



Creating better engagement

A guide for government and civil society organisations



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About Bond

Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development. We connect and champion a diverse network of over 400 civil society organisations to help eradicate global poverty, inequality and injustice. We work to influence governments and policymakers, develop the skills of people in the sector, build organisational capacity and share expertise.

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a guide for government and civil society
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Building effective engagement between UK civil society and the government

A healthy democracy requires a strong, open and vibrant relationship between civil society and government. Effective engagement, where civil society organisations (CSOs) are brought into decision-making processes and involved in designing policies and programmes, is integral to building this relationship. It is also the key to designing policies and programmes that work.

In this paper, we use the term CSOs to refer to the more organised elements of civil society, where people come together to take collective action on issues such as climate change, global poverty, human rights, environmental protection, nature conservation, community development, peace and justice. It includes registered charities, non-governmental organisations, trade unions and labour organisations, environmental activists, human rights defenders, disabled people's organisations and community groups as well as protest networks and movements.

CSOs provide decision-makers and government officials with access to valuable information, diverse expertise and new ideas, resulting in better designed policies and programmes that have greater impact. CSOs can amplify voices and perspectives from different groups across society, including people who have been marginalised, which supports equity

and inclusion. Engaging with civil society also improves accountability and transparency, adding an essential layer of checks and balances to policy formation and decision-making.

Most government officials and civil society actors know this, but in practice the quality of engagement varies. All too often, it is rushed, used to legitimise decisions that have already been made, or it doesn't happen at all. When it does take place, we tend to see the same faces round the table, which can result in stale and one-dimensional conversations.

How can we improve engagement so that it delivers on its promise of greater inclusion and impact for all? This short paper looks at the principles behind effective engagement and outlines key steps that government and CSOs can take to improve it for everyone.

Bond's engagement expertise

Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. We have 450 members, ranging from large international non-governmental organisations with a worldwide presence to small specialist organisations. We also support more than 40 multi-member expert working groups examining topics such as disability, conflict, child rights, funding and transparency.

Supporting effective engagement between civil society and government is a core part of our work. Over the years, we have convened hundreds of dialogues, roundtables and events with our members, wider civil society, government ministers, civil servants and parliamentarians. For example, in 2021 we chaired the C7, the primary engagement process between the UK Government and civil society ahead of the G7 Summit. Bond has also convened dialogues between civil society and the UK Government on humanitarian crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine.

This paper draws on this experience as well as research conducted in 2018-19 and published in our report **[Ensuring civil society is heard](#)**. It provides practical recommendations for government and civil society on how to make engagement processes more effective for all participants.

What is effective engagement?

Engagement concerns the involvement of civil society and the wider public in policy development and decision-making processes. It might be a standalone meeting or consultation, a series of events or an ongoing or regular dialogue that lasts over many months or even years. There are many ways of engaging with civil society, which can be used alone or in combination with others.

Our experience tells us that government-civil society engagement is most effective when it is **meaningful, inclusive** and **deliberative**. It should begin early, be regular and consistent, balance transparency and confidentiality, encourage accountability and be well-resourced.

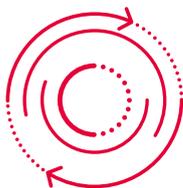
Methods of engagement include:

- Written consultations
- Surveys
- Social media conversations
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Roundtables
- Taskforces
- Expert panels
- Advisory groups
- Evidence sessions
- Idea generation and co-creation sessions
- Citizen assemblies
- Town hall meetings
- Other public events

Principles for effective engagement

Bond has identified three principles of effective engagement: it must be meaningful, inclusive and deliberative.

Meaningful



Engagement must be relevant and purposeful. The greater the scope for influence or co-creation, the more meaningful the engagement process is likely to be. It should never be used to reinforce or legitimise decisions that have already been made.

Inclusive



The best decisions are informed by diverse perspectives and expertise. It is crucial to consider who is in the room and who is not. If you can't invite all the relevant stakeholders, be open and transparent about the criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Seek advice from sector networks about who might be well placed to contribute.¹

Deliberative



Engagement is most valuable when it is rooted in open discussions that encourage participants to work together to identify problems and develop innovative solutions. Deliberation can strengthen the legitimacy of a decision-making process and give people a sense of ownership over the outcome.

1. For the international development sector, these networks include Bond and its working groups, plus the Gender and Development Network, Trade Justice Movement and Action for Global Health. For the domestic sector, the two largest networks are the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and the Association for Chief Executives.

