

Open Government Partnership Action Plan of Latvia

The recent years have seen a growing awareness, both on a global scale and in Latvia, of the need for the public administration structures (both at the political and administrative level) to achieve public understanding, participation and support.

The role and influence of civil society have considerably increased in decision-making on development issues vital for Latvia. At the same time, this influence cannot yet be regarded as sufficient or satisfying all stakeholders. The mission of public administration institutions at various levels is to enhance their tools for day-to-day communication with civil society and organisations representing it. The involvement of civil society in decision-making processes and legislative initiatives is one of the ways for reducing the gap between power and society and is a potent tool for building an inclusive society in the country in general.

It is in Latvia's long term development interests to implement an efficient, honest, open, responsible, public interest based and modern government at all levels (local, regional, national, as well as international). In line with open government best practice, decisions must be taken in a close interaction with the public, which, in turn, actively and efficiently applies all participation tools at hand.

It is in this context that the Government of Latvia sees the open government initiative as an international and unanimous forum that complements, supports and strengthens the efforts of each individual country towards openness in government. The Open Government Partnership enables the countries, while sharing experience and guided by common values, to achieve their individual objectives sooner and more successfully. By joining this international initiative Latvia commits to taking over the best intellectual, legal, administrative and technological international expertise, as well as sharing its own experience to date.

In view of the above, and by publicising this action plan, the Government of Latvia confirms that its goal is to promote clearly identifiable administrative, legal and public change through shaping and strengthening a people-friendly, effective, open and honest public administration.

To achieve the goal, it is important to ensure deep and persistent change in the cooperation between the state and civil society. By this, the Government of Latvia pledges to raise the quality of inter-institutional communication and cooperation, ensure a transparent, well-organised involvement of civil society representatives in preparing and adopting administrative decisions, thus achieving more qualitative, comprehensive and sustainable change in the work of public administration.

With regard to the priorities stated in the action plan, as well as in line with the “Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia until 2030” approved by the Saeima and the national Reform Programme of Latvia for the implementation of the European Union (EU) Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, “Europe 2020”, the Government of Latvia has identified four priority areas in which change should be enhanced, thus approaching the established goal:

1. Improving the quality of the involvement of society and civil society organisations in decision-making processes;
2. Improving the quality of public service provision
3. Restricting corruption;
4. Facilitating freedom of information and introducing the open data system.

The goals that Latvia has set for the Open Government Partnership have certain cross-cutting aspects: to ensure that the society of Latvia and civil society organisations are highly aware of and get engaged, on equal terms, in the process of preparing decisions and holding consultations; society has an easy and effective access to the public sector information; public institutions make their best efforts to clear any doubts about possible maladministration; and public institutions gain awareness of the primary task of government being the delivery of services to the public and acting in the public interests.

In association with civil society partners, including social partners, Latvia commits to drawing up, updating on a regular basis, and evaluating the action programme that maps out Latvia's path to its goals. With his aim of producing, implementing and monitoring the programme, Latvia pledges to devise or establish the required forms and/or forums of cooperation, to constantly enhance their efficiency, as well as devising and improving relevant administrative mechanisms.

In the process of planning the measures to be carried out within the priority areas, the government institutions set up a working group, which carried out active consultations with civil society organisations and social partners to the Government. Their recommendations and revisions contributed to producing a declaration on the activities planned by Latvia to ensure participation in the open government partnership that maps out Latvia's path to the goals the country has set.

The action plan, which contains a commitment to making specific improvements, is to be regarded as an open document to be further improved and allows for initiatives beyond its original scope. The plan is to provide a platform for joint efforts of the Government and civil society organizations towards achieving the objectives and thus further contents can be supplied along with putting in place relevant administrative mechanisms for achieving the objectives and monitoring that.

The work towards achieving the objectives of the action plan will be done in a close connection with the National Development Plan (2014 – 2020), the

Government Action Plan, the Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy (2012-2018), as well as policy planning documents relevant to the objectives of the Declaration.

It is important to note that a necessary prerequisite of achieving the action plans objectives is a close cooperation between the legislative and executive powers, and, to this end, the Government pledges to facilitate an effective cooperation with the Saeima.

