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Colombia

E-Participation in Colombia

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1. Context

The current National Development Plan (2010-2014) of Colombia, states “Prosperity for all” as the main development goal which means building a country with more jobs, less poverty and more security. The attainment of this objective is based on eight strategies, one of which is “good governance”. Hence, the Government has considered institutional strengthening by means of good governance as one of the most effective mechanisms to achieve democratic prosperity (NDP 2010).

Good governance follows five principles: a) Transparency and accountability; b) Effective public management; c) Participation and citizen services; d) Vocation for public service; d) Strategies to combat corruption. In this scenario, technology becomes the enabler factor that supports the achievement of the above mentioned principles and that is precisely the cross role assigned to the e-Government Strategy.

Regarding citizen participation, in previous years the country faced three major challenges: a) The absence of a coherent Government strategy to encourage participation exercises, b) Dispersion of rules, actors, decision processes and resources and, c) Difficulty of citizens to organize themselves, coordinate their actions, monitoring public policies and influence decisions. In response to these challenges, the Government headed by the current President and the Ministry of Information and Communications Technologies (Ministry of ICT), through the e-Government Office, have designed harmonized strategies aiming at promoting the participation by leveraging technology. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to present the main features of such initiatives and highlight some essentials that might contribute to a better policy.

2. Policy Framework

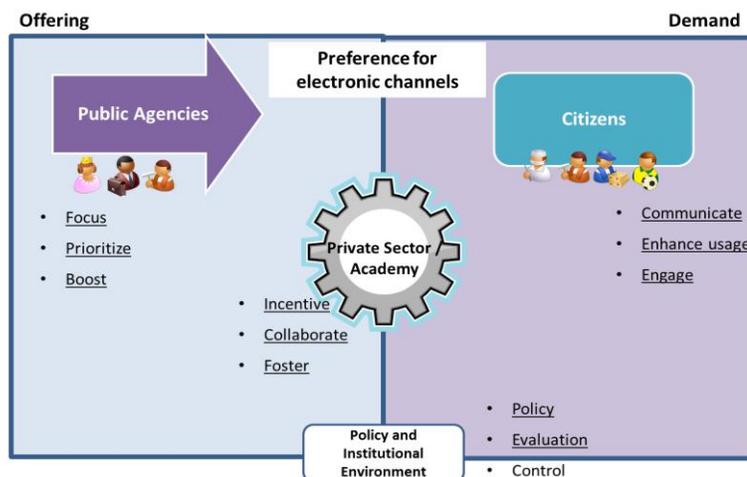
The e-Government Strategy promoted by the Ministry of ICT has consolidated itself as a mean for citizens and private sector to access more and better services offered by public administration and to participate in the decision-making process. From 2007 to 2012, the e-Government Strategy focused on promoting efficiency, transparency and citizen participation and it comprised five stages in order to progressively adopt ICT by public agencies. Such stages are information, interaction, transaction, integration and democracy.

Democracy embraced that every public organization at central and local level had to enable e-participation mechanisms for citizens to actively participate in making decisions involving policies, plans or specific projects. In order to accomplish this task, public agencies had to perform the following activities: a) Call citizens to participate, b) Make available to citizens online mechanisms such as forums, blogs, social networks, conversation rooms and distribution lists, c) Implement interactive platforms where citizens can track public policy outcomes, d) Release the outcomes coming from public consultation and participation regarding policy construction and decision making.

As result of the previous policy and institutional framework, public agencies made significant progress in promoting participation in different government areas. One of the high-impact e-participation exercises carried out during this period was the consultation process led by the Ministry of Education in 2006 and 2007 that turned into the National Education Plan 2006-2016 (ME 2013). It was constructed with the support of citizens, regional and local leaders, education institutions, the industry, research centers, private sector and parents, making use of ICT. This experience was awarded in 2007 by the Organization of American States – OAS as the best e-participation initiative because it was innovative and enabled participation of communities from diverse geographic regions, including remote areas, due the use of technology.

Looking for further progress in e-Government, a new Plan was set in 2012. Such plan, currently in effect, aims to boost the use of technology in public sector to open information, provide services and encourage citizen engagement. Such purposes are pursued by developing actions with three stakeholders (Citizens, Public Agencies and Private Sector) and following two initiatives: “Enhancing Good Government” and “Engaging citizen to participate and collaborate”

Graph 1: Current E-Government Framework



Source: Ministry of ICT – E-Government Office

Enhancing Good Government: This initiative is oriented to strengthen the use of technology in Public Administration. It is supported by three processes: 1) Design and innovation aimed at improving the policy, guidelines, products and services; 2) Technical service and solutions which is in charge of developing cross-border solutions; 3) E-Government advice services targeting public agencies to improve capacities to adopt, use and innovate with technology.

