

E-democracy: towards direct democracy in local communities

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1. Introduction

Citizen Participation is necessary for **building democracy**. That is why it is crucial for controlling leaders, for an improved transmission of citizen preferences, for mitigating conflicts, facilitating agreements and reducing costs in political decision-making. Additionally, participation promotes a type of citizen who has a greater interest in being informed about political affairs, in cooperating with others and who is more respectful of those who are different, hereby strengthening social links between people and favouring intercultural understanding.

Citizens' opinion, suggestions and criticisms can determine the type of democracy a city will have, as well as its quality. To sum up, citizen participation is both important and useful.

E-democracy wants to offer one of the most **innovative** and **technology-oriented websites** in Europe. The use of ICT (Information and Communications Technologies like internet, Java mobile phones, SMS messages, etc.) will help to set up direct democracy mechanisms in local communities in order to bring government closer to the citizens (direct citizen input in policy-making) through the use of new participation tools, thus expanding the scope of policy deliberation at a neighbourhood level.

This City or any big city's quarter website dedicated to e-democracy will contain several applications in order to initiate a **dialogue** process between citizens and their leaders, which will lead to a better understanding of their needs and therefore an improvement in the quality of the city's services.

With this initiative, E-democracy seeks for the following **aims**:

- Foster citizen engagement in local governance
- Strengthen local citizen associations
- Help bridge the digital division
- Provide citizens with tools to participate in the local decision-making processes that directly affect them

Involving the community in politics might be a tricky business, but the fact is this becomes substantially easier when dealing with **local communities**, as people feel more a part of the whole, and that they may make a bigger impact and have a bigger influence. Therefore, the pack of measures and initiatives that we suggest next aims to deal with these local communities, and may later be expanded into larger ones.

2. Target group

E-democracy's main target audiences are the individual citizens (motivated to participate - or chosen). We chose not to target associations of citizens since they are usually more involved in local politics. Moreover, the first part of the project is geared towards all the citizens within a city while the second part will be applicable to groups of citizens within the districts of a city.

3. Guiding principles

Extensive communication campaign

The project must be largely publicized before being launched – as well as afterwards. It must not be addressed to activists or professional militants but to all the citizens, from all social layers, ages, genders and areas (press releases, emails, mails, TV programs, etc.) An important part of this information campaign will seek to help citizens take advantage and raise their awareness of e-governance ICT. Otherwise there will be little participation.

Political support

The initiative must be supported by all the political forces of the community so that the political group in power does not take advantage from it at the expense of other groups.

Digital divide: building bridges

The project must be accompanied by measures to reduce the digital divide. For instance, Public Access Internet Centres shall be deployed at a neighbourhood level where citizens could learn to use computers and the Internet. Additionally, free access computers will be available in public buildings.

“Easy website”

The website and the applications have to be user-friendly, offering a clear design, large fonts, adequate and balanced range of colours etc., especially for the elderly and the handicapped people.

Simple registration

A high participation must be pursued. However, the registration process could limit the citizens' participation. Thus, the registration phase must be as simple as possible, for instance giving the citizen the possibility of identifying themselves using their ID card number in conjunction with a personal password so as to minimize the risk of fraud.

Democratic tradition and successes

One of the main objectives of the project is fostering citizen engagement in local governance. Even though, lack of democratic tradition and public participation in some countries has to be taken into account. As, after the election of candidate A or B, the majority of people does not take an active roles in politics, and this is something our project aims to change. This type of citizen is used to

participate in elections every four/five years – in order to elect her/his representatives, but not to actively participate in these types of consultations. As Politics are part of our everyday life, especially in local communities people should have a greater say in any initiatives or in any investments taken.

E-democracy is a long term project and it might not be expected to be a frank success during the first year, when the participation rates achieved could be low and might need to improve in the future.

Training on ICT

There should be some ICT training provided to all people interested to help the City Council. Otherwise the most knowledgeable people in ICT would step in front, creating issues of fairness.

4. Do's and don't's of public website design

There are numerous ways in which one can design public websites. Some websites are more effective than the others. To illustrate the point better one can have a look at the web pages of two Polish cities: Mrzezyno at www.mrzezyno.pl and Trojmiasto at www.trojmiasto.pl. Both of these sites are official internet pages sponsored by the local authorities. Despite this similarity, there is a huge difference between their effectiveness. In case of Mrzezyno the information is only available in Polish. There is no possibility to interact with the local authorities. The users of this website do not have any forum to express their opinions on vital, local issues. The page is not too informative and contains very often outdated information. On a different note, the other example presented by the group is the website of the Trojmiasto area. In this case the situation looks entirely differently. This page is available in English, which makes it easier for foreigners living there to find their way in the city. Moreover, the citizens are encouraged to use the website by its functionality, which enables them to deal with basic informative tasks, filling inquiries, answering surveys and expressing opinions. Despite the multiple functions that are available, this website is clear and easy to navigate. Trojmiasto ensures that all enquiries are answered quickly and that most recent events are easily available, which gives positive impression to the users.

