

Ted Conference 2006

24- 26 September 2006- Mantova

E- democracy in context The Italian case.

Anna Carola Freschi

anna.freschi@unibg.it

University of Bergamo

Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial- NoDerivs 2.5

Main Focus

The features of the Italian national policy co- funding local e-democracy initiatives, aimed to

- support citizen participation to public/ political decision making,
- in the framework of the second phase of the Italian national Plan for e- government (e- Europe Action Plan)

It is a policy line defined in the autumn of 2003, after a research on field . Total budget amount: 10 millions Euro; launched with a national call in summer 2004 (call closed in July: 139 projects candidates)

- 57 Projects selected in springtime 2005; (at least 80%) Projects launched in April- June 2006

Ongoing research at the University of Bergamo to evaluate the projects

Index

1. Defining the domain of a national policy on e- democracy at local level (2)
2. The pre- existing Italian context: from e- democracy to e- government (8)
3. The features of the national Call (2)
4. The selected projects (6)
5. Emerging considerations (6)

1. Defining a specific policy domain

- E- democracy (like democracy) has many dimensions (social inclusion, information pluralism, free and open public sphere, transparency, competition rules, citizens direct initiatives, etc.)
- Crucial dimension identified: the **participation of the citizens in public/ political decision making process** (according to an emerging line in the international landscape on e- democracy – “participation between two elections”; following a vision of ‘continuous democracy’ (Rodotà, 1997)
- Why? This is the field where the crisis of legitimacy of political elites/ parties and institutions is more worrying and dangerous
- This crisis means a growing loss of political mediation capacity at institutional level, within a society in rapid change (growing gap in knowledge; erosion of consensus basis)

1. Defining a specific policy domain (2)

In sum:

- 1. ICTs as tools to support participation in public policy making (integrative approach)
- 2. Local scale (municipal or regional dimension) , essentially as the governmental level closer to the citizens democratic control
- *Main goal of a national policy: to provide a general common framework to the initiatives of local autonomies*

2. The pre- existing context (1)

Italian landscape of ICTs usage, last 10 years at local level

- **Civic networks** *(as institutional portal of administrative services to citizens)* prevail on **community networks** *(as public- private website to foster the citizens participation and the renewal of a local public sphere)*
- Until 2- 3 years ago: a **general shift** of attention from the properly 'political' dimension to the administrative/ service dimension

2. The Pre-existing context (2)

- Some reasons of that shift
 - General context: political paradigm stressing efficiency
 - NewPublicManagment, *Lean state*, neoliberal globalization - Increased area of relationship between public and private sector (governance)
 - National context: concentration on the needs of modernization
 - reforms of: local autonomies, electoral systems, public sector work organization, institutional communication

2. The Pre-existing context (3)

- Other relevant elements on the Italian background of the last decade
 - The **reshaping of the national party system**, with the emersion of new political parties
 - The 'Italian anomaly' , in terms of the monopolistic control of the **mass media system**
 - Emersion of **new forms of governance, concentrated at local level**, and with a increasingly degree of inclusiveness
 - The **growth of social movement and third sector** (new needs and participation practices emerge) finding in the Internet a tool to access directly to the public and each other

2. The pre-existing context (4)

In Italy there isn't a complete distrust or reject towards political Institutions; but **towards party system and representative organizational model.**

High turnout in the general and local elections

High turnout in the constitutional referendum and even in primaries of the center-left coalition.

Citizens participate when they perceive that fundamental democratic values and instruments are at stake.

In general, it's a society highly 'dense' in terms of **social capital** and formal/informal citizens **associations**, model of **urbanization** (small and medium size cities).

2. The pre-existing context (5)

A preliminary research on e-democracy initiative at local level

carried out by 2 Universities and supported from CRC-Italia/ Formez and CNIPA;

- DICO- University of Milan: analysis of the civic network technologies to foster participation
- CAMBIO- University of Florence: definition of the specific e-democracy domain and analysis of the use of ICT by offline participatory local policies

2. The pre- existing context (6)

Data: Website analysis and focus groups
(summer 2003)

Research report released in winter 2003

De Cindio, De Pietro, Freschi, 2004, available
[http:// www.crcitalia.it](http://www.crcitalia.it)
(only in Italian)

2. The pre- existing context (7)

- The main findings (*diffusion and usage of services*)
 - A **low development of web services to support the citizen participation** to the political process (also in terms of basic information services)
 - A general **low success of the initiatives to foster the dialogue** between institutions and citizens (general failure of online forums)
 - A very **low use of ICTs in local « concertative » or participatory policies** (Territorial Pacts, PB, Agenda 21, urban strategic planning, etc.)