Engaging citizen to participate and collaborate: This initiative is oriented to strengthen citizen and business capacities to interact with public organizations and to create opportunities of collaboration, participation and social control. In this purpose, the e-Government Office has formed a working group which is responsible for designing and implementing communication, promotion and take-up strategies that lead to citizen involvement in the design and use of e-services, participation in decision-making processes and collaboration under an Open Government framework.

In this new scenario, e-Participation includes the principle of collaboration, that is, the decision-making process and the implementation of specific solutions addressing public issues are performed by encouraging and taking advantage of the interest and knowledge of society, and by promoting joint efforts within and between public agencies. Moreover, in order to provide participation instruments to citizens, public organizations must guarantee access to all public information in open formats, meet the guidelines on accountability issued by the Government, promote the use of social networks and collaboration platforms and create opportunities for decision-making and problem solving.

3. Fostering E-Participation

Colombia has been making significant progress in the ICT policy following a framework that encompasses direct actions on infrastructure, services, applications and users. The “Live Digital Plan” (Vive Digital) which constitutes the current ICT policy, has achieved relevant outcomes and includes key elements that are necessary to keep up a progressive e-participation improvement. Such elements are described as follows:

Infrastructure: Colombia has gone from 2.2 million Internet connections to 6.2 million in the last two years. In 2013, Colombia will reach 7.8 million Internet connections and in 2014 it is expected to reach out 8.8 million. Complementary, in 2010, 17% of households had Internet access and in December 2012 this percentage was 33.8%. In 2013 it is planned to reach 43% of households and the goal for 2014 is 50% of households connected. Regarding the small and medium enterprises, in 2010 only 7% of them had Internet connection; in 2012, the figure reached 20% and it is expected to achieve 50% in 2014.

Additionally, in 2010 only 200 municipalities had connection to optical fiber and now there are 553. In 2013, 226 additional municipalities will be connected and in 2014 the goal is to get a total of 1,078 municipalities, which means 96% of the national territory (Molano 2013, p. 112). On the other hand, the mobile telephony penetration is 105.3 percent and the Ministry of ICT has provided children and youth with computers through the “Computadores para Educar Program”. Nearly 7 million children have benefited from the purchase of 577.000 computers delivered to more than 13.500 educational centers. This is the largest purchase of computers ever made by the Colombian Government.

Access to Services: With the purpose of promoting new services, wider use of ICT infrastructure and ensuring massive citizen access to ICT, Colombia has implemented measures that have allowed, through public-private actions, the widespread use of the Internet. These measures include subsidies for Internet access targeting low-income inhabitants. Thanks to the new regulation, nearly 1,000,000 families will benefit from Broadband Internet subsidy which may be used to fund the computer or the Internet service fee.

As complement, 101 “Live Digital Points” (Puntos Vive Digital) have been installed throughout the country. Such points are community spaces equipped with computers and Internet connection which offer access to citizens; 25 out of the total are directed to people with disabling conditions. Finally, the Ministry of ICT has connected rural and remote areas by installing 1.055 kiosks, also equipped

with Internet and computers that are located in population centers of over 100 inhabitants and national parks. In 2013, the number of kiosks operating will increase to 2,744.

Applications and content: The Open Government initiative that is being carried out in Colombia involves a significant range of activities regarding e-Participation. All public agencies are required to disclose and publish data sets in open and reusable formats. Here, the Ministry of ICT along with the Presidency, the National Department for Planning and the Secretariat of Transparency has focused actions on those sectors and information that might potentially have a higher impact in terms of apps oriented to research activities, social control, e-participation and e-services.

In fact, the E-Government Office has planned to develop four collaborative events in 2013 to co-create apps from open datasets¹. The first event was carried out in June and, at the same time, a group of citizens performed an event where additional content was developed focusing in social control, e-procurement and data journalism.

Similarly, co-creation and crowdsourcing platforms can potentially improve citizen engagement. “Active Citizens” (Ciudadanos Activos)², for instance, is a civic platform created by citizens concerned about community issues in the city of Cali. Here, citizens can report problems that observe (Streets that need to be repaired for instance); but they also are able to post proposals on transport, security, infrastructure and other topics. In addition, citizens join groups with similar interests and interact with local Government. As this type of initiatives foster social innovation, the E-Government office is supporting similar enterprises in other regions as a mean to improve participation and collaboration by using technology.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the “Crystal Ballot Box” initiative (Urna de Cristal)³ is part of the content and application created to boost e-participation. This constitutes the main e-participation initiative currently happening in Colombia; it is a platform where citizens can track the course and results of policies and bring their concerns and proposals directly to official organizations, interacting and creating a binding relationship between active citizens and Government.