On the basis of this analysis, one can form a list of best practices:

- Available in multiple languages
- Encourage citizen participation by: surveys, opinions, ability to file forms for official documents
- Easy to navigate
- Quick responsiveness
- Informative

5. Phase i: functions for the entire community

These functions are dedicated to all citizens and serve the indirect democracy more - or they could be regarded as semi-direct democracy instruments:

- Interactive, confidential and facilitated space, where questions and issues can receive a rapid response from counsellors or civil servants.
- Forum on municipal issues based on links with counsellors and the mayor: online policy dialogue
- E-consultation for symbolic municipal decisions
- E-petitioning
- SMS broadcasting / spreadsheets / database technology to multiply information easier
- Decision-tracking / monitoring technology

Improvement of communication

The first aspect to be improved is communication. If people want to be active and take an active role in Politics, then they must feel welcome, and the communication should be done in the smoothest and best possible way. Therefore, it is essential to have good communication structures between the citizens and the politicians/counsellors/civil servants. Replies should take no longer than one working day's time, and should be conceived in the clearest possible way. It is then required to have competent professionals of the highest calibre. To facilitate this, any e-mails and incoming calls shall have a reference number, in order to make them easier to track, respond to, and even consult at a later stage.

Forums

Another useful tool to adopt would be a forum. The usefulness of forums is always debated as very often people with radical ideals and unfeasible plans post and even render the forum impracticable due to the huge amount of posts. It is then encouraged to have sensible moderators of this forum, appeal for the common-sense on posters, and even have people who occupy high posts in the city hall responding to questions.

This would be joined by online petitions, which could be started irrelevantly of the topic. If a matter might be relevant to the community, it should be discussed, and only after ensuring the community support at i.e. 33%, should be taken into account by the policy-makers.

E-consultation on symbolic issues

No matter where one lives, very often new public sites and buildings emerge or disappear, a fact to which one may or may not agree with. In order to tackle this issue, e-consultation for symbolic municipal decisions should take place. This would allow the citizens of a given community to express their views on what may be relevant to their daily life, being schools, parks, libraries, or others. At least 51% of the population should be represented among the voters, and if a majority was achieved in the votes, then the decision could/should be binding.

Promoting business

A space to encourage business should also take place. Very often there are small and medium companies/investors who do not know where to invest, or where the opportunities are. Due to the fact that often investments do not go into accordance with the market's needs, there are numerous cases of bankruptcies. Therefore, by developing a mechanism, with the active support of citizens, an

information network for investors should be developed, so that any investment goes in accordance to the needs of the given community, thus increasing the chances of success.

Fighting crime and vandalism

An information network regarding crime and vandalism should also be developed. Vandalism is unfortunately on the increase among younger generations, so citizens should have the capability to easily report to the competent authorities about these aspects, from graffiti to abandoned/destroyed cars. These are part of all societies, and very often are not changed as the citizens do not know who to contact.

Citizens' information on time

Something of extreme importance is the proper and on-time information of citizens. If people are not aware of the main developments, it will be difficult to participate, in whatever way. There should obviously be a close cooperation with local media, and daily updates on the websites. After citizens registering on the webpage, there should be an option of selecting the main interests of each citizen. As the society is diversified, so are people interested, and if one is more interested in the environment, or in social affairs, or any other topic, he should not be overloaded with information that he may not consider to be relevant. Therefore people should choose their areas of interest, and should be notified by e-mail and/or SMS when new debates about those topics are emerging, so that they could take an active role.

Technology

Monitoring technology should also be developed, so that people can follow all the stages of the processes. This could happen via reports, to be written in a time-period to be specified.

Annual report

Upon each year a report should be written with the main initiatives, and with clear graphs and tables of what has been done, and how the citizens have influence its formulation, and its outcome.

6. Phase ii: functions for groups of citizens

The second step of the project is launched several months after the first one, since the latter will contribute to the spread of the ICT as political instrument within the community. It aims at promoting direct democracy via ICT. It is inspired by what is done in Switzerland or in Porto Alegre for instance.

Four small groups of citizens are formed with around 20 people. These groups are specialised in four political areas: **social affairs, environment, youth and culture**.

The citizens are selected according to their willingness and interest, but could be also at random (like a jury) if they all come from the same party, association or social origin. The selection procedure has to be as transparent as possible. A certain degree of heterogeneity among the groups must be conserved.

A **City Council's Special Commission** is created - to monitor the project and to select the candidates. All the political forces are represented in it. Decisions are taken by consensus.

The City Council determines the **limits of competence** and the **budget** given to the groups. In respect to this framework, the groups of citizens democratically decide actions they consider particularly important to improve the quality of life in the district.

They are in **permanent dialogue** with the district services, the Mayor and the Special Commission with ICT. Innovative tools, such as fora and wikis shall be used so that the group of citizens and the city council can work together on a given issue in real-time.

They are helped by **permanent coordinators** working as civil servants. The latter shall be as neutral as possible and are particularly careful with non-experienced citizens. Via an Intranet forum, spreadsheets technologies, video and audio technologies, they offer assistance. The groups of citizens could also consult an **online database** with reports of experts and all documents they need. Simulation technology is particularly useful to determine the forthcoming projects and especially their budgets.

Internal communications will be possible through a forum, intranet and online dialogues. E-voting will be used to determine the collective choices. To monitor the application of their choice, they will launch impact assessment surveys and a budgetary control mechanism.

The Special Commission is responsible for the control over their decisions, their uses of the public funds and their overall working. **The City Council ratifies their projects.**

Tax exemption is offered to the citizens as compensation for the time they invest in the e-groups' activities. The City Council provides them with a computer for the duration of the project if they do not have one.

In conclusion, this project may succeed especially when the population is well-familiarised with using ITC tools, necessity doubled by the request that public administration be open to involving population in decision-making at local level.

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