eParticipation in Practice in Europe: The Case of “Puzzled by Policy: Helping you be Part of EU”

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the case study of “Puzzled by Policy: Helping you be part of EU”, a European e-participation project, which studies the needs of concerned citizens, stakeholders and decision makers, and provides a unique platform for users to learn and discuss about policy at the EU and national level, while finding out what particular policies mean to them on the national level so that they can contribute to policy drafting. The findings of our study suggest that the path to successful e-participation should not only involve ICT, but should first incorporate a conceptual model of e-participation, i.e. questions such as how to model the policy to be debated in the democratic process, how to define the public engagement model, what communication model should be used, and what deliberation methods should be addressed.

1. Introduction

e-participation is a relatively new and emerging area of research across Europe. It aims to reconnect citizens and stakeholders with decision makers and policy-making, and make the decision-making process easier to understand and follow through the use of new information and communication technologies (ICT) [1, 2, 3]. Participation has become a highly political issue over the last few years, and e-participation is seen as a major factor in this development, however, it is not clear what is the role ICT plays, and what are the relevant factors and key variables for shaping the development and implementation of a successful e-participation system to engage citizens, stakeholders and decision makers in the democratic process. As a result, some see eParticipation as a silver bullet to many democratic challenges, whilst others see it as largely irrelevant. The truth is probably a mixture of all three, so the task is to steer a careful path to ensure that realised benefits outweigh all else [4]. At the same time, as with any new field, it is still not clear what the current e-participation paradigm is, and what are the underlying significant technologies and engagement models to support this paradigm. In this context, the key dimensions to characterize e-participation initiatives has been proposed by Macintosh [5] according to the suggested by earlier works by the OECD [6], while a framework for assessing e-participation projects and tools in Europe has been proposed focused on different layers of analysis [7]: participation areas, support of categories of tools, technologies used, levels of participation addressed, and stages in the policy-making process.

As the projects and initiatives concerning e-participation are expected to grow, case studies, good practices, and lessons learnt to address new issues in e-participation become vital. The aim of this paper is to describe the case study “Puzzled by Policy: Helping you be part of EU”, the learnt lessons, and key factors of interest to anyone who is trying to use new technologies in order to support online democratic engagement. “Puzzled by Policy” is a European e-participation project which provides a unique platform to learn and discuss about policy at the EU level and find out what particular policies mean to citizens and stakeholders on the national level so they can contribute to policy drafting and impact assessments. Puzzled by Policy also helps decision makers at both the National and the European level better understand the impact of their policies on constituents by feeding citizen reactions back to them. This project has been developed to address the problem of democratic deficit, using an inform-consult-empower e-participation conceptual model [20] that uses a multi-stream model to policy modelling [8]. We argue that it is important to clearly characterize in an e-
participation paradigm the level of participation, the technology used, and the stage in the policy-making process such has been suggested by the OECD[6], and Macintosh and Tambouris et al., in previous works [5, 7]. However, we argue that at the same time it is also vital to define in an e-participation paradigm how to model the policy process for an inform-consult-empower approach, how to build a social engagement model for effective governance, and how to introduce an appreciative vision to involve actors’ participation. Furthermore, providing lessons learnt is crucial to improve the path to successful e-participation.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the state of play of e-participation at European level. Section 3 describes key relevant factors for developing e-participation initiatives, while Section 4 presents the most relevant aspects of the study case “Puzzled by Policy: Helping you be part of EU” according to the key factors described at Section 3. Section 5 gives concluding remarks, the learnt lessons and the key factors of interest to anyone (practitioner in e-participation, stakeholders, elected representatives, and decision makers) who is trying to use new technologies in order to support online democratic engagement.

2. Background – The State of Play of e-participation at European Level

The European e-participation strategy in terms of EU institutional and inter-institutional implementation is embedded in the concepts of good governance, communication and transparency. ICT-enhanced citizen participation emerged as a priority for citizen engagement in late 2006, whereas before that citizen engagement was perceived in terms of accountability, legitimacy and good governance with limited references to eParticipation. In this context, the EU created eParticipation channels to enrich existing channels of representation, as well as created new ones, fostering the transparency and legitimacy of European policy making and generated institutionalized opportunities for public debate on European Issues, offering a range of online debates, chats and consultations, such as Debate Europe, Commission Consultations, EU Tube and Commissioners’ blogs [4].