2. The pre- existing context (8)

- The main findings (*diagnosis*)
 - Crucial point: **weak political/ institutional will and support**, and worry about citizens demand pressure
 - Isolation of the ICT sector action within the administration; **lack of inter- sectorial coordination** + low diffusion of digital skills
 - The **issue at stake is often generic** and is **perceived as not relevant** by the citizens + the goal of participation is unclear
 - A **gap between offline and online channels** for participation: need to integrate the two dimensions
 - Worries about **e- privacy, digital divide**

3. The national call: the choices to modify the frame (1)

- To concentrate the efforts where **political resources and will are adequate** to support the empowerment of citizens participation
- To underline the **organizational change needed, enhancing inter- sectorial cooperation and skills**
- To promote the **partnership institutions/ citizens associations**
- To give the priority to **reaching a critical mass of citizens**, instead of developing new software
- To focus on the link between **policy cycle** and **citizens participation**, promoting a vision of **participation as an open and continuous process**
- To promote **networks of experiences** (on territorial, policy issue, institutional affinity) with different backgrounds

3. The national call. A first result (2)

- A great success in terms of proposal submitted (139) in two months, with a **wide mobilization of Institutions** (Municipalities: about 650; Provinces:48; Regions,, etc.) **and civil society** (about 450 associations of different size and nature)
- A promising result in terms of creating a **mixed community of practitioners and experts of participation and e- participation**

4. The selected projects. New Emerging protagonists

Often outsiders of e- democracy, and insiders of local governance

A great number of **Universities**: Political/ Social/ Urban Planning Departments (involved in local governance projects) + ICT Departments

3 thematic (policy issue) networks: Participatory budgeting, Urban strategic Planning, Agenda 21, based on previous offline experiences

very relevant associations in the national landscape: e.g. Cittadinanza Attiva, Rete Nuovo Municipio, ARCI, Trade Unions and Entrepreneurial Associations, etc. + various Associations of Local Authorities (ANCI, UNCEM, UPI, Lega Autonomie Locali)

a **growing number of small and young enterprises**, specialised in (e) participation: Camina, DEEP, TOTEM, ParTecs, etc.

4. The selected projects. Some general features (1)

- Two big families of projects:
 - With a **civic networks background**
 - With a « **concertation** » or **participatory background**
- Two main scopes:
 - **focused on a specific or limited set of policies** (urban planning, social policy, education, youth, etc.)
 - more '**generalist**'
- Facing 3 kinds of political problems/ challenges
 - **Everyday problems** (evaluation of services, short terms)
 - **Design of a strategic policy** (planning in the medium run)
 - **Rule- making process** (regional level, mainly on the internal side)

4. The selected projects. Some general features (2)

- 9 Regional projects (7 of them by the Legislative Assemblies)
- 2 by inter- Provinces (UPI and groups of Provinces)
- 4 by single Province
- 24 proposed by individual Municipality
- 5 associations of Municipalities and Rural Mountain Municipalities
- 4 Thematic networks

30% of the projects could have a **national impact, as they involve a network of local administrations**

4. The selected Projects. The technologies

- Internet based services (text, video and voice); Integration Internet- Mobile
- Services:
 - targeted newsletters, mailing lists
 - polls (unregistered, registered) and certified voting
 - Blogs, KMS, GIS, Wiki

4. The selected projects. Prevailing vision on citizenship (4)

Some risks ...

- citizens as **providers of information** (citizen – prosumer of public services/ e- administration perspective - >), **not as producers of original and organic views**
- trend to stress the relevance of **artificial group** (panels) instead of social aggregates (informal groups, associations, etc.)
- prevailing **strong stratification** of the user's access
(e.g.: can't read/ read only/ read and write)

4. The selected projects.

Challenges/ opportunities (5)

- The political context is quite different, at local and national level (Prodi's Coalition won the election – New government from June 2006)
- Projects require a deep inter- sectorial work
- Projects are based on strong pre- existing alliance
- Awareness of the risks of a 'technology driven model' of participation
- Big late in the launch of the projects (April 2006); the majority of them have planned from 6 to 12 months of work before the prototype and demonstration phase.
- Only ½ of the projects are online providing some information services. Only 10 are experimenting services for the dialogue. Only 2 reached the deadline scheduled at the time of the proposal submission.

5. Emerging considerations

E- democracy in context ... (1)

The recommended approach:

- To consider the problems related to participation keeping jointed its offline(conventional) and online dimensions
- The transformations of democracy (conventional) and e- democracy should be considered as two faces of the same more general social and political process

5. Emerging considerations

E- democracy in context ... (2)

- A general problem: there is the **risk of a prevailing simplified vision of the political democratic process** when we try to rationally engineering it.
- But, even in the era of governance, public decision making processes remain a matter of social and political **conflict**.
- Conflict also means the **emerging different models of rationality and forms of knowledge**.

5. Emerging considerations

E- democracy in context ... (3)

- The prevailing vision on deliberative democracy is based on various forms of **statistical sampling**. It faces the problem of political representation from the **side of the institutions** (political parties and governments).
- It doesn't deal with the goal of fostering a better and wider participation of citizens. **Statistical sampling is an abstract process; political participation from below requires the building**

5. Emerging considerations E- democracy in context... (4)

- **Citizens attitude (offline and online) toward participation is very different, in different countries e.g.: disaffected towards democratic institutions and hostile to polity itself; specifically disaffected towards political parties, they can be politically active in other organizational (or more dis- organized) forms; more or less experienced, or completely new)**
- **e- democracy projects are too much oriented to a generic, abstract, atomized citizens (like the economic actor)**

5. Emerging considerations E- democracy in context... (5)

Language/ Discourse have a peculiar nature:

- continuous (not discret) process
- polysemic
- based on social/ cultural sharing of norms and unsaid meanings:

Very difficult to be standardized

And...

- E- democracy (and e- participation) is itself a terrain 'in question'
- with its confronting actors, visions and interests ...

Thank you for your kind attention!

anna.freschi@unibg.it

University of Bergamo - Faculty of Economics