

Korea's Open Policy Lab: A participatory approach to public sector innovation

This case study examines Korea's use of participatory and collaborative approaches to policymaking through the Open Policy Lab (OPL), supported by the Korea Institute of Public Administration (KIPA). The OPL functions both as a platform and a structured methodology, bringing together subject-matter experts, frontline practitioners, and other stakeholders to co-create policies. It focuses particularly on early-stage policy design under conditions of uncertainty and complexity. Led by Korea's Ministry of Interior and Safety (MOIS), the Open Policy Lab has played a central role in advancing public sector innovation by integrating collective intelligence, operational expertise, and structured deliberation into agenda-setting and policy formulation.

This case study was prepared for the Open Government Symposium in Seoul, held on 22 May 2026 during Open Government Week. It forms part of the initiatives marking the 30th anniversary of Korea's accession to the OECD.

As the Republic of Korea marks 30 years of membership to the OECD, this case study is an opportunity to reflect on the country's evolution in public governance reform. This evolution has included a move from focusing mainly on administrative modernisation and economic development towards more open, participatory, and innovation-driven approaches.

In particular, the expansion and institutionalisation of citizen and stakeholder participation throughout the policy process has become a defining feature of this transformation, aligning with the OECD's Recommendation of the Council on Open Government, which Korea has adhered to since its adoption in 2017 (OECD, 2017^[1]).

The example presented in this case study reflects broader efforts that have positioned Korea among global leaders in applying the principles of open government to improve policy and involve stakeholders into decision-making. Korea consistently ranks among the top performers in the OECD Digital Government Index (OECD, 2026^[2]), reflecting strong performance in user-driven, open-by-default and proactive service delivery. The country has also developed long-standing participation mechanisms, such as the Sotong24 Platform, through which citizens can engage with the government via policy proposals, reviews, surveys, and public competitions (OECD, 2025^[3]). In addition, Korea has adopted people-centred approaches to administrative simplification, leveraging digital government, data integration, and interoperable systems - notably through the Gov24 portal- to reduce administrative burdens on citizens and businesses.

Together, these efforts demonstrate Korea's commitment to ensuring that the government remains responsive to citizens needs and capable of addressing emerging challenges. Korea's experience offers valuable insights and practical examples for OECD Members and beyond.

Challenge

Democratic governments today operate in a context of rapid and disruptive change. Increasing policy complexity across several domains and low public trust in institutions mean that governments cannot rely solely on traditional sources of expertise, such as public officials and external consultants. Governments therefore need to draw on a broader range of external knowledge and perspectives, including the voice of citizens (OECD, 2023^[4])^[OBJ].

In this context, governments need to strengthen their capacity to listen, anticipate, engage and respond in more continuous, structured and meaningful ways. Without such capacity, they risk policy blind spots, reduced legitimacy, and difficulties in sustaining reforms over time (OECD, 2020^[5]).

This case study presents the Open Policy Lab as one approach through which Korea is adapting to these challenges by recognising the need to harness the collective intelligence of a wider set of stakeholders to make institutions more innovative and responsive. It demonstrates how the Ministry of the Interior and Safety (MOIS) is advancing a governance vision that emphasises openness, participation, collaboration, and innovation in response to increasing complexity and uncertainty.

The Open Policy Lab model

The OPL operates as a collaborative policy proposal platform under the Open Government and Public Innovation Platform (OIPP), in co-operation with the MOIS. The Korea Institute of Public Administration (KIPA) provides facilitation, analytical, and methodological support to OPL processes and working groups where it acts as a neutral, independent organiser and facilitator, convening participants, and ensuring continuity across policy areas.

The OPL is designed to support policy co-creation under conditions of uncertainty by enabling the definition of policy problems and the identification of policy priorities through structured interaction and analysis. Rather than functioning as a general consultation mechanism, it focuses on co-creation at early stages of the policy cycle, where problem definition and identification of policy priorities exert a decisive influence on downstream outcomes.

Once a policy challenge is identified, participants are then selected to reflect a diversity of perspectives, including subject matter experts, frontline public officials, researchers, policymakers, and, where appropriate, private-sector actors. Selection criteria prioritise expertise, implementation experience, and the ability to contribute to system-level problem definition.