How to make engagement effective

There are four steps that both government and CSOs should consider when planning an engagement to ensure it is effective, whether it is a standalone meeting or consultation, a series of events or an ongoing or regular dialogue that lasts over many months or even years.

- **Begin early and give people sufficient time to fully engage.** Government should involve civil society early to shape the direction of the engagement. This can create buy-in and a shared sense of ownership. Early notice of meetings is essential, and they should be scheduled on a regular basis for ongoing engagements. In emergency situations, such as humanitarian crises, meetings may need to happen at short notice, but this should be the exception rather than the rule. Agreeing the agenda well in advance helps to ensure the right people are in the room and participants are well prepared. Providing people with adequate time to respond to documents and written consultations makes it easier to include a wide range of perspectives and experiences, and it improves the quality of responses.
- **Be open and accountable, while recognising the need for confidentiality.** Sharing information ensures that all relevant stakeholders are kept informed, and it enables those involved to bring in voices from people who are unable to participate. However, there may be a requirement to find a balance between openness and the need for confidentiality, so it is vital everyone agrees in advance who can share what and with whom. This also helps to build trust among participants. The default should be for all engagements to be fully open and transparent to support accountability (i.e. participants can freely share information with those not directly involved). However, where sensitive topics are being discussed, or senior government figures are involved, the Chatham House Rule may be used.² Participants should not be asked to sign non-disclosure agreements as this can undermine trust. Providing feedback, which communicates the reasons and evidence-base for decisions taken during and following
- the engagement, is an important part of the process. This helps to make decision-making more transparent and accountable.
- **Co-create a well-structured process that encourages consistency.** Government and civil society should work together to agree the scope and purpose of an engagement and ensure that a well-structured engagement process is put in place, where participants know what is expected. This is especially important for long-term, ongoing engagement processes, which can run for many months or even years. It can help to create a Terms of Reference, which sets out the engagement's objectives, the process and tools to be used, the feedback mechanism and key stakeholders' roles and responsibilities. The representatives from all parties should, where possible, remain consistent. This helps build trust between parties and ensures continuity during discussions.
- **Recognise and commit to invest the necessary time and resources required, especially for long-term engagements.** Everyone must be aware of the level of commitment required to engage effectively and be pragmatic about the ongoing resources and investment needed, particularly in terms of staff time. Some engagements may require a facilitator or coordinator, as well as a chair, to ensure the process runs smoothly. Other roles, such as notetakers, should be assigned to a dedicated person or rotated among participants. As well as providing resources for a facilitator or coordinator, it is worth considering paying expenses and/or honorariums to some participants (especially those from low- and middle-income countries or participants with lived experience) to cover their costs and recognise the time and contribution they have made to the process.

2. The Chatham House Rule is where information disclosed during a meeting may be reported by those present, but the source of the information may not be explicitly or implicitly identified.

Equity, diversity and inclusion

Both government and CSOs have more to do to ensure diverse voices are shaping policy and programmes. Well-organised engagement has the potential to support greater equity, diversity and inclusion. It can enable decision-makers to hear and consider the perspectives and experiences of different groups when making decisions or designing policies and programmes that impact them. Yet all too often, it is the same individuals and organisations who are invited to take part, and there is limited participation from people who have been racialised or marginalised, who are from low- and middle-income countries or who have lived experience of the issues being discussed.

Ensure diverse speakers and participants

Those organising meetings or events as part of an engagement process must ensure there is a diverse range of speakers and participants. Decisions should not be made about communities that have been marginalised without their involvement. Their views and experience must be taken into consideration. When discussing international development issues, for example, this might mean ensuring there is equal representation of participants from low- and middle-income countries compared to high-income countries.

While it is important to put forward representatives who have the relevant knowledge, experience and seniority, CSOs should also consider the diversity of participants. Racism and inequity are endemic within society, and CSOs must take concrete steps to provide equitable opportunities for people of colour and those with lived experience to participate. CSOs may wish to give up their seat at the table so that someone from a group that has been racialised or marginalised or is from a low- or middle-income country can take their place. You should consider refusing to speak at or participate in an event if there is not diverse gender, race, age and disability representation among the speakers.

Make engagement processes equitable

Due thought should be given to ensure engagement processes are equitable. They should recognise people's different circumstances and make allowances that enable everyone to engage on equal terms, including those from low- and middle-income countries.

