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## Engaging Canadians in Making Policy: More Needs to Be Done

**Ottawa** – Canada's political parties, MPs and, indeed, Parliament itself, aren't as effective as they might be in involving Canadians in their deliberations. Public consultation by the public service remains one-sided.

"This should be a concern at a time when trust in government is declining and demands for involvement are increasing," says Susan Phillips, lead author of a new research paper from CPRN.

"Significant reform is needed to engage citizens more effectively."

In *Mapping the Links: Citizen Involvement in Policy Processes*, Phillips, who teaches at the School of Public Policy and Administration at Carleton University, and her co-author, Michael Orsini, of the Department of Political Science, Glendon College, York University, take a systematic look at citizen involvement in policy making and ask why, in spite of favourable rhetoric, so little progress has been made.

In search of the answer, the authors explore the links between various dimensions of citizen involvement, stages of the policy process and the workings of three key groups – Parliament, the public service, and non-government actors.

Citizen involvement in policy-making has many goals – the opportunity for citizens to make policy demands, the opportunity for governments to obtain social knowledge, and the opportunity for community development, for example.

"What we see," says Phillips, "is that progress on these fronts is very uneven."

Phillips and Orsini find traditional institutions wanting:

- MPs (and MLAs) collect useful knowledge, but have little influence on policy

- Parliamentary committees are adversarial, lack resources, rely mainly on expert opinion and have limited impact
- Political parties are exclusionary and limit political discourse
- The public service relies too much on one-way communication
- Civil society organizations often have limited resources to participate fully and many are limited in their advocacy activities by government regulations.

"What is needed is a combination of reforms to these institutions, the creation of new institutions devoted to citizen involvement, a genuine cultural shift in attitude, and investment in civil society," Phillips says.

The authors recommend:

- Giving political parties a role between elections by strengthening their internal policy capacity, and providing more opportunities for members to participate
- Opening up channels of influence for MPs (and MLAs)
- Greater resources and independence for parliamentary committees
- A more inclusive, deliberative, transparent public consultation process by the public service, which is better connected to policy decision-making
- Support for stronger democratic processes in community organizations and investment in community capacity building
- Encouraging the media to make promotion of public deliberation part of a journalist's role

Equally important, the authors call for a culture shift to recognize the true value of involving individual Canadians in policy processes.

"Citizen involvement has to be viewed not only as a means of information gathering, but as a way to expand the boundaries of citizenship in a diverse society, enhance citizenship skills, and invest in community capacity building," they conclude.

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