AN OVERVIEW OF E-PARTICIPATION MODELS

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I. INTRODUCTION

“E-Readiness... ascertains how ready Governments... are in employing the opportunities offered by ICT to improve the access to, and the use of, ICTs in providing basic social services.”

Strategic and meaningful application of ICT for the purpose of improving the efficiency, transparency, accountability and accessibility of government is possible if the ultimate objective of e-government is to promote social inclusion, or e-inclusion. The real challenge lies in not only ensuring that certain preconditions are met for e-inclusion such as access to ICT tools, networks and literacy, but the degree to which e-inclusion enables an individual to participate more fully in the social, cultural and political arenas of society. Particularly in policy-making, e-participation makes use of the digital communications media to allow citizens to participate through a more inclusive, open, responsive and deliberative process. Where the relative difference between ICT penetration and its use among different socio-economic groups is high, it increases the digital divide between the “e-haves” and the “e-have-nots” in the world. Consequently, the focus of e-inclusion and e-participation should examine issues of empowerment rather than just access which will contribute to greater social cohesiveness, competition and democracy.

A more critical analysis of the concept of empowerment is essential for understanding why it is not simply an inevitable consequence of providing access to ICT. E-inclusion initiatives have not always resulted in promoting social inclusion; to the contrary, they have, at times, resulted in promoting isolation and exclusion, despite advances in the provision of online services and communications. Conversely, some communities feel empowered even when individuals do not make personal use of ICT tools and services.

The emerging debate in OECD countries, and particularly in the UK, is focusing on the question of how to define the concept of empowerment. First, the term itself requires greater conceptual clarity and analysis since empowerment is an idea, not a policy. Furthermore, since empowerment also implies giving power to those who do not currently have it, it is more important than ever to understand the nature of power and how it should be re-distributed. For example, does empowerment principally involve the removal of economic barriers and the creation of a more equal society? Or should it be viewed within a wider frame of reference, whereby empowerment means providing more opportunities to citizens to participate in the political system, improve their capacity to participate, stimulate a culture of civic engagement, or all of the above?

1 Global E-Government Readiness Report, 2005
2 UK Local e-Democracy National Project: http://www.e-democracy.gov.uk/knowledgelpool/
3 International Association for Public Participation, IAP2
Furthermore, e-inclusion and e-participation are “moving targets”: while on the one hand, innovations in ICT continue to create new gaps or exacerbate the digital divide for the vast majority of people in the world, several underprivileged communities are also learning to bridge the gap by developing creative ways of using ICTs, individually and collectively. However, e-participation endeavors are still in their infancy and few countries have actively promoted it to date; so examples of good practice are rare. In fact, it is not easy to assess the impact of e-consultations and e-participation because there are few examples of dramatic policy outcomes as a result of this process.

Use of collaborative technologies is challenging the traditional notions of democratic involvement by allowing citizens greater opportunity to express their individual political will. There are not only top-down but also bottom-up initiatives that are transforming the way governments interact with their citizens and vice versa. These innovative models of engagement are creating communities that are virtual and fluid, and impact policies and practices in a variety of ways and with varying degrees of success.

Limitations of the paper

The UN e-Readiness Reports focus primarily on reviewing e-government websites for 191 member countries of the United Nations. This paper will undertake to review reports, studies, websites and evaluations of e-government initiatives with a view to highlighting good practices and lessons learned for the express purpose of making suggestions and recommendations for the future direction of e-Readiness Reports, particularly focusing on e-participation. Based on the research, the paper will attempt to identify issues for the future direction of the UN’s review of e-government and e-participation models, as well as draw upon lessons learned for governments contemplating e-participation endeavors.

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5 Ibid. p.5
6 http://www1.oecd.org/publications/e-book/4204011E.PDF
7 http://europa.eu.int/information_society/activities/egovernment_research/focus/edemocracy/index_en.htm
II. A REVIEW OF SELECTED E-PARTICIPATION MODELS

A study of e-consultations and e-participation in policy-making will inevitably arrive at the following conclusions:

- Examples of e-participation and e-consultation are few in number;
- Where they exist, they are still of an experimental nature and not very clearly defined in terms of expected outcomes; and
- The public is not very well informed about these initiatives, and nor is there a clear mechanism for integrating the result of these processes into effective policy outcomes.