The selection process for the working group begins through a stakeholder identification and analysis exercise where a multi-disciplinary network on the topic is built, drawing from national research institutes, relevant associations (e.g. trade unions), academia, and government. Potential participants are assessed to confirm their expertise, representativeness, and commitment to public problem-solving. The broad spectrum of perspectives solicited for the OPL working groups are well suited to policy problems requiring expert knowledge, technical advice, and experience as users or implementers in order to identify priorities and gather inputs to tackle a problem (OECD, 2022^[6]).

The core of the process consists of facilitated workshops and co-creation sessions, complemented by interviews and preparatory analytical work. These activities are supported by evidence, data analysis, and scenario-based tools to structure discussion, surface assumptions, and explore policy options.

The Labs produce policy recommendations that are explicitly designed to inform government decision making. Outputs focus on clarifying policy problems, distinguishing priorities, identifying feasible directions for action, and highlighting implications for implementation. The outputs of these workshops are further validated by surveys of working group participants as well as triangulation with other experts.

The OPL applied to the field of public sector modernisation and innovation

Since 2020, the Open Policy Lab has been applied across a growing portfolio of policy challenges. Initial applications focused on smart mobility and platform-related industries. From 2023 onwards, the scope expanded toward public sector innovation challenges. This shift was consolidated through closer collaboration with the MOIS from 2024, which was formalised under the Comprehensive Government Innovation Plan (Republic of Korea, n.d.^[7]).

MOIS, which leads Korea's public sector transformation and innovation agenda, has recently used OPL processes across a variety of issue areas: the adoption of artificial intelligence in the public sector; the integration and improvement of open communication and participation practices; and efforts to reduce administrative burdens and improve efficiency for frontline public servants. As illustrated in Box 1, the Open Policy Lab has supported early-stage agenda-setting and policy design in areas characterised by high complexity and uncertainty.

Box 1. Open Policy Lab use cases

AI adoption in the public sector

As public sector adoption of artificial intelligence accelerated, MOIS faced increasing uncertainty regarding the reliability, ethical use, and organisational readiness for deploying AI systems. Existing policy frameworks remained largely aspirational, offering limited guidance on implementation, risk management, or operational capacity.

MOIS partnered with the OPL to jointly determine policy priorities addressing AI governance, capability development, and trustworthy implementation. Working groups composed of policymakers, legal experts, technologists, and frontline officials were brought together through iterative workshops that combined evidence reviews, discussions on policy priorities, and reflections on administrative practice.

The process generated concrete policy prototypes, improving personnel systems to recruit AI specialists, workforce upskilling approaches, establishing performance management and incentive systems to promote AI adoption, measures to secure the quality standards of AI training data in the public sector, principles for responsible deployment in public administration, AI governance frameworks and other outputs. These outputs directly informed National AI Strategies for public sector, such as the appointment of a National Chief AI Officer at the Presidential Office and vice-ministerial or senior level Chief AI Officers in each ministry and contributed to the development of legal and regulatory frameworks. Other policies adopted as Presidential Agenda items that originated as working group proposals include the government-wide common AI infrastructure, the introduction of AI impact assessments for the public sector, training of public officials including AI champions, and the disclosure of AI use cases in the public sector.

Integrated citizen participation and communication systems

The gradual proliferation of platforms and institutional channels for citizen participation and communication resulted in an over-fragmented landscape where these platforms were not connected to the relevant agencies. Dispersed responsibilities and the absence of a system-level perspective limited coherence and usability for both citizens and public officials.

The OPL was used to reframe these arrangements from an integrated, cross-institutional perspective. The working group brought together approximately 30 participants from central and local government, academia, research institutes, private digital technology firms, and frontline public administration. Through in-depth interviews and multiple rounds of facilitated workshops, participants mapped existing systems – such as civil complaints, petitions, and citizen proposals – and identified bottlenecks.

Rather than proposing a single technological fix, key policy directions were identified across three dimensions:

- Institutional reform, including clarification of roles and processes across participation mechanisms and the introduction of deliberative formats that link citizen input to policymaking.
- Digital and administrative innovation, including the use of AI, digital twins, and robotic process automation to improve efficiency, integrate platforms, and enable data-driven policy analysis.
- Legal, institutional, and governance adjustments, including a legal basis for integrated participation systems, clearer data-sharing rules, and feedback and evaluation mechanisms to ensure sustainability.

