Strengthening e-Participation:

Overcoming Obstacles for Better Consultation Mechanisms. Case studies

PhD. Andreea STOICIU
Director, Institute of Management and Sustainable Development (IMSD), Romania
Coordinator of the UN/WSIS C7 Subgroup e-Government for Sustainable Development
• The development of ITC tools and of e-services is directly linked to the active involvement of citizens and the private sector in the delivery of public services.

• Reports indicate the increased level and depth of all stakeholders’ participation in decision making.

• Thus, ICT tools are essential for all participation actions and empowering citizens' ability to influence governance, actively be a part of the policy proposing, in setting the agenda, in project implementing, at all levels.

• The e-participation international programmes and also national or local projects should promote and strengthen governments capacities to engage citizens in decision-making processes by using technology.

• A recent UN report recognized the relevance of e-Participation in all aspects: e-consultation, e-information, e-decision making. People are using blogs, chats, web 2.0 and social networks. Politicians, decision makers, public administrations and governments have incorporated these tools in their activity.
Improving the consultation mechanism and increasing the effectiveness and impact of e-participation, are directly influenced by various factors such as:

- Transparency/openness of the decisional factors/governments;

- Identifying the correct barriers and problems;

- Suitable and sustainable legal framework;

- Viewing the citizens not only as passive receivers of information through e-services, but as active partners who are engaged to interact with the government;

- Education and digital divide diminishing measures;

- Developing and implementing evaluation tools for measuring the impact of the actions;

- Improving technical infrastructure;

- Investments in ICT tools and other needed resources such as training.
There were identified 4 types of barriers in strengthening e-participation:

- Political barriers
- Social barriers
- Technology barriers
- Human/emotional barriers
Surveys and studies by various organizations such as OECD, UNPAN, UNDESA, EC reviled that although in many countries, a great progress was made in what concerns e-participation, there are numerous problems governments and authorities face in implementing and using these tools.

As previous described there were identified 4 types of barriers in strengthening e-participation:

1. **Political Barriers:**

   - Legislation gaps, legal/organizational frameworks;
   - Transparency and demonstrating government’s commitment;
   - Promoting and supporting active citizenship;
   - Top down engagement of citizens - governments consult and engage citizens;
   - Difficulties encountered in measuring and evaluating participation efforts and impact;
   - Local, national and international cooperation.
2. Social barriers:

- Social models are various, communities are very different with different needs, so citizens should have access to differing sources of information in order to become better educated about the political and social issues facing their community;

- Level of poverty and lack of adequate resources;

- Bottom-up empowerment - citizens get active in engaging in decision-making;

- Improve public responsiveness;

- Improve information-seeking and keeping up with important issues;

- Lack of cooperation between stakeholders in local, national and international level;

- Poor measures in bridging digital divide and promoting inclusiveness of all types.
3. Technical barriers:

- Proper technical Infrastructure - lower-quality or high-priced connections, such as internet access to the Internet (*e.g.*: countries such as Yemen or Iraq fall at the bottom of the list with internet penetration rate of under 2%);

- Development and large scale implementation of engagement technologies;

- Better usage of technology and more cost effective tools such as: open government data, social media, mobile and wireless communications and dedicated web sites/portals/blogs;

- Lack of affordable ITC tools and poor technical assistance;

- Limited access to quality ICT content.
4. Human/emotional barriers:

- Low level of education;

- Lack of digital literacy;

- Diminished trust and low accountability in decision-makers, politicians and governments;

- Lack of direct channels of communication between public authorities, elected representatives, politicians, citizens, governance – between all the stakeholders.

- Lack of trust and low individual participation levels caused by past political problems (e.g.: citizens in former communist countries in Eastern Europe, such as Romania, register lower initiatives and campaigns, volunteering, memberships, participating in decision-making).
Statistic information about e-participation

On the other hand, e-participation is developing, many countries make progress in e-consultation, e-information, e-voting, e-polling or social media tools usage.

- A recent study showed that many developing countries have adopted citizen inclusion in decision making by using ICT.

- Republic of Korea and the Netherlands are the world leaders, Singapore and Kazakhstan are in the top.

- Europe has the largest share of the top e-participation countries.

- Despite progress the gains are not spread evenly - across and within countries, locally and nationally.

Geographic distribution of top performers in e-participation:
E-participation best-practices.
Case studies.

• For better understanding and improving the mechanisms of e-participation sharing best practices and international cooperation are essential.
• There are several best practice example in countries such as:

  - Estonia (e-voting)

  - Spain (e-consultation project Portal “Mejora” in Spain)

  - Hungary (e-democracy site)

  - Lithuania (public consultations site)

  - Albania (consultation tool for citizens)

  - Romania (availability of an online presence of a regional government top representative in social networks).
Estonia - e-voting system

Countries like Estonia have been very progressive in the development of ICT and e-services. E-Estonia – is one of the best cases in e-government: [http://estonia.eu/](http://estonia.eu/).

**Estonian e-voting system** - has been under development since 2002 and in 2007, for the first time in the world, it was possible in Estonia to vote online for parliamentary elections - total of 30,275 out of 940,000 registered voters voted online: [http://www.valimised.ee/](http://www.valimised.ee/).
Spain - e-consultation project Portal “Mejora” in Spain

http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/haciendayadministracionpublica/omsp/Welcome.do

The platform Andalusia Citizenship Relationship is an observatory improvement portal to improve public services, using various levels of participation and information dissemination.
Hungary – e-democracy portal

https://edemokracia.magyarorszag.hu/edemokracia

Blogs, forums, twitter and Facebook are increasingly being deployed by governments as consultation tools. One of the best cases in using open electronic discussion forums is in the national Hungarian portal.
A recent study conducted by IMSD (www.imdd.ro), focusing on countries from Central and East Europe (CEE), such as Romania, Ukraine, Armenia, Lithuania reviled that in many regions at various levels politicians and governments using social networking sites in order to engage citizen and to promote open dialogue.

By using 5 scaling indicators, the evaluating system showed that:

- Online tools did prove viable as a new medium for registering and reacting to reported electoral violations and other problems.
- A bigger number of citizens request a real-time response from the official and government and social media is an easy tool to use for real-time communication.

The graphic representation of the 5 indicators for measuring the impact of social media – www.imdd.ro.
Concluding, the opportunities for engaging citizens, better e-participation tools and benefits of citizen inclusion by e-participation, are:

- The inclusion of the civil society in authorities 'decision-making improves democratic systems and the value of associative life.

- Also the quality and effectiveness of the governance is increasing, thus better use of resources and sustainable development emerge.

- Empowerment of citizens - both public authorities and NGOs/community organizing interventions should assist this process.

- Better motivations - long-term and sustainable participation requires that local and regional authorities and governments engage in an open and transparent process.
Further conclusions:

- Individual citizens also need to be challenged **to become active** by improving and promoting technical, social and education **skills**.

- **Reinvigorating a sense of community** among citizens for better citizen e-participation.

- Sustainable development of **infrastructure for e-participation**, both technical, such as **functional channels, access to information** and **legal and institutional**.

- **Governments and public authorities should develop more e-participation projects and also impact and effectiveness evaluation systems**.

- **Developing cooperation and information sharing** by stakeholders in various regions or countries who are facing the same issues or have comparable systems. Also national and international cooperation at all levels in essential.
Thank you!

Q&A