


Using ICT to enhance active participation
in
the policy making process: The EU
approach

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The context

Two developments have increased interest in e democracy:

- the continuing political disengagement and
- the development and increasing uptake of new technology (e.g. internet, mobile phones, digital TV).

There is a widespread belief that the use of new technologies has the potential to help reverse this decline in political engagement.

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ICTs can empower citizens to be more

- involved in the decision-making processes,
- enabling not only a better and faster decision-making process,
- increased transparency and accountability, but also
- Encouraging better communication between all parties involved.

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The European approach

e-Democracy is seen as an integral part of the European e-Government policy, whose scope is to make governments more relevant to citizens by increasing their participation and involvement in decision making and helping to face the large scale disaffection with the existing democratic processes, commonly referred to as the **“democratic deficit”**.

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The problem

However, beyond

- good governance principles (that are also applicable to the European Institutions themselves, as formulated in the White Paper on European Governance),
- a general policy for e-Government,
- the use of online consultation as part of Better Regulation,
- support for e-Democracy R&D in the EU's Information Society Technologies Programme and piloting or implementation where applicable in the related R&D programmes,


no explicit e-Democracy policy has yet been formulated at the EU level.

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“Communication is first and foremost a matter of democracy. People have a right to know what the EU does and what it stands for. And they have a right to fully participate in the European project. Communicating Europe is not just a Brussels affair. EU institutions and Member States must now work on it together. The European Union has grown up as a political project but has not found a place in people’s hearts and minds.”

*Vice-President of the Commission,
Margot Wallstrom*

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White Paper

Commission's proposal for responding to this challenge in order to mobilise all the key actors in eDemocracy – i.e. EU institutions and bodies, Member States, regional and local authorities political parties and civil society – in order to move away from one way communication toward citizen oriented dialogue.

It sets out five areas for joint action:

- defining common principles for communication on European issues; empowering citizens;
- working with the media and new technologies; understanding public opinion; and
- doing the job together with web-based eDemocracy applications heading the list.

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i2010 eGovernment Action Plan

- the i2010 eGovernment Action Plan adopted by the European Commission on 25 April 2006 addresses five priority areas that need to see significant progress by 2010 and underlines the commitment of the European Commission to delivering tangible benefits to all Europeans, in cooperation with the Member States: ***No citizen left behind: eGovernment will only really make a difference if everyone can use it.***
- The i2010 eGovernment Action Plan clearly sets the strengthening of citizen participation and democratic decision making as a priority, and proposes a coherent framework and closer links between policy research, preparatory action and good practice framework.

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i2010 eGovernment Action Plan

Key activities are divided into three pillars:

- eParticipation
- eLegislation (better legislation / eParliaments / ICT tools for democracy), and
- eVote

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eParticipation

eParticipation:


- Active & inclusive involvement of citizens in decision making
- Enhance democratic processes; fight democratic deficit
- Strengthen European citizenship via Citizens involvement in EU level decisions
- It can lead to better legislation
- It can change the way Parliaments interact with Citizens
- It can produce ICT tools for democracy



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- In June 2006, the Council of Ministers recognised "the growing interest in eParticipation and the impact of ICT on activities in the political sphere and welcomes its inclusion in the i2010 eGovernment Action Plan".
- The Council of Ministers invited the Commission and the Member States to "experiment with innovative eParticipation schemes aiming at increasing participation in democratic processes focusing on tools and addressing citizens' demands."


Riga Declaration

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eParticipation

- Recent demand for Citizens participation to EU level decisions increases the importance and potential of eParticipation.
- eParticipation is constantly developing and comprises a variety of areas such as e-consultation, e-legislation, e-petition and e-deliberation.
- In this context, a significant number of national and regional authorities of the Member States have undertaken actions in these areas and have already launched numerous projects and initiatives with very promising results.


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Current situation


ICT research on eParticipation and eDemocracy has been making a significant contribution over the past 10 years, having funded about 30 major projects. It paved the way for significant technological advances, and it is today starting to transform governments.


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EU 2006 Preparatory Action


- **This Preparatory Action is launched for first time in 2006 based on the Budget Amendment approved by the European Parliament on 15 December 2005⁴. It aims at harnessing the benefits of the use of ICTs for better legislative process / better legislation at all levels of governmental decision making and for an enhanced public participation in such processes. This action will last up to three years. The next steps is to prepare for WP 2007**
- **After that, it may become a program, depending on the outcome of the 3 year period.**
- **A number of pilot projects have showed good progress in utilising digital technologies to make representative democracy more effective.**


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Indicative projects are the

- The **eLaw project** supports law-making in Austrian Ministries as well as in Parliament through reform of the production of legal texts
- **Citizen participation in public debate in Denmark**
 - ✓ The overall objective has been to establish a democratic forum where citizens, public administration and politicians could engage in debates.
- **The Scottish ePetition system**
 - ✓ providing citizens with a means to voice concerns through formal processes of Parliament
- **The Portuguese Electronic Vote Project**
- **The Receipt and Forwarding of Electronic Documents in the Proceedings Before the Federal Social Court -Bundessozialgericht (ERV)**
 - ✓ providing citizens with a means for electronic file management


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eParticipation practices

There are marked differences in eParticipation practices at the different geographic levels of governance that need to be systematically explored. These differences stem from a number of factors, like:

- the perception of citizens on the *degree of influence* they can have (larger in local
- environments, lower at EU level);
- the citizens' understanding of the *direct relevance* of the legislation to them (more direct at local level);
- the *scale of involvement* (easier at local level); *personal commitment of key decision-makers* for moderated discussions

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Proposal: EU WORKSHOP

- The workshop participants stressed the importance of moving from a “supply-driven” approach to a “demand-driven” or *bottom-up approach*.
- Current practices of e.g. Making a draft legislation available on-line and inviting comments by citizens is already an old fashion approach.
- This has been described as the “loudspeaker” approach, whereas the potential of ICTs allows us to move to a “radar” approach, where all views and contributions can be collected before legislation is drafted.
- It would enable to move from individualistic participation to collective decisions.

EU STAKEHOLDERS' CONSULTATION WORKSHOP
Brussels, 3rd April 2006

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Concluding Remarks

- The new approach should empower citizens to have involvement based on a good understanding without depending on the “experts” views only.
- *The concept of networked legislation: legislate by reconnecting with the citizens*
- This is based on information (to know), on communication (to speak) and on cogovernance (to work with others).
- Risks of the use of ICTs should be identified and transformed into opportunities. These include shifting emphasis from what people want to what people need, ensuring an inclusive approach, adopting a horizontal approach, and fighting non-responsiveness.

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

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