

Inception report

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Background and context

The state of the art suggests that e-participation is probably going through a so-called *hype cycle*¹, having lived through its *peak of inflated expectations* about its transformational power and a *trough of disillusionment* regarding the actual lack of impact on governance processes, it is now becoming a constant of the political landscape. In academia, e-participation studies are probably in their late teenage years. After early waves of enthusiasm followed by stings of doubts, scholars have adopted a more balanced and empirically driven outlook on e-participation (Chadwick 2009). However, the field is still not theoretically or empirically mature. First, there seems to be some confusion of what e-participation really means and what its different phases are. Second, there is lack of comparative studies about how information and communication technologies (ICTs) affect democracy, and the debate has mostly been taking place at the level of anecdotes in the media and conflicted case studies in academia (Grönlund 2011; Tufekci 2013). Third, most studies have focused only on individual e-participation cases and not on the interdependence of these cases within a larger system (Parkinson, Mansbridge 2012). Yet, no single case could possess the capacity sufficient to legitimate the decisions and policies that governments adopt, and there clearly is a need for a more systemic approach to e-participation.

One of the reasons for the lack of coherent assessment studies on e-participation is the complexity of evaluating the effect that ICTs can have on democratic governance. So far, the assessments have mainly relied on e-participation benchmarking efforts carried out by international organizations like the United Nations (UN), the World

¹ The hype cycle was coined by Gartner (a research house based in the U.S.) that is tracking the development and adoption of new technologies by plotting them on the Hype Cycle, updated yearly. The hype cycle is often applied to describe the adoption of new media forms by society (Fenn and Raskino 2008).

Economic Forum (WEF), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), or by consulting firms and companies like Accenture, CapGemini, etc. Typically, these efforts produced indices that have, however, been heavily criticized. The same goes for the general quality of the data and the results based on the latter, questioned by many (Bannister 2009, Heeks 2006, Janssen 2010). One of the main drawbacks of the existing web indices is that they tend to be methodologically weak². The OECD has called this phenomenon 'bean-counting', given that the indexes measure above all the number of web pages, level of internet penetration and services provided, without going into more complex aspects of e-participation. The prominent UN eParticipation index focuses exceedingly on technical aspects of e-participation and displays some methodological difficulties, e. g. countries that are authoritarian or excel in Internet censorship can still score high on e-participation (Grönlund 2011). Recently, however, there have been attempts to go beyond the technology towards a more comprehensive measurement of the impact of ICTs on political processes. One of the more promising examples is the pilot study on Open Government and Transparency carried out by CapGemini in Europe in 2012, to be extended in the following years.

At the same time, a relatively recent development is the advancement of the Internet and social media in developing countries, especially through the use of mobile devices. There are several instances where new media played a role in political processes, e.g. the 'activist mapping' tool *Ushahidi* that was used in the aftermath of Kenya's disputed 2007 presidential election to collect eyewitness reports of violence (Goldstein and Rotich 2008) or the role of the social media in the upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt (Ritter and Trechsel 2013, Howard and Hussain 2011). However, overall, little is actually known about the impact of e-participation on citizens, policy-makers and policy in developing countries.

When studying e-participation, it is important to keep in mind that ICTs are not inherently good or bad. Their impact can be both positive and negative, sometimes even in the same cases, e.g. during the 'Arab Spring', digital media allowed democratization movements to develop new tactics but soon authoritarian governments started to integrate social media into their own counter-insurgency

² See e.g. the Global E-Governance Survey by the Rutgers University-Newark, the "e-readiness" index by the Economist Intelligence Unit and the e-Government index by Brown University. The 2007 e-Government study from Brown University, for example, puts Sweden in 60th place, behind Kazakhstan, which rates 57th. The UN e-participation sub-index 2012 places Kazakhstan no 3 (Both the Brown and the Economist indexes have been discontinued.)

strategies (Howard and Hussain 2011); and in the case of Kenyan post-elections, ICTs were a catalyst to both ethnic-based mob violence and to citizen journalism and human rights campaigns. (Goldstein and Rotich 2008). The use of new technologies for support of governance processes offer many new opportunities but also present new challenges, such as limited and unequal access to ICTs, lack of infrastructure, electronic fraud, and the absence of or inadequate legal frameworks (PIWA and UNDP 2009).