Users’ Capabilities: The “Digital Citizen”⁴ initiative (Ciudadano Digital) is oriented to encourage the use and adoption of ICT among public servants and in the public education sector. Every public

¹ See “Vive Gobierno Móvil” (Live Mobile Government), <http://moviles.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co/>. Viewed 13 July 2013

² See <http://www.ciudadanosactivos.com/>. Viewed 13 July 2013

³ See <http://www.urnadecristal.gov.co/>. Viewed 13 July 2013

⁴ See <http://www.ciudadanodigital.org.co/>. Viewed 14 July 2013

servant and teacher in Colombia is to be trained and certified under the program by 2014. To date, there have been 300,000 people registered for the Digital Citizen initiative; by 2014, 700,000 are expected to have completed their Digital Citizenship training. In addition, the e-Government Office has created training and education programs targeting public officials to build institutional capacities and promote cultural changes. In the last two years 120-hour courses were delivered and this year the Office will implement a graduate program which will be provided in conjunction with universities.

“Redvolución”⁵ is another interesting social project whose purpose is to stimulate and inspire a significantly heightened use of the Internet by community members by education and training. It also pursues the adoption of ICT to meet every day needs, thereby creating an emotional engagement with technology. Training is provided to the low-income citizens and it is carried out by high school students.

Finally, as part of the citizens’ engagement activities the E-Government Office has designed take-up an usage campaigns by taking advantage of mass media, social networking and other strategies to make citizens know the offering of e-participation. The first step is to communicate the offering of e-participation coming from public agencies; the second step seeks that citizen experiment with the mechanisms available online in order for them to gain confidence. Finally, a series of actions are developed to encourage collaboration, that is to say, promote that citizens can create contents that boost e-participation. Here Open Data is relevant as information becomes a central input to engage citizens.

4. E-Participation Experiences: The Crystal Ballot Box

The “Crystal Ballot Box” initiative represents the best concrete experience on e-Participation in Colombia. This is a platform for social inclusion as every citizen, regardless of geographic location, is able to speak with the government and express their needs and opinions. Likewise, citizens can contribute to set public policy and meet, track and benefit from the Government plans.

Structure: The Crystal Ballot Box works in three different but complementary dimensions: a) Information and transparency that promotes the visibility of progress in policy implementation, b) Consultation that seeks to generate greater interaction and a close relationship with citizens, c) Decision-Making which is aimed at encouraging participation, problem-solving and advocacy in the

⁵ See <http://redvolucion.gov.co/>. Viewed 14 July 2013

decision-making process of public administration.

Operational Model: To ensure the quality and relevance of the initiative, the Crystal Ballot Box operates as a multi-platform, integrating web 2.0 and traditional media. It also has a request-and-response management system and protocols for quality of service to citizens, relevant content targeting particular groups and manuals of communication and media usage.

Channels: The Crystal Ballot Box makes use of six integrated channels as follows:

Website: It offers communication tools and information about the development of specific national Government initiatives. In addition, citizens can participate by leaving comments, asking questions and sharing them through social networks.

Call-center: The Citizen Contact Center is a central telephone line where citizens can get information and participate. It has a script that is modified weekly according to the topics launched through the website.

Text Message (SMS): The platform sends an average of two posts per week with information and inviting people to participate and to access the contents promoted by the initiative.

Mobile (USSD): This tool is being tested on mobile platforms and it allows citizens to meet and vote on the most relevant issues of the week by making use of a text message interface.

TV: The Crystal Ballot Box TV Program is broadcasted every Sunday and here citizens get informed about current concerns in public administration, not in the form of news or magazine, but as a dialogue between the citizens and the agencies.

Radio: Similar to its TV counterpart, the objective of this program is to establish a two-way dialogue with citizens on the main achievements and evolution of the central Government policies.

Social networks: By using Twitter, Facebook and Youtube, citizens can ask questions, send proposals, find out the Government initiatives development in a more didactic and easily manner, see Government responses and participate in accountability exercises. In fact, one of the most relevant elements of transparency is the accountability reports which are posted permanently on the website and spread over social networks. These contain the reports on participation exercises, the responses to citizens and the progress of Government actions.