The outputs of the OPL, as a type of working group, were formally reported to key decision-making bodies, including the MOIS. Several recommendations addressing improvements to citizen-centred communication, enhanced participation in policymaking, and the development of an AI-based public grievance platform were reflected in the President's policy priorities.

Reducing administrative burdens for front-line public officials

As part of Korea's administrative innovation agenda, the OPL, in collaboration with the MOIS, convened working groups to address the growing administrative burden faced by front-line public officials, notably teachers and local social welfare officers. These actors reported excessive workloads driven by fragmented reporting requirements, data management, handling of civil complaints, and responses to

oversight requests, which limited their capacity to focus on core service delivery and contributed to burnout.

The OPL applied a bottom-up, agenda-setting approach centred on frontline experience. Interviews were conducted with teachers, education office staff, and local social welfare officials to identify systemic sources of administrative overload. Based on this work, dedicated working groups were established, bringing together teacher unions, regional education officials, welfare administrators, and sectoral experts to validate findings and structure policy problems.

Discussions highlighted structural drivers of burden linked to Korea's centralised governance model. Welfare and education policies designed by multiple central ministries are implemented at the local level, creating a "funnelling effect" in which administrative demands accumulate at the frontline. As a result, both teachers and social welfare officials spend a disproportionate share of time on administrative tasks, leading to standardised rather than responsive service delivery.

The finalised outputs will be disseminated through a joint forum by KIPA and MOIS. MOIS will then coordinate with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health and Welfare to ensure adoption and implementation of improvement measures.

Source: Written inputs and materials provided to the OECD Secretariat by (Korea Institute of Public Administration (KIPA), 2026^[8])

Results and reflections on enhancing participation in policymaking

Taken together, these use cases illustrate how the OPL supports policymaking in complex and cross-cutting policy areas through structured participation. In each case, the OPL contributed upstream in the policy process, shaping problem definition and agenda setting at stages where options remained open and implementation considerations could still be meaningfully incorporated. In particular, the cases above illustrate how:

- **Early-stage co-creation enhances policy relevance and implementability:** Engaging diverse stakeholders (policymakers, technologists, frontline officials, and external experts) at the agenda-setting stage helps ensure that policy priorities are grounded in operational realities, reducing the gap between strategy and implementation.
- **Structured participatory methods can address complexity:** Combining a variety of rigorous methodological approaches helps ensure that complex and emerging policy areas – such as AI – be broken down into clearly defined challenges and concrete, implementable policy recommendations. The institutionalisation of these approaches has enabled iterative use and cumulative learning, strengthening the integration of participation within routine policymaking processes rather than treating it as a one-off or experimental activity.
- **Policy labs can serve as durable and neutral intermediary spaces:** Institutional arrangements that position policy labs as convening platforms (e.g. through a semi-independent body) can facilitate trust, mediate across institutional silos, and enable cross-government alignment on priorities and roles. Rather than relying on *ad hoc* or episodic consultation, the OPL operates through a dedicated framework and a stable host organisation, allowing participatory methods to be applied consistently across policy domains and over time.
- **Bottom-up problem identification improves the accuracy of policy diagnosis:** Direct engagement with frontline actors (e.g. teachers, social workers) allows governments to identify structural bottlenecks – such as administrative overload caused by centralised policy design – that are often overlooked in top-down policymaking.

More broadly, the OPL demonstrates an approach to mobilising collective intelligence in a targeted and pragmatic manner. By focusing on actors with relevant expertise and operational experience, and by linking engagement directly to agenda-setting and policy design, the model offers a transferable set of principles for governments seeking to address complex challenges. The key lessons of institutionalisation, a structured and methodologically rigorous approach, and the mobilisation of collective intelligence are valuable considerations that can be applied to broad set of contexts to enhance the effectiveness of participatory processes (OECD, 2022^[6]). As governments around the world confront increasing complexity, Korea's OPL offers a replicable model for embedding open governance principles into core policymaking processes to deliver more efficient, inclusive, and effective reforms for citizens.

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