E-government performance tends to mostly focus on the delivery and provision of online public services, and less on feedback mechanisms that allow citizens and stakeholders to engage in policy debates and consultations. In recent years, however, e-government has been gradually evolving into a more interactive process whereby citizen engagement through e-consultation and e-participation is now being viewed as a necessary next step towards the promotion of a more inclusive society.

Clearly, the issue of the digital divide continues to be a major concern to governments worldwide. Even in technologically advanced countries, such as in the EU, the digital gap is quite significant, despite a significant increase in the access to ICT equipment and services. It is estimated that about one-fourth to a third of the EU population are still outside the pale of e-government services. Various surveys have identified six kinds of socio-demographic factors that account for the gap, namely: geography, income and social status, education, gender, age and disabilities. However, the nature of the digital divide needs to be better understood in shaping e-government strategies and policy in terms of: (i) the differences between individuals and groups (cultural, employment profiles, etc); (ii) transitory gaps, such as gender, age, time and market forces; and (iii) structural or socio-economic gaps, such as in education and income.

So what is being done to respond to the drivers of demand for e-government? A recent study of the EU member countries found that the digital divide is lower where the level of ICT adoption is high. In other words, “changes over time indicate that increased use of ICT will mitigate some digital divides, in particular those related to gender, region and to some extent, age,” but strong policy support would be needed in order to bring that about.

While on the one hand, innovations in technology promise greater access to information and connectivity between governments and the citizens, the proliferation of ICT is also creating new social and professional requirements that threaten to further exclude those who are unable to meet them. Efforts are being made to explore multi-channel approaches to reach the under-privileged and marginalized groups, at times

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8 eEurope Advisory Group – WG2 – e-Inclusion: Final Report, 2005
9 Ibid.
10 EU: Information Society Benchmarking Report, 2005
combining them with traditional approaches such as town hall meetings and face-to-face interaction with the public.

E-participation models have been grouped under three broad categories: (i) information, i.e., a one-way flow of information from the government to the citizens; (ii) consultation, i.e., a two-way relationship whereby citizens are encouraged to provide feedback to the government; and (iii) active participation, i.e., a partnership arrangement with the government in which citizen engagement is actively solicited for defining and shaping policy.  

The International Association for Public Participation (IAPP), on the other hand, provides a spectrum of consultation and participation tools that range from information provision to active participation. They include:

- **Information provision**: fact sheets, web sites, open houses
- **Consultation**: public comment, focus groups, surveys, public meetings
- **Involving the public**: workshops, deliberative polling
- **Collaboration**: citizen advisory committees, consensus-building, participatory decision making
- **Empowerment**: citizens’ juries, ballots, delegated decisions.

In IAPP’s 5-tiered classification, however, the e-participation model culminates in ‘empowerment’ which allows citizens the prerogative to influence policies and laws that govern their lives. To varying degrees, the following countries illustrate different levels of e-participation in various parts of the world:

**United States:**
In the UN’s Global e-Government Readiness Report 2005, the United States is ranked as the world leader in e-government readiness. Its strength and uniqueness lies in the fact that the US government’s web portal collects and consolidates information from 51 million government web pages for the convenience of the public. It is extremely user friendly, enabling citizens to ask questions that are not already covered in the searchable database, and targets users by groups. Although the portal is in English, the official language, it is nevertheless accessible to Spanish speakers as well.

The seamless integration of government services and good examples of transformational government are also evident at the local government level, such as New York City’s 311, non-emergency (phone service) program. The service integrates 40 call centers into a one-stop shop arrangement whereby citizens can directly access City Government without having to understand the organizational complexity of where and how to get the required services.

**Commentary:** Given the size and complexity of the federal government structure in the US, online consultation at the national level on policy issues would neither be feasible nor desirable, except for elections and referendums. Citizen engagement is mostly

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11 “Characterizing E-Participation in Policy-Making” by Dr. Ann Macintosh, 2004
12 IAP2, 2000
relegated to the state and local levels, where government portals offer access to a
diversity of public services. However, active e-consultation and e-participation
opportunities are almost non-existent, although grassroots initiatives, including online
blogs, are becoming increasingly popular means for energizing the voting population to
take an active interest in elections and policy issues.