The Government of Latvia commits to producing a joint report on an annual basis and in consultation with civil society, evaluating the progress towards the objectives of the action plan, and setting new priorities, if needed.

OPEN GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO DATE

A number of changes and innovations have been introduced under the four priorities that bring Latvia closer to its goal. The most significant of those are:

Public participation

- At the Cabinet level, civil society organisations have broad opportunities for participating in decision-making: they can join a working group for drafting a law or a policy planning document, suggest improvements to draft legislation, take part in an inter-institutional coordination of opinions, or apply for giving an opinion at a Cabinet meeting. Institutions must indicate in annotations to new draft documents whether public consultations have been held.
- As from February 2012, the citizens of Latvia have a possibility to directly influence the agenda of the Saeima sessions. If at least 10000 Latvian citizens who have reached 16 years of age sign a joint application to the parliament, their idea will be discussed at parliamentary committees and the plenary session. The signatures can also be collected in an electronic form, provided that the identification of signatories is ensured.
- With the aim of promoting an efficient, open, inclusive, timely and responsible public engagement in the process of development planning, a legal framework has been operational since 2009, laying down the procedures for public participation in development planning activities of the Saeima, the Cabinet, institutions of direct public administration, planning regions and self-governments.
- A Forum for Cooperation between the Saeima and NGOs, held on a yearly basis since 2006, draws up and evaluates an annual cooperating programme which outlines desired improvements to legislation and the cooperation between the Saeima and the general public. A coordination group meets on a regular basis, both for preparing the forum and supporting improvements to cooperation between the events.
- A Memorandum on Cooperation between Non-governmental Organisations and the Cabinet of Minister has been operational since 2005, and 247 NGOs have joined the initiative so far. The aims of the memorandum are to facilitate the work of effective public administration acting in the public interest, to enable civic engagement in decision-making and to produce proposals for

budget preparation. This is ensured by a council that works openly, holding regular meetings.

- Individual advisory councils are operating under the auspices of various ministries; the councils evaluate documents drafted by public institutions and provide proposals and recommendations for their improvement.
- Since 2004, the National Trilateral Cooperation Council (NTCC) has been working to pursue a national level dialogue between the Government of Latvia, employers (Employers' Confederation of Latvia – *LDDK*) and employees (Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia - *LBAS*) in order to harmonise the interests of those organisations with the possibilities for the state to deal with social and economic matters.

Restricting corruption

- A successful system has been set up to ensure the transparency of political party funding. The website of the institution in charge of supervising the legitimacy of party financing, the Corruption Prevention and Combating Office (*KNAB*), displays up-to-date information on donations to political parties, maintains a publicly accessible database of party funding and publishes financial declarations submitted by political parties.
- On a yearly basis, *KNAB* draws up an operational report, presenting information on the violations found and penalties imposed, which allows evaluating the effectiveness of anti-corruption efforts. The report is a tool to ensure national visibility on the issue.
- Corruption prevention is *KNAB*'s another function. *KNAB* monitors the restrictions and prohibitions applied to state officials in this regard, consult government institutions on preventing corruption and develops and coordinates the introduction of National Strategy as well as State Program of Corruption Prevention and Combating. A number of guidelines have been produced, as well as a handbook on reducing corruption. The *KNAB* also provides training for public officials on various issues related to reducing corruption. The *KNAB* operates a public advisory council.

Improving quality of public service provision

- The State Revenues Service (*VID*) ensures a possibility to receive services via the Electronic Declaration System (*EDS*). The *EDS* is an online tool for submitting declarations, reports and tax returns to the *VID*. Currently, 95% of all reports and declarations required by law can be submitted online via the *EDS* website.
- Business people can settle most of the administrative formalities electronically, for instance, register a company online, and at the same time submit an application to be entered on the VAT Payers' Register, etc.
- A portal at <http://www.latvija.lv> is a catalogue of public services, also providing an opportunity to receive a number of public services online.

