex barriers (e.g. language, cultural appropriateness, literacy, etc.).</td>
<td>C3: Lack of accessibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii. Entering into formal agreements with community-based organizations to co-design and co-facilitate Open Dialogue with under-served populations to ensure cultural appropriateness, help frame problems from a community’s perspective, and promote a safe environment that enables genuine dialogue.</td>
<td>C2: Fear of discrimination C5: Community complexity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv. Providing financial support to third party and community-based organizations to carry out these activities, as well as to individuals with lived experience who face financial barriers to participating in government consultations. This action recognizes that many organizations operate with limited resources and that increasing participation by those with lived experience provides a public benefit. Financial procedures may need to be adapted to enable full success for this action, for instance, by allowing honoraria to be issued in cash without collecting Personally Identifiable Information.</td>
<td>C3: Lack of accessibility C4: Limited resources</td>
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</table>
Implementation Strategy 1B: Support communities in navigating government complexity, with the objectives of building sustained relationships, providing a venue for communities to identify issues for discussion, and improving two-way communications.

What this might look like in practice:

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<tr>
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</table>
| i. Forming advisory councils for under-served communities so that community representatives have opportunities to raise and resolve issues without having to navigate the internal complexity of government, and so that departments can better identify accessibility issues before engaging under-served populations. Staffing such advisory committees with an appropriate secretariat to ensure that meetings are action and outcome-oriented and to account for the time requirements to resolve issues that involve multiple departments. | C1: Low levels of trust  
C2: Fear of discrimination  
C3: Lack of accessibility  
C6: Complexity of government |
| ii. Providing a portal or central point of contact for specific communities so that under-served populations do not have to navigate the internal complexity of government when accessing information or services. | C6: Complexity of government |
| ii. Working in partnership with under-served communities to identify measures of success for government services and proactively circulating evaluation results at regular intervals to increase accountability and promote dialogue. | C1: Low levels of trust  
C6: Complexity of government |

Sample commitment 2: Reduce barriers to inclusion and accessibility

**Description:** Take steps to reduce barriers preventing the full participation of under-served populations across all Open Government activities.

**Planned result:** Under-served communities more fully participate in and benefit from Open Data, Open Information and Open Dialogue.

**Example key indicators:**
- Accessibility is formally evaluated as part of all Open Government activities
- The number of Open Data products produced or modified in response to the needs of under-served communities
- The number of government staff who receive training on cultural safety and humility and/or human rights
Implementation Strategy 2A: Improve the capacities of departments and agencies to engage with under-served communities, especially to identify how upcoming policy decisions, data collection strategies and access to information requests may impact specific populations.

What this might look like in practice:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i. Creating centres of excellence within government for engaging under-served communities to support departments in carrying out engagement that is context appropriate, in recognition that it is not feasible for all departments to develop competencies for all under-served communities and that inappropriate engagement tactics have the potential to cause harm where community members have experienced trauma or discrimination. Where helpful and completely voluntary, Government of Canada employees with lived experience could have the option to contribute their expertise.</td>
<td>C1: Low levels of trust</td>
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<td>C2: Fear of discrimination</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C3: Lack of accessibility</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C5: Community complexity</td>
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<tr>
<td>ii. Requiring departments and agencies to identify potential impacts on under-represented communities before launching public consultations, and, where warranted, adapt engagement activities to reduce barriers to participation (e.g. provide additional time to enable participatory design, allocate an accessibility budget, etc.).</td>
<td>C1: Low levels of trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C3: Lack of accessibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>iii. Reviewing Privacy Impact Assessments and Access to Information procedures to ensure that stigmatized populations cannot be “outed” by accessing government information or services or through participating in consultation activities. Proactively communicating these efforts to increase the confidence of stigmatized populations that their participation will not result in a breach of privacy.</td>
<td>C2: Fear of discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv. Providing senior government staff and direct service providers with training on cultural safety and humility, as well as human rights competencies in relation to under-served communities.</td>
<td>C2: Fear of discrimination</td>
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Implementation Strategy 2B: Develop standards for data handling, reporting and communication that take into account the needs of under-served communities such as privacy, accessibility and context.

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<tr>
<td>i. When analysing and reporting on public consultation results, avoid relying solely upon themes or averages when doing so would result in the loss of important context or “lump” together participants without understanding the complexity and diversity that exists within many under-served communities.</td>
<td>C5: Community complexity</td>
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<td>ii. Identifying and publishing qualitative Open Data sets in addition to quantitative data, which may better meet the needs of some under-served communities.</td>
<td>C1: Low levels of trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>ii. Improving the coherence of Open Data sets across different levels of government, so that under-served communities do not have the additional burden of re-interpreting data that is presented in different scales / units / formats.</td>
<td>C1: Low levels of trust</td>
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<td>C6: Complexity of government</td>
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Next steps

SFU’s Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue will submit this report to Canada’s Open Government Team to review in conjunction with other inputs received through their consultation process and use to identify potential actions for its 4th Open Government Plan. As part of this process, the Centre recommends validating and co-designing any resulting actions with a range of under-served communities.
Endnotes


v Retrieved from https://open.canada.ca/en/content/principles-and-guidelines


xiii Sheedy (2008)