In the recent years, the EU and its Member States have mounted a concerted effort to find workable mechanisms and solutions to enhance and boost e-participation under the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Framework Programmes for Research (FP5, FP6 and FP7). Currently, the activities in the e-participation area have continued under the CIP ICT Policy Support Programme for 2009, which focused on addressing e-participation as empowering and involving citizens in transparent decision making [9].

At the European and international levels most e-participation cases tend to focus on communicating information on legal issues, crime and justice, while also actively trying to engage citizens in policy issues. However, none of the multinational cases delegate power of any kind to participants, although all of them have been launched based on concrete policy contexts and with specific objectives usually stemming from EU and other international priorities [4].

Currently, the first wave of e-participation projects has not been as successful as initially anticipated, due to the need for higher participation by governmental officials. This is somewhat surprising, as many studies have investigated and shown that there are many benefits of citizen participation, including tapping into local knowledge and innovation, reducing or avoiding conflict, increasing social inclusion or cohesion, mobilising new resources including voluntary labour, reducing transaction costs, and generating trust and social capital [10]. The limitations that have tended to prevent pan-European projects from reaching a mass audience include a lack of interest in policy issues or politics, low levels of trust in politicians, a large and diverse range of policy actors, varying levels of technical skill, a lack of integration of e-participation strategy into actual government organisation structures, language difficulties, and privacy issues [11]. What is evident with many of these barriers is that they are for the most part not technical obstacles, but barriers that apply to participation in the broader sense of the word. The reasons that deter citizens from participating online are common with those that deter citizens from participating offline. This would suggest that there is too much expectation on e-participation to be the silver bullet of citizen engagement; that there exists a misconception that the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) will alleviate the standard barriers to participation, engage a wide range of citizens and have a direct impact on the policy making-process. In order for e-participation to be effective for governance, technologies must be integrated into a broader adaptation of government-citizen relationship building taking into account the social complexity, political culture, organisational structures and the technological dependencies.

3. Key Factors in e-Participation Projects

One of the main lessons identified by the 2009 European e-participation summary report is that more
focus is needed on better e-participation project design [4]. The main problem faced when attempting to design an e-participation project is that the field of e-participation is new and rapidly evolving. On one hand, different approaches have been proposed as e-participation paradigms. On the other hand, it is not clear how to model the policy process due to its complexity, whereas ICTs can play different roles according to the needs of the concerned citizens, stakeholders and decision makers. The public engagement and communication model play also an essential role in order to engage the main actors in the democratic process. Dissemination models using viral marketing are also vital to disseminate the e-participation initiative. The deliberation and discussion methodology used to foster actors’ participation is also essential to determine the best practice path and to ensure that efforts to e-participation have been effective.

In the next subsections, each one of these key factors and variables are described. In Section 4, how these factors have been developed in the case study Puzzled by Policy is presented, together a case example which is being developed at an EU country.

### 3.1 eParticipation Paradigm

According to the OECD study, and the Macintosh and Tambouris et al., works [6, 5, 7], the key dimensions of an e-participation paradigm should be focused on the level of participation, stage in decision-making, actors in the democratic process, technologies used, rules of engagement, duration and sustainability, accessibility, resources and promotion, evaluation and outcomes. Using these key dimensions, three different levels of participation can be defined as follows:

- **e-enabling**: supporting those who would not typically take advantage of the large amount of public data available.
- **e-engaging**: consulting a wider audience to enable deeper contributions and support deliberative debate on policy issues.
- **e-empowering**: supporting active participation and facilitating bottom-up ideas to influence the political agenda.