Freedom of information and open data

- Freedom of information has been ensured and initial prerequisites have been created for re-use of data (in the meaning of the open data system),

providing access to information, including the fact that any resident can receive information from public administration institutions in no more than two weeks.

- Asset declarations by public officials are publicly available on the internet. Information on public official's monthly salary is also made available to the public.
- Information on the announced public procurement, contracts awarded and other related information is also available on the internet.
- Audit reports by the State Audit Office are available on the internet.
- Following a Cabinet meeting, the minutes thereof and the decisions taken are published on the Cabinet website.
- Anybody interested can subscribe via the Cabinet website for receiving an update on draft legislation (currently there are 1400 subscribers representing private bodies, civil society organisations, mass media, etc.).
- Since 2002, the Government of Latvia has been using an electronic system of document circulation, "e-portfolio". The E-portfolio system gives access to the documents of the Cabinet and the Cabinet committee, the agendas and minutes of meetings. The system is used by the staff of the State Chancellery, ministries and other public institutions, as well as social partners involved in the government decision-making process (the e-portfolio has about 1000 users).
- Publicly available statistics on incidents having been a threat to individual or public security, with possibilities of electronic search according to various criteria (e.g., type, place or time of the incident) and displaying the search results as a table and on a map.
- Publicly available overview on incidents having been a threat to individual or public security, with electronic access to the Joint Register of Incidents for entering urgent announcements and an overview of the events registered in last 24 h, as well as offering a possibility to search for incidents entered on the Register and displaying aggregated publishable information and statistics of the incidents.

OPEN GOVERNMENT COMMITMENTS

Latvia commits to making targeted efforts within the four priority areas. While maintaining a trans-sectorial approach, Latvia sets individual objectives under each priority and defines the measures to be carried out to achieve the objectives.

1. Improving the quality of the involvement of society and civil society organisations in decision-making processes

The Objective: through facilitating a high quality involvement of civil society organisations in the central and self-government decision-making, to achieve a higher public satisfaction with decisions of public institutions and the work of the Government.

Action:

1. As regards the role of civil society and the representatives of its organisations in public decision-making process, to ensure a

comprehensive evaluation of the content, quality and effectiveness of the existing engagement mechanisms;

2. To put in place the required policy and a mechanism for its implementation, so as to ensure legal and administrative action for identifying and dealing with the drawbacks in the existing and incoming mechanisms and cooperation practices related to the engagement of civil society organisations in national policy decision-making;
3. To ensure a quality overview on the standards that regulate access to information for civil society and its organisations and, as much as possible, include the examples of best international practice in that information;
4. Make easier and increase public participation in governance processes through strengthening and expanding the possibilities of applying e-participation tools.

Practical measures:

- Implement the "NGO Fund" programme co-financed by the European Economic Zone thus increasing the capacity of NGO and their quality engagement in drafting legislation and sectorial policies. February 2012 a third round of project proposal selection with joint funding of 1 million euros was announced. Third round of project proposal selection is implemented within European Social Fund operational program "Human resources and employment" 1.5.2.2.2. Sub-activity "Administrative Capacity Building of NGOs".
- Strengthen the role of the social partners (*LBAS* and *LDDK*) and civil society organisations in decision-making process by ensuring that social partners and civil society organisations are an equal discussion partner for the Government, self-governments and other public institutions;
- Upgrade legislation that regulates trade union operations.
- Assess the practice of co-working between ministries and sectorial NGOs and develop recommendations for improving the works, including the extension of the principles of the Cabinet of Ministers Cooperation Memorandum to cover also the ministries, and the organisation of regular meetings between representatives of the ministries and NGOs in a mutually acceptable form and contents;
- Devising a public engagement model for integrated, coordinated and quality decision-making at all levels.

2. Improving the quality of public service provision

The Objective: to increase the quality and accessibility of public services through introducing the one-stop-shop principle, enhancing e-services and decreasing the administrative burden in the process of receiving services.