**United Kingdom:**
In the UK, the government identified certain criteria to revitalize its relationship with
citizens and ensure a continuing dialog beyond just during the elections. In so doing, it
set forth guidelines for information dissemination to the public, to provide opportunities
for consultation, and facilitate the provision of online services.\(^{13}\) A striking feature of the
UK government portal is its focus on e-consultation, which makes it a leading proponent
of e-participation in the world (although in the e-Government Readiness index, it ranks
third in Europe, after Denmark and Sweden).\(^{14}\) An outstanding feature is the linkage to
formal consultation sites from the main web portal, encouraging citizen consultation and
participation, including detailed descriptions and instructions to facilitate the consultation
process itself. The Cabinet Office issues annual reports on compliance with the Code of
Practice on Consultations, which ensures that officials are held accountable for
managing the process and its outcome.

Furthermore, the UK Transformational Government Initiative strategy is based on the
needs of the citizen and focuses on the provision of services through training of front line
staff. The strategy is to direct all government departments to work together, integrate
service delivery systems, and balance data sharing with data protection legislation in
order to develop a truly innovative and citizen-centric approach to delivering services.\(^{15}\)

**Commentary:** The UK government has taken the lead among OECD countries in e-
participation initiatives, actively exploring ways and means to engage in consultations
and policy discussions with its citizens. In fact, lessons learned from the Local e-
Democracy experience offers many insights into how e-consultations should be
designed and developed and how the results of the process can be linked to tangible,
policy outcomes. The accountability factor deserves particular mention given that the
government is taking a proactive approach to publish audited, annual reports on the
consultation process with the express desire to keep the public informed.

**Singapore:**
Singapore is ranked seventh in global e-government readiness ranking, according to the
UN. It reflects a strong commitment from the government to promote access and use of
ICTs. It maintains excellent, informative, and up-to-date sites with easily accessible
information. More significantly, it also includes a Government Consultation Portal which
encourages feedback from citizens regarding policy, as well as a forum for suggesting
ways to cut government waste. The most notable aspect of Singapore’s overall online
presence is the integration process, which makes it one of the ‘best practices’ for
integrated portals and one-stop-shop sites, and therefore an effective way forward in e-
government.

\(^{13}\) eParticipation Scoping Study, OFMDFM, 2004
\(^{14}\) Global E-Government Readiness Report, 2005
\(^{15}\) [http://www.egovmonitor.com/node/3964](http://www.egovmonitor.com/node/3964)
**Commentary:** A noteworthy factor in Singapore’s online presence is the way service delivery has been integrated to facilitate access to citizens. Instead of developing ‘silos’ of information by separating information by departments, they are grouped under categories instead, which makes the site extremely user friendly. The government portal also actively encourages feedback from the public in order to improve its services.

**Canada:**
In Canada, e-services are organized by category and not on a department-by-department basis, which makes it user-friendly, and responsive to citizen demands. In order to gauge the efficacy of their services, the government uses a unique Canadian outcomes analysis approach called 'Citizens First' in the case of individuals and families, and 'Taking Care of Business' in the case of companies, which used further surveys against the Common Measurement Tool that the government officials responsible for GOL have developed. With this tool the government has been able to measure client expectations, priorities and actual percentage satisfaction with government services at all levels of government, and track how that is changing.

In a recent survey, GOL Canada was assessed to have not only service maturity (i.e., the level to which a government has developed an on-line presence in terms of service breadth and service depth), but also customer service maturity, which measured the extent to which government agencies manage interactions with their customers and deliver service in an integrated way across all channels.

**Commentary:** The political will to engage its citizens in policy discussions and to improve public services is amply manifested by the development of a measurement tool to gauge the usefulness of the information and services provided on its website. This is an encouraging first step for the future of e-services and e-participation in Canada, which aims to design its services based on public demand and user needs.