Organizational structure: The Crystal Ballot Box team is composed by an interdisciplinary group of professionals. In addition, a response-to-citizen management network was created which is in charge of coordinating tasks with over 50 central agencies and of encouraging high-quality services from those public servants responsible for citizen attendance. The Crystal Ballot Box also has the support of the Presidency of the Republic. The specific instances involved are the High Council for Communications which establishes the guidelines and editorial policy, the High Council for the Regions and Citizen Participation that supports the participation strategy at a regional level and the Secretariat of Transparency which coordinates transparency and anti-corruption initiatives.

Main Achievements: During the first phase (2010 - 2013), the Crystal Ballot Box made significant progress. This includes having reached over 4 million Colombians, the development of a new technology platform and the execution of participation exercises involving 16 ministries and central agencies. As for the e-participation outcomes, in 2011 the Government represented by the High Advisory Office for Good Governance and Administrative Efficiency, decided to carry out an anti-procedure campaign to assure good faith, transparency and best practices in public administration. Here, a citizen consultation was run to identify those unnecessary procedures that often facilitate corruption and create inefficiency in the service delivery process.

Citizens were called to participate by making use of the whole range of channels available (Twitter, Facebook, SMS, website and call-center) in a two-week period. They were asked four simple questions⁶ and the campaign was accompanied by traditional media strategy⁷. As a result, nearly 70.000 people expressed their opinion and in January 2012, the President issued the Law 19 whose purpose of is to facilitate the relationship between the Government and the citizens. Over 400 procedures were eliminated in 2011 and 259 more during 2012, representing 40% of all the procedures of public agencies.

In addition, in 2012 the initiative ran the first public feedback exercise to identify the knowledge, understanding and public perception that different audiences had about the initiative and to hear citizens' expectations and recommendations. The results of such study constituted the basics to improve the citizen participation platform, the strategy and the communication codes.

⁶ 1) Which procedure in the public administration should not exist?; 2) Which is the most inefficient procedure in the public administration?; 3) Which procedure do you think involves more bribes?; 4) Which procedure would you like to do via Internet?

⁷ Some samples may be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFDOwIujIM4>. Viewed 14 July 2013

Finally, in 2013, a new engagement exercise was executed, this time aimed to widely share the Anti-Corruption Policy and to be aware of citizens' concerns about such issue. It also pursued to centralize information on government initiatives to fight corruption and, finally, to open participation channels for collective construction. The information and conclusions will be submitted to the Secretary of Transparency who, in turn, will analyze and incorporate them into the Anti-Corruption Policy document. Like the above mentioned, 10 more e-participation events will be performed in this year involving diverse agencies at central and local level.

To summarize, the following figures represent the impact of the Crystal Box during recent years, in terms of coverage and participation experiences.

Table 1. Crystal Box Impact

Indicator	2011	2012	2013
Number of citizens reached by messages	NA	5.520.483	7.121.315
Number of followers in social networks	11.739	46.456	82.111
Number of visitors to the webpage	222.970	640.411	490.384
Number of telephone calls received	NA	7.102	4.412
Users registered in Mobile Crystal Box	NA	11.478	
Number of national participation exercises and campaigns	1	10	10
Number of social network interactions	NA	57.015	56.835
Number of questions and claims processed	80	10.731	6.838
Number of public agencies linked	4	11	50

Source: *Ministry of ICT – Crystal Ballot Box Initiative*

5. Policy Recommendations

From Colombia's e-participation experience, the following are clues that might lead to boost e-participation policy:

1. Coordinate actions with those instances and initiatives that may boost participation. Transparency, Civil Service, ICT, Planning, Service delivery, Open Government and others closely related
2. Support local initiatives that do not require sophisticated technological infrastructure
3. Make use of basic technology. SMS, USSD, Video Streaming

4. Provide training to public servants about web 2.0 and Open Government. Complementary, implement take-up strategies to citizens to enhance the use of technological tools
5. Implement communications strategies to engage citizen
6. Use diverse technical channels when carrying out e-participation events, not only Internet but telephone, mobile, radio, social networks and TV
7. Legal framework is necessary but not enough. Provide common infrastructure, improve access, promote the creation of content (apps, collaboration platforms) and establish adoption initiatives
8. Participation may come from the bottom. Support civic initiatives
9. Assessment is necessary to track the progress of actions. Define internal indexes that allows to identify pitfalls and successes
10. Engage public servants to open participation processes by providing training and formal education
11. Implement innovation process in public administration to find out new e-participation forms
12. Provide incentives to agencies and citizens. Awards, contests and public recognition is quite useful

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