Action:

1. Put in place a system of public services, which includes improving the legal environment and seeking a common methodological approach in the area of public services both in local governments and at the level of direct public administration. The system is based on introducing the one-stop-shop principle and developing e-services;

2. Develop the catalogue of public services (www.latvija.lv) as the central site thus facilitating accessibility to public services;
3. Pay particular attention to improving the quality of public services in the fields such as health protection, education, data and transport infrastructure;
4. Develop policy and relevant legal and technical tools to ensure active short term use of e-documents and support their long term use among public sector institutions;
5. Promote the use of e-services thus reducing the administrative burden on population.

Practical measures:

- Take forward the development of e-services and open public internet access points to promote the use of e-services thus reducing costs and administrative burden for population, companies and public administration;
- Identify and assess, by applying the 72 criteria methodology, the public services delivered by all government sectors, to establish the need for optimization and delegation of services or forgoing a service altogether;
- Enhance frequently used e-services, including an integrated efficient electronic Land Register process; introduce e-services and improve information systems at the National Land Service, synchronising those with other information systems; introduce electronic registration procedures for all registers held by the Register of Enterprises; Setup an integrated information system for civil registration;
- Ensure use of e-services by the Road Transport Directorate in the field of passenger and goods transportation, including the issuance of special permits (licences) and licence cards, European Community transport permits and copies etc.

3. Restricting corruption

The Objective: establish a common framework for cooperation between the Government and society that creates, promotes and sustains an active counteraction to corruption, as well as raising awareness of the significance of honesty in public administration.

Action:

1. Apply political and legal mechanisms to do away with corruption in public administration and introduce preventive measures of reducing corruption risks, in order to create an environment conducive to compliance with high personal moral standards and professional code of conduct of public employees. Develop personnel recruiting and management system and internal control mechanisms instrumental to achieving the above and facilitating a smooth and effective performance of public functions.
2. Enhance the existing regulatory mechanisms protecting 'whistle-blowers' in public administration by adding elements of comprehensive protection

(confidentiality of the whistle-blower's identity, applying disciplinary procedures in case of the violation of whistle-blowers' rights etc.);

3. Ensure professional and transparent governance of state and self-government owned companies.

Practical measures:

- Increase control over the spending's of physical persons being within the limits of their lawful income;
- Facilitate transparency of lobbying by elaborating a statutory regulation of lobbying;
- Encourage readiness to report violations through educating the staff of public institutions and the community about the need to report violations of the law to public authorities. Inform about witness protection programmes and the possibilities to use those, the protection of informants and guarantee of anonymity;
- Enhance statutory regulation of the matters related to the control of the activities of persons who directly or indirectly receive national budget subsidies or other public funds, while performing their professional duties outside public institutions;
- To reduce political influence and put an end to politicising daily administrative decisions, a state shareholdings management concept and related regulations will be drawn up. The current draft concept addresses the model of managing state shareholdings and offers to introduce corporate governance at state-owned companies, including the transparency of information, dividend policy, the policy of motivational remuneration, appointing the members of company administration bodies, setting commercial targets and evaluating results.

4. Facilitating freedom of information and introducing an open data system

The Objective: facilitate economic development and civic participation in public administration by ensuring the required political, legal and technical change as well as a change in administrative practice with regard to making the public sector data public.

Action:

1. Enhancing national legislation to include the latest trends of the EU sectorial policy concerning the re-use of public sector data as well as taking into account best practice in other countries;
2. Introduce unified technical standards concerning the re-use of public sector data;
3. Develop and support an open data portal for a coordinated aggregation and storage of the publicised information;
4. Ensure a user friendly approach to technically processable, accurate and latest data on the budget;
5. Support re-use of public sector data, create new and practicable public services , as well as e-services and initiatives;

6. Continue advancing electronic application, declaration and reporting systems, with a focus on the development of the required infrastructure, notably in rural areas.

Practical measures:

- Given that central government institutions of Latvia have approximately 180 different websites, there are plans to develop a unified concept for their administration and a single website of the Government of Latvia, while civil society organisations are invited to identify the data categories publicising which would make their work easier and help to reach the set objectives;
- Ensure universally accessible online broadcasting of the Cabinet meetings and plenary sessions of the Saeima;
- Build a website with freely accessible information on the participation possibilities for civil society organizations (events, discussion, public consultations etc.).