### 3.2 Policy Modelling

Policy formulation is a complex factor involving many aspects over a potentially long period of time. In order to establish a framework for modelling policies, we need a policy model that takes into account the policy actors and networks, the knowledge generation, and the knowledge utilisation. The policy stream [12] (also known as the solution stream) includes potential ideas to separate the policy modelling process into the problem stream, policy stream, and political streams. The problem stream contains problems, where problems are seen to be social conditions where there is a recognised need for change. Arguments must be made and accepted that a negative social condition is attributable to causes within human control (and not simply a matter of fate or a fact of nature) and amenable to government solution before it can become a problem for public policy [12]. The policy stream (also known as the solution stream) includes potential new ideas that will be tested for feasibility, acceptability and relevance. The multiple-stream model implies the possible existence of policy proposals or solutions, without the existence of a particular problem. In such cases, policy actors may try and identify policy problems to add leverage and support to their proposals, thus pushing these problems onto the agenda. The third component in the multiple stream model is the political stream, which denotes the national mood, organised political interests, and the government itself; that is to say the dynamic and often unpredictable elements that will ultimately determine if a problem and a policy alternatives will appear on the government agenda.

According to the multiple stream model, it is only when a problem has been defined, a solution has been identified and the political conditions are right, that the policy window appears, i.e. the time period where the proposed policy is on the political agenda, i.e. there is the possibility for an actual policy creation or change. However, should any of these components shift, the window of opportunity may close, for example if key actors change, if the event that caused a change in national mood passes, or if no ready alternative solutions are available.

### 3.3 The Role of ICTs and Social Media

Technology is altering the way in which citizens access and exchange information and participate in the political process. New technologies have the potential to increase transparency, promote citizen understanding of their government, and allow them to participate in the political process in new ways. In addition, citizens may expect more from e-government than those institutions are ready to provide [4]. The social web (named Web 2.0) opens new opportunities and challenges in the goals and objectives of e-participation. In the social web environment, people typically start using their web and mobile devices to join a discussion group, read a blog, or tag a photo. Many decide that one look is enough to satisfy their curiosity, but also others decide to return to an
application a second or third time, and some of them start to contribute [13]. Usually, new users begin by doing simple things, and a few of these people return and begin participating more actively. In this context, e-participation applications developed using the underlying social media could provide new mechanisms which should be designed and used to engage citizens, stakeholders and decision makers to contribute, and at the same time, to involve them to return and participate actively.

3.4 Engagement and Communication Model

Openness is not sufficient to ensure public participation. Currently, there are many reasons for citizens, stakeholders and decision makers to not participate in the policy making process. Two broad groups can be identified [11]:

- **Audiences who are “willing but unable”** to participate due to a variety of reasons such as cultural or language barriers, geographical distance, disability or socio-economic status.
- **Audiences who are “able but unwilling”** to participate because they are not very interested in politics, do not have the time, or do not trust government to make good use of their input.

In order to ensure the engagement of these two types of audiences, it is not only necessary the use of ICTs through the development of innovative applications, and the presence on on-line social-network communities, it is also vital to provide a public engagement model where it is defined a combined approach between the use of ICTs’ solutions together multiple channels for participation including face-to-face. In addition, clear objectives should be defined based on understand citizen’s evolving needs, and describing what is the importance on get involved.

As a result, governments must expect to “go where audiences are” when seeking to engage with them, rather than expecting audiences coming to government. It is clear there is a need to design a strategic communication plan with all the audiences in a collaborative way in order to ensure the participation of all the actors in the policy making process. Both principles, efficacy and equity, must be addressed in the engagement and communication plan in order to ensure the public participation. On one hand, efficacy assures the true value of opening up policy making to a wide range of views as input for evidence-based decision making. On the other hand, the equity principle assures that the audiences who are least equipped for public participation (such as unemployed, disabled, and young) are reached.

