

Geanina Diana Moraru

Department of Public Policy, Central European University

E-participation

Involving citizens in public
policies

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Introduction

From the Greek polis onwards, participation of the citizens has changed and evolved in order to accommodate to the realities of the societies. If in the ancient times, all the citizens participated in the decision making process of the community through direct democracy, nowadays the level of implication of the citizens is mainly reduced to voting the representatives at local, national or regional levels. However, due to the decreasing number of electoral participation, the building up of institutions' democratic deficit, or in order to overcome the apathy of the citizens, citizen participation is becoming more and more a hot topic that researchers, civil society and institutions alike are trying to improve, understand and evaluate.

As a goal, participation can be achieved through different processes, which based on the specific objectives of the programs use different techniques. Glass developed a framework in regards to these techniques that include public hearings, citizen advisory committees, citizen panels, value analysis, or citizen surveys (Glass, 1979). Together with the development and boom of internet and information communication technologies, participation kept the pace and e-participation emerged as a parallel and supplementary channel to the traditional one. The definition of e-participation used in this paper refers to e-participation as "the use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives" (Macintosh, 2006). Nonetheless, when it comes to e-participation, a new framework needs to be adopted as well. A framework that takes into

consideration the right tools used for the right objectives in order not only to increase the level of participation of the citizens, but also to improve the democratic process, policies and legislation.

Within the European Union, special attention is paid to the growth of e-participation in the policy making process, and the European Commission set its priorities in this area by funding projects and studies at regional and local level.

Researchers approached this topic from various perspectives: how to include citizens in local policy decision making processes (Lourenço and Costa, 2006), which are the right tools and methods for effective participation (Grönlund, 2003) or what elements should be included in e-participation pilots together with the right technology (Macintosh, 2004) but also focused on countries from which best practice examples can be drawn (Ahmed, 2003).

The paper will review next the general theoretical considerations and distinctions on forms of e-participation, areas covered, levels of participation, the tools used and the place in the policy cycle that e-participation is employed in. Although of great importance, the measurement and evaluation of e-participation programs will not be discussed in this paper, due to size limitations and also the scope of the paper. Towards the end, a case study will be discussed based on the theoretical information presented.

I. Theoretical points

1. Forms and areas of application of e-participation

In terms of the forms that e-participation can have, the distinction is made between government initiated / top – down approaches and citizens initiated / bottom – up ones. While Fuchs uses e-participation with the meaning of “digital democracy as participatory bottom-up process” (Fuchs, 2006), the interaction of citizens with governments and vice-versa is more complex than that and changes with the way e-participation is designed and with the tools that are used. Both top-down and bottom-up initiatives are important to be used (Ahmed, 2003) for a better flow of communication and information, together with the appropriate level of intervention and the characteristics of the community.

While the areas of applications of e-participation tools are diverse and depend on the level of the policy cycle they are combined with, for this paper “13 practical areas of deployment of ICT to support eParticipation” are mentioned, based on the DEMO-net Working Paper 5 (Fraser, 2006). These areas are: Information provision, Community building/collaborative environments, Consultation, Campaigning, Electioneering, Deliberation, Discourse, Mediation, Spatial planning, Polling, and Voting (Fraser, 2006).

2. Levels of participation

When it comes to the level of participation the literature identifies different classifications. On one hand we have the OECD study that categorizes the level of participation in three: information, consultation and active participation. Information

refers to “a one-way relationship in which government produces information for use by citizens” (OECD, 2001). Consultation is a “two-way relationship in which citizens provide feedback to government” (Fraser, 2006). However, governments are the ones that “set and define the issues that are up for consultation, set the questions and manage the process, while citizens are invited to contribute their views and opinions” (Fraser, 2006). The third level is active participation, a more advanced stage that sees citizens as equals, where the relationship is “based on partnership with government in which citizens actively engage in defining the process and content of policy- making” (Fraser, 2006) but whose final decisional responsibility lies with the government.

A more complex classification was presented by the International Association for Public Participation which developed five levels of participation: Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate and Empower. While the first two levels are similar to the ones of OECD study, Involving brings new the continuous relationship in which the citizens concerns are considered, after which Collaboration sees the public as a partner in developing the alternatives and the solutions to their problems, with a final step of Empowerment of the public which this case would be the decision maker.

