United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
Division for Social Policy and Development

Expert Group Meeting

"E-Participation: Empowering People through Information
Communication Technologies (ICTs)"

Conference Room K, ITU Headquarters
Geneva, Switzerland, 24-25 July 2013

Thematic Session #4:

E-participation: Innovative Strategies, Emerging Trends and Services for
the Empowerment of People

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In the recent years, e-participation has emerged as an important area particularly
in e-government and e-governance. Proliferation of the Internet and mobile
technologies has only accelerated the need for more e-participation from citizens
around the world.   Billions of global citizens are calling for transparencies and
better governance without corruptions.   This is happening in various countries
from India to Brazil.   These citizens want to have their say in decisions that are
made by leaders throughout the world. Lately we have seen this in Turkey and
Brazil.   Given this global movement, what should be the proper e-participation
strategy in order to engage and empower people? This is one of key questions
that is posed to many governments around the world. There is no simple answer
to this question.

According to the United Nations E-government Readiness Knowledge Base, E-
participation "is the sum total of both the government programs to encourage
participation from the citizen and the willingness of the citizen to do so. It

encompasses both the demand the supply side."[1] It is about promoting participation of the citizen through socially inclusive governance. [2] It aims to achieve citizen engagements in public policy making by "increasing e-information to citizens for decision making, enhancing e-consultation for deliberative and participatory processes, and supporting e-decision making by increasing the input of citizens in decision making."[3]

The World Bank describes e-participation in terms of a collection of tools that "are used to collect and discuss citizens' and businesses' views so their interests and need are better represented in government programs or processes."[4] "The tools include online surveys and polls, electronic newsletters, e-mail, feedback forms, and web forums where citizens can express their opinions. They can be used to supplement public forums or meetings. E-Participation applications may have a publish feature, presenting relevant background information, decisions, and other materials to help citizens and business understand certain public policy or regulatory issues."[5]

E-participation is more than simply informing or consulting citizens, it is about engaging the citizens in decision making process and empowering them to participate in democratic governance so that a common goal is achieved.   In that aspect, it is not a simple top down way for government to inform citizens about things that matter to them. It is a give-and-take process that has to be integrated into all levels of decision making from local to regional to federal government.   It is also about building consensus, which is necessary to make proper decision to act on.   Otherwise, it can result in an ineffective and chaotic stalemate situation where no big decisions can be made. E-participation is often included as a subset of e-government and e-governance participation. It is also related to e-democracy, Internet activism, e-consultation, e-deliberation, virtual volunteering and parliamentary informatics. It is assumed but it is important to point out that it is not just G2C. It is about whole ecosystem of local and federal governments, private sectors, NGO, civil societies and academics to work together to share ideas that could help solve issues like cleaning a waste site, deploying green transportation, building a park, etc. We also have to recognize the underlining issue of budgeting that could satisfy all stakeholders particularly the government, which has a limited budget.

In order to create a functioning e-participation that can take everyone's input and be able to make informed decisions, it has to be carefully strategized and developed accordingly.   In light of latest massive demonstrations fueled by mobile and social media technologies around the world, many governments are

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[1] http://unpan3.un.org/egovkb/egovernment_overview/eparticipation.htm.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] E-government Primer, The World Bank.

[5] Ibid.

paying attention to the issue of e-participation. On the other hand, many governments are uncertain about the power it presents. They are seen as a double edge sword but it doesn't have to be that way. With the right strategy, innovation and ICT can help create practical and useful tools for citizens to participate in important issues and be able to take part in decision-making process.

As the Aide-Memoire clearly outlined, "there is a growing global consensus that the Internet and its related technologies" like mobile and social network technologies, "are providing a new framework for economic, political and social development.[6] In fact, ICTs are accelerating the changes throughout all facets of society including education, science and health. In some cases, they are revolutionary that can change the governments within weeks.   We can accept that ICT particularly the Internet and mobile technologies are fundamentally changing our society from the way we do banking to the way we receive medial services through telemedicine. In order for the Internet to lead this social metamorphosis, it has to be accessible to all, remain transparent and neutral and enable people to use the Internet for socio-economical development and human capacity building.