4. Puzzled by Policy Hypothesis

Puzzled by Policy (PbP) aims to reduce the complexity of decision making within the EU and reconnect citizens with decision makers and policymaking by introducing new technical applications to bring policymaking on the hot topic of “immigration and migration” to the citizens, stakeholders and decision makers in an engaging manner. This differs from many current e-participation projects, whose main goal is usually to directly influence policy-makers and have an impact on policy [19]. PbP refers to multiple stakeholders: citizens, policy makers, NGOs, etc. As regards citizens, PbP promotes social inclusion by trying to engage any type of citizen regardless of age, nationality, social status or educational level, etc. For this reason it differentiates between two citizen user groups in order to assure both principles, efficacy and equity: 1) the hard-to-reach such as the young, disabled, unemployed, and immigrants, and 2) the mass of everyday citizens. PbP performs four pilots in four EU countries as follows: 1) Italy: 100 targeted citizens in Turin, unlimited citizens nationally (minimum target 1,500 citizens); 2) Greece: 100 targeted citizens in Athens, unlimited citizens nationally (minimum target 1,500 citizens); 3) Spain: 100 targeted citizens in Canary Islands, unlimited citizens nationally (minimum target 1,500 citizens); and 4) Hungary: 100 targeted citizens in Budapest, unlimited citizens nationally (minimum target 1,500 citizens).

4.1 PbP e-participation Paradigm and Policy Modelling

PbP is modelled around an Inform-Consult-Empower approach [20]. This approach is inline with the multi-stream policy-making model [8] described in Section 3.2 and, as such, offers policy actors the opportunity to participate in an appropriate and achievable setting. The Inform-Consult-Empower model is structured progressively: participating at the Inform level is the most straight-forward and requires the least amount of interaction from the participant, participating at the Consult level requires more of a time and deliberative commitment from a participant, whereas participating at the Empower level requires continuous contribution and in-depth deliberation.

A holistic way of addressing policy modelling in PbP has been incorporating both the multiple stream model [8] and the policy cycle model according to the Code of Good Practice for Civil Participation in the Decision-Making process, produced by the Conference of International NGOs of the Council of Europe (see
Both models are complimentary, representing sequential phases of the policy-making process. The multiple stream model represents the topical discussion, lobbying and proposing that takes place on an ongoing basis. Once a policy window appears, i.e. a problem has been defined, a solution has been identified and the political conditions are right, the policy decision-making cycle comes into effect. The combined approach recognises that although decision-makers may or may not play a role in the problem stream and policy stream during phase 1, they must be involved in order for a policy window to appear and phase 2 to come into effect.

4.2 The role of ICT in PbP

The PbP platform presents an informative and easy way to use online platform, which can be pushed to social media sites and to own desktop and mobile devices. The PbP platform consists of: Policy Profiler, u-debate, and the PbP widget.

- **Policy Profiler (PP):** is a Web based tool which gives citizens and stakeholders the opportunity to find out about their preferences within the policy field of immigration. It allows participants to compare their positions with existing policy making in an easy to understand, graphical and informative way. It allows them to make their opinion known on immigration policy issues within the EU and to place that opinion within the overall landscape of immigration policy provisions, positions and debates in the EU member-states. As a result, the participant obtains a graphical representation (scatter chart) of their policy preferences compared with the positions of all national and/or European stakeholders.

- **U-debate:** is a multilingual, pan-European deliberation forum, where participants can view, discuss, and share ideas on immigration policy. Discussions threads are deliberative in the sense that each post is classified as an Issue, Alternative, Pro Argument, Con Argument or Comment. From this structure a deliberation model along with the actors involved emerges. A key feature of PbP u-debate is that it facilitates multilingual, pan-European discussions. Discussion threads can be automatically translated into any language. This facilitates participants with different native languages to participate in common discussions.

- **PbP widget:** enables the viral distribution of the PbP platform throughout the Web, as the widget can be embedded, and thus accessed, on any website, blog or social media on the Internet. Table 1 shows how the two different tools of PbP platform apply the Inform-Consult-Empower model.

The main benefits of using these tools in the PbP platform are:

- Through the PbP platform citizens are able to get informed, evaluate and review policy positions.
- Citizens’ level of knowledge about EU migration and immigration policy can be increased.
- Pro-actively encourage decision makers to access the site and join in the debate for themselves.
- Make a positive contribution to policy drafting and impact assessments by feeding a consolidated version of their views back to key national and EU-level decision makers. Decision makers will be asked to provide responses to feedback.