3. Tools

E-participation tools are the practical mediums through which citizens and the public engage and get involved in dialogue among themselves and with their elected representatives. The choices are getting more and more sophisticated and increasing in numbers, being at the government’s or grassroots organization’s latitude to choose the ones they want to use. However, as stated above, the increasing variety of these choices

makes it difficult. Not only do they have to fit the community needs, but also the areas of application, levels of participation and the technological pre-requisites for some of the tools to be used. E-Methods for Public Engagement publication classify the tools used in e-participation in thirteen types of which I can mention here: e-participation Chat Rooms, Discussion forums / boards, Decision-making Games, Virtual Communities, e-panels, e-petitioning, e-deliberative Polling, e-consultations or e-voting (Macintosh, Coleman and Lalljee , 25).

Some of these tools presented here have already been successfully used in e-participation projects with good results, while some are not that widely used. As already mentioned, the tools need to be wisely chosen and their characteristics considered before starting an e-participation project.

4. Stages in the policy cycle

The stage of the policy making cycle at which e-participation tools are used is an important factor in choosing the tools. The stage at which citizens participate has an effect on the results of the engagement. Researchers generally believe that the earlier in the process the citizens participate, the better to influence a certain policy they are. However, in order for the citizens to meaningfully participate early in the policy designing, they need to possess the knowledge and the understanding of the policy cycle (OECD, 2003). There are five stages that make the policy cycle: Agenda Setting, Analysis, Formulation, Implementation and Monitoring. When thinking about these stages they can not be separated from the previous sections discussed in the paper: the areas of participation, the levels and the tools. For example, based on the level at which

citizens participate different tools could be used (for the agenda setting stage, virtual communities could be a good choice in that issues could be brought up and discussed and policy makers take the feedback and introduce them on the agenda). Examples of e-participation projects at different stages in the policy cycle are varied, with a good literature on it, both in term of explanation but also description and evaluation.

The paper focused until now on general characteristics of e-participation projects that government officials or grassroots organizations should take into consideration when designing and implementing such attempts. Next, the paper will focus on an example of e-participation project developed in Romania by SMART Development Center: “Public Policies made by Citizens”.

II. Public Policies made by Citizens – case study

The discussion and literature review presented above creates the framework for analyzing and evaluating the case study this paper will focus on. After a short introduction which will cover the main facts and characteristics of the project, I will evaluate the project within the framework discussed, in order to assess some of its strengths and weaknesses, as well as present some recommendations for future successful implementation and growth of the project in line with its mission and goals.

“Public Policies made by Citizens” is a project funded by the European Commission in the framework of Youth in Action Programme – Action 1.3 - Youth Democracy Projects. SMART Association developed it as a new method of participation and was recognized by the Council of Europe as a good practice example of involving

citizens in collaborating problem solvers, addressing issues important to them and their communities, but also coming up with solutions that are suitable for them, in order to make positive improvements in their lives and communities. The mission of the program is to “engage people in providing valuable, sustainable and feasible solutions to problems of public concern”. The website is created in Romanian (www.politicipublice.ro) and is designed to cover the entire country. So far five problems have been raised, and received ten solutions from citizens.

1. Forms and areas of application of e-participation

It is easy to understand that this is a true grassroots, bottom – up approach of involving citizens in the influencing of the democratic process by using ICTs. However, the project has the potential to evolve in partnerships with local and national institutions, transforming itself therefore in a “hybrid” of bottom-up and top-down initiative.

The areas that citizens can bring their input in are varied: from environmental issues, to educational, youth, health or industry ones. While some problems refer to local issues, there are national issues as well (for example, one discussion refers to the youth law in Romania). The characteristic that links all these areas and types of issues is the fact that they all affect the citizens and in order for good solutions to be found, their input is of significant importance.

2. Levels of participation

Using the International Association for Public Participation framework, this initiative falls in the Involve and Collaborate categories, having as the main goal the

involvement of the citizens in the problem solving process. The most important characteristic of this project is the ability of the citizens to not only get involved by raising problems, but also participate in the discussions for finding the right solutions to the problems.

3. Tools and Technology used

The technology and tools used revolve around the SMART method of public policy (Annex 1) designed by the organization. The website is a place for the community to come together, raise problems and find solutions appropriate to them, based on the knowledge and characteristics of the community. In my view, this project is a good example of a virtual community tool.

4. Stages in the policy cycle

When it comes to the stages in the policy cycle that the project aims to influence, it is easy to understand that it refers to the Agenda Setting stage. As literature concluded, the earlier the citizens get involved in the policy making cycle, the better the results will be, being possible to add this feature as one of the project's main strengths.