Objective and scope

The overall objective of the assignment is to critically examine the effective role that ICTs could play in supporting democratic governance processes.

The final report will (i) contribute to the setting of standards for good and systematic practice in the field of ICT-mediated citizen engagement (henceforth 'e-participation'), and (ii) assist the development of a framework to monitor and evaluate e-participation initiatives.

The assignment will be carried out in three phases:

Phase 1. Literature review

Phase 1 will focus on reviewing the relevant academic and data resources, and on providing a summary analysis of the state of the art in the field of e-participation, focusing particularly on e-participation initiatives in developing countries. The review will concentrate on the following questions:

- What is e-participation and how has it evolved?
- How is e-participation in developing countries different from e-participation in developed countries?
- What is the evidence we have so far regarding e-participation in developing countries?
- Where are the current knowledge gaps in the e-participation literature?

A key limitation to the review will be that most current knowledge is based on case-study research that has quite some reduced external validity. Also, there is relatively little literature on the e-participation initiatives in the developing countries. One of the reasons for this could be that in many countries, in developing ones in particular, ICTs have mostly been seen as a savior of how to increase internal administration efficiency or how to streamline public services, and much less as something that can qualitatively change governance.

Phase 2. Critical assessment of e-participation claims

In Phase 2, we will carry out a critical assessment of the validity of claims regarding the impact of ICTs on democratic governance. This will include an analysis of:

- factors that lead to success and failure in the use of ICTs in participatory governance processes,
- challenges and obstacles, particularly in efforts to incorporate ICTs into participatory governance processes,
- key lessons learned.

Phase 3. Development of an analytical basis for a framework for future research and evaluation in the field of e-participation

In the final phase, we will develop an analytical basis to inform future research and the development of an evaluation framework in the field of e-participation. In developing the analytical basis, we will address issues such as:

- Design and sustainability of e-participation initiatives,
- Inclusiveness (equality of access for different groups of population),
- The urge for bridging organizations/actions that can connect techies at the forefront of the development of e-participation applications with governments and civil society actors,³
- Improvement of conceptual tools for comparing e-participation

Ultimately, these recommendations should serve to increase the commitment of policy-makers in developing countries to e-participation and to the incorporation of its outcomes into governance processes.

Finally, having identified knowledge gaps in the literature during its review (Phase 1) and critically assessed the e-participation claims (Phase 2), we will also suggest areas of further research.

Below is a draft table of content, based on the information above:

³ See e.g. the Revenue Watch and Harvard's Transparency Policy Project (<http://www.transparencypolicy.net/>) or the Sunlight Foundation's Transparency Camp: <http://transparencycamp.org>

Draft table of content

1. Introduction
2. Results of the literature review
 - a. Definition of e-participation
 - b. E-participation in developing countries
 - c. Gaps in the literature
3. Critical assessment of e-participation claims
 - a. Factors that lead to success or failure
 - b. Challenges and obstacles
 - c. Key lessons learned
4. Analytical basis for a framework for future research and evaluation
 - a. The design of e-participation initiatives
 - b. Inclusiveness
 - c. Sustainability
 - d. Bridging organizations/actions
 - e. Development of conceptual tools

Work Plan

Start date	Task	Deadline
22/7/2013	Draft Inception Report sent to UNDP	26/7/2013
29/7/2013	Agree the Inception Report	02/8/2013
02/8/2013	Literature review	11/8/2013
12/8/2013	Assessment of e-participation claims	18/8/2013

19/8/2013	Development of an analytical basis for a framework for research and evaluation in the field of e-participation	25/8/2013
12/8/2013	Draft Report	25/8/2013
26/8/2013	Draft Report discussion with UNDP/WB	01/9/2013
01/9/2013	Create and send Final Report (circa 25 pages) incorporating UNDP/WB comments and amendments	10/9/2013

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