Figure 2 shows the home page of the platform where the three main tools are visible.

4.3 Engagement and Communication Model

The definition and description of an engagement and communication model is vital to ensure the project’s and pilot’s success. Once the e-participation paradigm and policy modelling has been described, the next step is how to facilitate and engage citizen participation in such a policy modelling process. The communication model includes the communications methods to promote the usage of the PbP platform. The different techniques used have been categorized in Table 2.
Once the forms of communication have been defined, the pilot launch and pilot activities need to be addressed including the policy making process selected for each pilot and the pilot topics selected.

The engagement model in PbP takes place in two stages. The first stage is platform technical set up and raising awareness within target groups (especially decision makers) before the official launch of the platform. The second stage after the official launch is focused on the facilitation of e-participation processes, engaging target groups, delivering result to decision makers and ensuring their feedback. Although there is likely to be a tendency for ICT to play a strong role in the dissemination and engagement through social media, other ways of engagement involving face to face are necessary in order to ensure PbP success. Section 4.6 describes a case example in Spain pilot, where this methodological approach has been used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inform</th>
<th>Consult</th>
<th>Empower</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PbP Policy Profiler</td>
<td>Participants are made aware of issues related to immigration policy and are encouraged to think about where they stand in relation to these issues. Participants are also informed about where the main stakeholders, including political parties and NGOs, stand in relation to existing immigration policy.</td>
<td>Participants are encouraged to participate in debates on issues they have extreme views on. Decision-makers are sent feedback on participants’ positions on immigration policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PbP uDebate</td>
<td>Participants can learn about immigration policy through reading debates from other participants.</td>
<td>Participants contribute to discussions on immigration policy with other stakeholders. Through collaborative discussions, participants may identify various solutions to immigration issues.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Table 1. How PbP platform applies the Inform-Consult-Empower participation approach |

![Figure 2. PbP platform](image-url)
4.4 Institutional Framework

Puzzled by Policy represents Europe’s one stop shop for consulting information and discussion on national and EU policies, and now, focusing on immigration policy. In this context, the PbP platform can provide valuable input into two stages of the local/national/EU policy cycles: the agenda-setting phase (by providing ideas for policy drafting) and the evaluation phase (by giving feedback on existing policies, i.e., generating knowledge on what citizens think of these policies, and by providing information about national (non) implementation of EU directives and other policies. As a result, PbP main target in terms of transmitting the feedback and knowledge acquired from PbP project will be the European Commission, DG Home (responsible for policy initiative and policy evaluation in immigration), the respective national ministries responsible for immigration policies, as well as the bodies at the local/regional level that deal with immigration issues (e.g., regional parliaments, municipality councils, immigration observatories, regional projects related to immigration, NGO’s, etc.).

4.5 The use of Viral Marketing as Dissemination Model

PbP dissemination model is supported on the use of viral marketing, that is, the use of marketing techniques to produce increases in brand awareness. Popular social networking sites and widget technologies are used to bringing policymaking to the citizens and stakeholders in a manner that is both fun and engaging. The use of widget technologies push the platform to popular social media such as Facebook and Twitter as well as to their own desktop and mobile devices, bringing policymaking to the citizens and stakeholders rather than relying on them to come to a specific site. As a result, platform can be recommended from people to their friends through the automatic mechanism of the widget which works as a “word of mouth” solution. In addition, the language localisation feature of the widget enables citizens to access content in their own language. On-line social-network communities such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Flickr, YouTube and Twitter are used as social media sites to disseminate the main events and news of PbP platform in order to ensure that all audiences are reached in the social web.

4.6 Case Example: Arona Local Municipality

The Arona municipality, a Spanish local municipality, wishes to better support the social participation in order to strengthen integration, coexistence and social cohesion and optimizing human diversity and cultural development through social participation. Currently, the integration of immigrants is one of the most important challenges facing Spanish society related to the immigration policy. With this purpose, the Spanish Council of Ministers approved the Strategic Plan for Citizenship and Integration 2011-2014 [18]. The Strategic Plan is based on the logic of equal treatment and combating discrimination along the lines set by EU Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin and by the Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation.