5. Stakeholders

The organization defined three stakeholders / target groups: the everyday citizen who can either raise an issue, a problem of concern to them or the community, that will be published on the website, or offer solutions to problems already posted by others. The second target group is the policy makers from SMART, who will take all the inputs from

the citizens and transform them in policy briefs / papers with recommendations on solutions to be implemented, and offer them to officials (the third target group) who in turn will have a well structured plan, in order to resolve the problems, with the most important characteristic being the feedback and input from the citizens.

6. Project strengths

The most important strength of the project is its uniqueness: there is no other similar project developed in Romania in which the inputs from the citizens are taken and transformed in sustainable and applicable solutions. Another main strength is the stage of the policy making process that “Public Policies made by Citizens” is aimed at influencing – agenda setting.

There are many people in Romania who would like to be able to raise problems, but also contribute to their solving and find the appropriate solutions. This project not only provides the access to the platform, but an important aspect is the fact that the website is user – friendly and does not require technical knowledge or software to be installed prior to participating. The only prerequisites are access to a computer and internet.

7. Weaknesses

The weaknesses that might arise could be attributed to the lack of funding and the self-sustainability – SMART organizations has to ensure the program is continuous in order for the exercise to be successful. Another important factor that contributes to the weak points is related to public authorities’ reluctance to accept and work with solutions

and recommendations coming from grassroots organizations. This weak point however could easily be overcome if the institutions and authorities would agree to give a try to the program, recognize citizens as partners in the decision making process and establish a partnership with the organization.

One last weak point that I identified by listening to the manager of the project (Radu Oprea) is the fact that there are not many successful examples in Romania that citizens could look at and trust that their time is worth investing in by participating in the project. Also they might not believe that they can make a difference and officials will take into consideration their input and feedback, so many are hesitant and might even give up the idea of participating.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The paper aimed at analyzing the growing field of e-participation, more specifically in terms of the theoretical frameworks that can be used in analyzing e-participation projects. A short explanation of the main characteristics of this framework identified in the literature was done, in order for the case study selected to be presented at the end of the paper. While most of the general considerations and distinctions on forms of e-participation, areas covered, levels of participation, the tools used and the place in the policy cycle that e-participation is employed in was done, the measurement and evaluation of such programs could be covered in a further study, this being mainly due to the size limitations of the present paper.

In terms of recommendations for the organization and the project, one of the first advices is for the organization to become more visible within the communities, so that more citizens learn about its existence¹. In the same time they should make sure to continuously push for establishing partnerships with local and national institutions and officials. The perspective of the project is a bright one and the mission is achievable if efforts to continue the project are made by the organization, but also by citizens and officials.

¹ At this point there is no indicator as to how many citizens participated in the project. A further study would need to address this issue as well.

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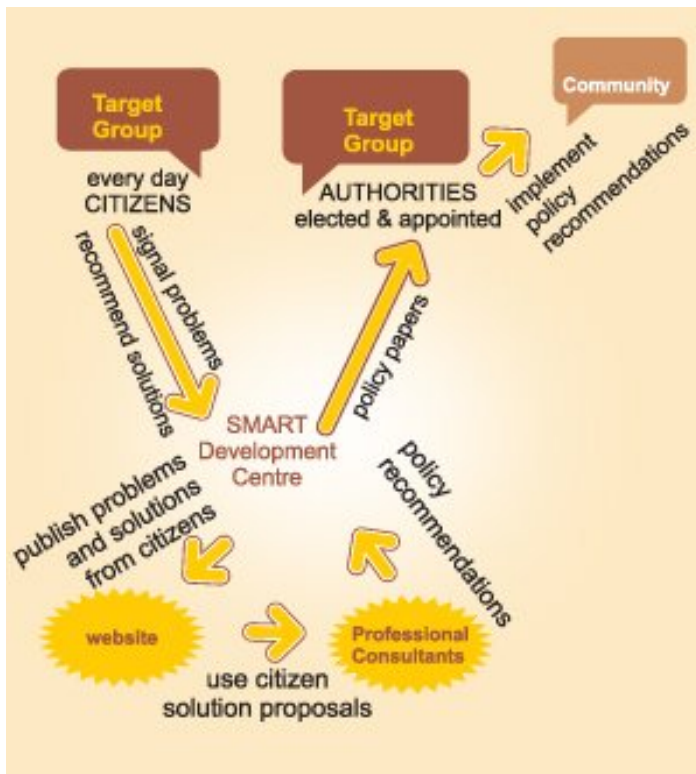
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Annex 1:



Source: Radu Oprea. <http://raduoprea.eu/en/about/smart-development-centre>