In order to come up with a strategy that works all stakeholders, it is very important to understand and align the needs of the government and citizens. The government has to be able to function while having its citizens participate in government policies and decisions through democratic and transparent processes. A poorly thought-out strategy can easily back fire on the government as it will only turn off or anger citizens by adding frustrations. The national strategy on e-participation should be a bottom-up approach, which gives citizens to participate from the beginning at the local level then get other stakeholders involved in consultations before it is elevated to the regional and federal government. In addition, there should be ways for citizens to participate in the national issues directly.   Most of services are targeted at the local level like cleaning a contaminated park or reducing pollution in the city. In some cases, these can be national issues, i.e., city states.

There are few global trends that need to be recognized and should be factored into the e-participation strategy. These trends including:

- Rise of youth population in terms of population and level of dissatisfaction;
- Increase in global population which is expected to be over 9 billion by 2050 and many of them will be in developing country;
- Limited food, water, energy, consumable resources for 9 billion;
- Climate changes and disastrous impacts;

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[6] Aide-Memoire, E-Participation: Empowering People though Information Communication technologies (ICTs)," EGM, the Division for Social Policy and Development, July 2013.

- Less number of jobs for unskilled workers due to automation which will increase the unemployment and underemployment;
- Citizens are no longer tolerant to corruptions and mobilizing via mobile and social media technologies;
- Rapid ICT changes;
- Age of desktop is over and mobility is in; and
- Social media is connecting billions people around the world.

These will impact all nations and not too many of them are ready to adequately deal with these changes upon us.   These will only create a wider gap between haves and have-nots.

ICT is not a solution for everything but if used or adopted properly, it can enable and solve problems. ICT can be used to enable and engage citizens to address many of these challenges. Due to the enormous challenges, the government will have to play a bigger role but it cannot solve every problem.   It can only work if the citizens can participate in the decision making process throughout the system.   If it is not provided, they will find their own ways to express their dissatisfaction as we have seen in the streets of Rio and Istanbul.

E-participation should be an integral part of the whole of e-government. All secretarial and ministerial offices should find ways to take input from the citizens and also able to facilitate the multi stakeholder participation process that could be used by the executives and law makers.

There are a number of ICT options to encourage e-participation today. It is important to employ what is commonly adopted by the citizens rather than creating something new.   A range of mobile and social media technologies are fully adoptable for e-participation including the following:
- Twitter, Weibo for information dissemination, sharing new initiatives, analyzing the needs of initiatives, etc;
- Social media networks like Facebook, VKontakte, Renren for sharing new initiatives, virtual town hall meeting, information sharing;
- Google hangout, Skype, etc. for small town hall meetings, information sharing, discussions, consultations, etc;
- Blogs for soliciting input;
- IM, QQ and other chat programs can be used to engage in one-to-one services;
- YouTube and other video sharing sites can be used to set up a comprehensive presentations and promotions of initiatives or projects; and
- IOS and Android mobile apps can be used to make information and citizen participation to the mobile platform like smart phones and tablets.

All these technologies can be smartly engaged to meet the needs of e-participation and can promote an effective e-participation. In order to make this successful, one has to have a clear strategy for each platform, app and

technology and clearly map to the services. One solution fits all doesn't work so everything has to be carefully tailored. In addition, this requires additional resources to respond, maintain, train, etc. A badly designed and deployed e-participation is worse than not having one.

What are some innovate use of e-participation?

- Emergency broadcasting system using texting;
- Apps to vote on local initiatives, i.e., building a shopping mall on the public land;
- Apps to collect input on proposed policy change;
- Google hangout meetings with experts;
- Facebook page on services and notices and get citizen's input on quality of services;
- Announcing new policy changes via twitter;
- Report issues to government office via twitter, i.e., unpicked up garbage @sanitation;
- C2C (citizen to citizen) forum on YouTube, Facebook;
- Apps to report issues to the city, i.e., broken traffic light will issue a work ticket and citizen will be notified when it is fixed;
- E-voting on local elections; and
- E-consultation on issues through open consultation process.

E-participation must be available to all citizens particularly those who are traditionally marginalized and ignored like minorities, indigenous people, disabled people, senior citizens and women. This social inclusion has to be one of core fundamentals of any e-participation strategy. Not all citizens have the same access to technology or afford technology. In order to create an e-participation system for all, it is important to consider multi channels to make sure everyone will have a reasonable access to the system. A simple modification of traditional cell phone or kiosk could bring many people to participate in the process.

The world is getting smaller due to the rapid adoption of mobile phones and many of these mobile phones can do as much as a small computer. This means even a farmer in a rural village now can participate and have his/her voice heard. This change will only accelerate which means the governments have to pay attention and meet the citizens' needs and expectation.