Policy Framework. The policy framework is supported on a process based on consensus and participation of all the citizens, stakeholders and decision makers involved in managing the integration in order to identify the key aspects to be addressed to provide best practices and build future plans for integration and policies in local municipalities.
Through the PbP policy making process, PbP facilitates that the participants are informed about where the main stakeholders stand in relation to existing integration policy (using Policy Profiler), and learn about the integration and social cohesion issues of their municipalities through reading the posts from other stakeholders in u-debate (inform step). In the next step of the policy making process, consult step, the participants contribute to the discussions, identifying the key points for integration process. In the empower step, through an initial understanding of the situation and how is confirmed their municipalities, the participants suggest to the decision makers the key aspects they consider to be addressed in order to strength the coexistence and social cohesion in their municipalities. Results are summarized by the facilitators of the pilot (the University of La Laguna (ULL)) through a consult report to the regional decision makers of the involved municipalities and the deputies of the regional Parliament. Feedback provided by decision makers will be included in PbP platform in order to foster participation in an active way. Final conclusions will be delivered to EU Commission and DG Home.

In order to ensure the e-participation success in Arona municipality with PbP to strengthen social integration and cohesion, a combined public engagement model was designed to build trust in the policy making process. This model interlaces face to face meetings, the use of social media, and computer workshops. Face to face engagement in PbP is focused on a bottom-up model based on a social constructivism approach [17] and an appreciative vision [14], where the citizens collaborate together in organized workshops in order to transform the local municipality. The results of this citizen participation are carried out to local decision makers where feedback is sent back to the citizens. The final results are sent to regional, national and EU Parliament. Table 3 shows the engagement combined approach.

Once a common goal has been built between all the stakeholders (citizens, NGOs, social agents, and decision makers), an iterative 3-steps cycle is performed based on the e-participation through PbP, face-to-face meetings to share new initiatives, and decision maker feedback.

To monitoring the success of the use of PbP platform in the combined engagement model, different metrics have been used focused on Google analytics statistics, PbP platform statistics, and PbP widget statistics. At the same time, gathering of recommendations and suggestions from users has been essential to involve users to firstly contribute and to return and participate more actively. The suggestions provided by the users can be delivered through different channels: online questionnaires of evaluations, e-mails to the pilot, recommendations through social media like Facebook, and direct suggestions collected from face to face meetings and workshops.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing the proposal</td>
<td>Characterization of a join map of the needs of the local municipality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing the social agents</td>
<td>Knowing who are the social agents and decision makers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovering resources</td>
<td>Identifying what are the resources of the local municipality in order to address the policy making process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building a common goal</td>
<td>Designing what is the work proposal and how it can be carried out through the policy making process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform-Consult-Empower</td>
<td>Using PbP platform to inform, consult and empower with the combined model of policy making on the common goal defined in the previous step</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing and organizing the group plan</td>
<td>Provide greater outreach initiatives implemented by the e-participation, so the initiatives can be shared and improved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision maker feedback</td>
<td>Decision makers present their feedback through PbP platform</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Combined Engagement Model to address e-participation in PbP

**Appreciative Vision.** The methodology used by the training facilitators is focused on an appreciative approach in order to involve the different actors to participate in PbP debate. The appreciative approach [14] is a commitment to foster a collaborative construction of reality based on dialogue and the systematic search for what works best as a primary key to achieve the positive community response. It contains two basic concepts, first inquiry, which is to ask questions, investigate, explore, discover and be open to new things. This step is carried out through face to face meetings with the different actors to characterize a join map of the needs of the local municipality (see Table 3) and the Policy Profiler PbP tool to introduce the main topics around immigration policy at national and EU level. On the other hand, the appreciation, which is that the search is focused on value and recognize the
strengths and successes to empower, rather than emphasizing the negative and falling into criticism. Appreciative attitude arouses the desire to create and discover new social possibilities through inspiring questions. An appreciative dialogue helps create a kind of dialogue and conversation that builds on the strengths existing and inspired by the projection of a preferred future for all [15, 16]. As a result, a set of appreciative questions elaborated by an expert commission on appreciative inquiry were delivered through PbP u-debate discussion tool and at the same time, encouraging the participants to envision the solutions according to their proposals.