When it comes to meetings and events, here are a few simple things you can do to make them more inclusive and equitable.

Make meetings and events accessible

Choose a time zone and language that is inclusive, and provide interpretation and captioning if necessary. You may wish to cover expenses and pay honorariums, which recognise the time devoted to an engagement. If any participants have a disability, you should make any adaptations they require to participate on equal terms. For hybrid meetings, try to make the experience comparable for those who are in the room and online by asking everyone to use their laptops and cameras. Be aware that not everyone has good internet access so may not be able to fully participate or view slides and videos. You may wish to provide funding for participants with limited or no internet access so they can attend the meeting in person or travel to somewhere with internet access.

Make everyone feel welcome and ensure everyone is heard

Chairs must be aware of the power they hold and create an environment where everyone feels willing and able to contribute. They should indicate that they are open to challenging and diverse view points, and ensure the meeting agenda and format provides everyone with an opportunity to participate (e.g. by using breakout groups or participatory techniques or inviting written feedback). Using an external facilitator can help make people feel more comfortable to contribute.

Checklist for effective engagement

Effective engagement between government and civil society needs to be:

Meaningful



Inclusive



Deliberative



Use this checklist when agreeing an approach for engagement to ensure it is **meaningful, inclusive and deliberative**.

Establishing an engagement process

- Agree the purpose and scope of the engagement (i.e. the issues it covers and its objectives).
- Design a clear structure and choose appropriate mechanisms for engagement (e.g. written consultations, roundtables).
- Agree a timetable that ensures there is sufficient time for people to participate (e.g. respond to written consultations) and establish a regular pattern for meetings (e.g. fortnightly, quarterly) if appropriate.
- Agree ground rules, including any confidentiality requirements (i.e. what information can be shared and with whom) and develop a Terms of Reference, if appropriate.
- Identify criteria for selecting participants, in terms of relevance and expertise required and to ensure inclusivity and diversity.
- Select chairs or recruit a facilitator, if using. Assign any other roles (e.g. notetakers, coordinators) and agree a dedicated focal person for each organisation, if appropriate.
- Identify and secure any funding required for engagement (e.g. for venue hire, consultancy fees) and produce a budget.
- Create an appropriate feedback mechanism (e.g. an end of engagement evaluation meeting, written responses to consultation submissions or regular review meetings throughout the course of the engagement).

Organising meetings as part of an engagement process

- Schedule regular meetings, put them in the diary as soon as possible, and ensure an inclusive time zone is used where relevant.
- Use an inclusive language and arrange interpretation and captioning if required. Make any other adaptations necessary so everyone can contribute on equitable terms.
- Co-create the agenda for meetings through dialogue, prioritising issues that are most important or urgent. Avoid trying to cover too much.

Checklist for effective engagement

- Identify and confirm speakers and participants, ensuring they are diverse and have the relevant expertise. Provide honorariums and expenses, if appropriate.
- Share the agenda in good time and provide participants with all the information and documents they need to take part (e.g. participants list, pre-readings).
- Consider organising a pre-meet for civil society, especially if there are a lot of participants, to agree priorities and objectives for the meeting.
- For hybrid meetings, try to make the experience comparable for those who are in the room and online by asking everyone to use their laptops and cameras.
- Chairs should indicate that they are open to challenging and diverse view points, and ensure the meeting agenda and format provides everyone with an opportunity to participate (e.g. using breakout groups or providing an opportunity for written input).
- Take meeting notes and share them promptly, in line with what has been agreed in terms of confidentiality and transparency ahead of the engagement.

Reviewing and concluding an engagement process

- Regularly review your approach to engagement and make improvements as necessary, based on feedback from participants.
- Keep others in your organisation informed, in line with what has been agreed in terms of confidentiality and transparency ahead of the engagement.
- Provide regular feedback to all participants and other stakeholders, including how information gathered through the engagement was used and how decisions were made.
- Publish the results of your engagement, where appropriate. Proactively share these results with all relevant stakeholders, in line with what has been agreed in terms of confidentiality and transparency ahead of the engagement.
- Conduct a joint evaluation or learning exercise, then make recommendations about how to improve the process and share them with relevant stakeholders.



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Visit our website for the latest news and views from the sector, useful resources, funding opportunities, jobs and training.

Find out more at bond.org.uk

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