5. Conclusions and Learnt Lessons

In this paper, the European case study “Puzzled by Policy” modeled around an Inform-Consult-Empower approach has been presented. The key factors of interest to anyone who is trying to use new technologies in order to support democratic engagement have been described.

The key learning points of the case study “Puzzled by Policy” are summarized in the following.

1. The success of e-participation cannot be only focused on the use of innovative ICTs: the use of innovative applications does not automatically deliver public engagement. Public engagement depends on first understanding the concerned needs of citizens, stakeholders and decision makers in an equitable and effective way through face to face meetings (see Table 3). Then, topics and policy making process can be matched to technology, focused on the context-specific needs of all the involved actors in the democratic process. Once the actors have understood the benefits of participating, is when technology benefits are perceived. In summary, successful e-participation is not a purely virtual participation. Multi-channel, including the human channel, is the most effective. As a result, citizens and stakeholders should work together in order to determine the needs and policies, knowing who are the social agents and decision makers, and what are the resources available to address the policy making process. Introduction of the Inform-Consult-Empower model with organized events and workshops with computers contribute to foster the virtual participation. In addition, offline engagement must include training to the participants when technical skills are not enough. In this context, PbP is perceived as a projection of offline social participation.

2. Trust is the key factor in participation: nobody will participate in an e-participation online platform if they do not believe that they will be listened to and what will the use of their contributions. Many participants have suggested that the data protection legislation about the platform is not clear and limited the participation.

3. The role of facilitators is vital: facilitators play a crucial role in the e-participation system. Our experience has shown that they must invest in managing the platform content, to facilitate discussions, to encourage actors to participate, to provide actors support, to provide feedbacks to and from decision-makers, and to monitoring the evaluation metrics of the system in order to address the corresponding actions. In order to ensure the success of online debate space, facilitators should pay close attention to: moderate online session by means of publishing short notices on session progress, accepting questions and comments from participants, providing additional explanation to participants if needed, facilitating the session in terms of communication protocols, encourage target groups to contribute their views and returns on a regular basis to see changes in the discussions. Other key variable is to engage and encourage participants to take part in the discussions without influencing their thoughts and opinions. It is also essential to lead the participants to a mutual understanding of their common objectives, providing feedback on inputs. It is crucial use words and language participants understand, i.e. policies should be explained in terms simpler than those used in European laws and directives. In order to enhance public participation, content quality and presentation need to be addressed in a continuous way. The use of an appreciative inquiry has provided the debate among the users. The main results shown that users participate in questions modeled with an appreciative and collaborative approach. However, non appreciative questions lead to a low participation. The aspects considered in the design of the appreciative questions were: open questions, hypothetic and reflexive questions, enable and generative questions, positive questions to enable changes, and questions to search new experiences. This situation lead that the participants identified key points that helped decision makers on how to address the intercultural dialogue and design key aspects to improve the social cohesion.

4. Realistic goals with decision makers: an important part of the e-participation process is representing feedback to decision-makers (empower). It cannot be assumed that from the beginning of the online e-participation system,
decision makers post their feedback in the online system. It is necessary to send regular updates from the online system to the affiliated national and local authorities through different channels to ensure that a feedback channel is created. Two different mechanisms should be provided to decision makers: (1) accessing on the platform directly themselves thereby enabling them to respond online, and (2) reading a regular short report sent by the facilitators, and posting the feedback from decision makers by the facilitators in the online platform.

5. Effective Evaluation methodologies: evaluating the success, and impact is essential for effective governance, including asking the participants. To date, evaluating the quality of open policy making processes is a new frontier for most governments.

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