**UAE:**
The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one of the countries that have made tremendous strides in advancing its e-readiness global ranking from 2004 to 2005. The gain is largely attributed to a revamped national site that integrates information and services into a single gateway where its services can be easily located. The UAE national site was not only completely re-done but also re-branded. Furthermore, the government took steps to provide participatory features on one of its ministry websites, i.e., the Ministry of Education, which is one of the few government sites in the Middle East to offer an open-ended discussion forum.

An interesting feature on the UAE gateway is the organization of the site by topics that are geared towards addressing the needs of the end-users, integrating information, services, and transactions under separate sections for residents, business, visitors, and government, thereby enhancing its interactive presence.

**Commentary:** The government has articulated a vision for its e-government strategy with the intention of "enabling integrated policy formulation by facilitating a knowledge-based

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16 [http://www.egovmonitor.com/node/709](http://www.egovmonitor.com/node/709)
world class government." It purports to do so by soliciting “ideas and feedback from external stakeholders.” On its website, the government also explicitly outlines the need to develop performance indicators, both quantitative and qualitative, in an effort to be transparent and accountable. It goes on to state that specific performance targets and tangible benefits to the government also need to be outlined in order to measure performance and success. Although the e-government strategy does not explicitly refer to e-consultation and e-participation processes, the experience with the Ministry of Education is nevertheless a salutary example of the government’s openness to engage citizens in a participatory process in the future.

**South Africa:**
South Africa provides some facility for public comment on its government portal. Although the range of public services offered on the website is not very extensive, it nevertheless offers citizens the opportunity to comment on a number of public documents on issues that are under consideration by policy-makers.

A particularly notable feature is the launching of a national accessibility portal in 2004 to make ICT available for four million people with disabilities, as part of their social inclusion strategy. Termed as the South African National Accessibility Portal (NAP), the site will be a one-stop information, services and communications channel that will support persons with disabilities, caregivers, the medical profession, and those offering services in this domain once it is completed in 2006.

**Commentary:** This is an example of an e-government portal that is beginning to evolve from e-information to e-consultation. The range of public services is not fully developed, but there is clearly an attempt to organize the information according to the perceived needs of the public, and in several different languages. Furthermore, the number of documents available for public comment is quite impressive, which indicates the government’s desire to solicit feedback from the citizens before finalizing the documents for legislative action. It is not clear, however, how the government intends to publish the results of its consultative process and assess the performance of its portal.

**Brazil:**
Brazil improved its global e-readiness ranking in 2005 by reinforcing its infrastructure and services. It’s one-stop-shop site is perhaps the most effective in Latin America, with the most pertinent information and services on the main page organized in easily-defined categories. They range from tax payment and health services to legislation information and utilities. The image logos make the site particularly user friendly. As for engaging citizens in discussing key policy issues, the portal offers limited choice of topics for online discussion.

The e-procurement website for government contracts for goods and services provides information on relevant legislation and current news on economic development issues. It includes an online bidding site for government contracts, as well as links to services for new and emerging businesses in Brazil. To use the online services, the website installs

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specific software for the user's computer and allows for online registration of potential
government contractors.

Commentary: A review of the web portal demonstrates that considerable thought has
been expended to organize and present information to the public in a manner that is
both logical and user-friendly. However, it is not easy to determine whether some of the
pages are still under construction or if the information is simply not accessible because
many of the pages are not available, and the “URL not found” message pops up after
clicking on the links.

As the above examples demonstrate, countries worldwide are exploring different
ways of developing interactive mechanisms to encourage e-engagement and e-
participation. However, the quality of the consultations and their results cannot be
evaluated against any universal standard of measurement since such a measurement
does not exist. Furthermore, few countries have developed qualitative or quantitative
indicators to actually link the initiatives with policy outcomes. Ideally, audited annual
reports should be posted on the websites for both government entities and the public to
review the outcome of the deliberative process and learn from the process.

In the final analysis, it is difficult to assess the usefulness, cost-effectiveness and
value added of official web portals without conducting nationwide surveys, opinion polls
and/or online rating systems. Under the circumstances, it is even more difficult to
compare one portal against another since user needs and requirements vary widely from
one country to another, as do the size and structure of government. The complexity of
these endeavors make it all the more necessary to compile and highlight the lessons
learned thus far from global experiences, and make a systematic effort in disseminating
good practices that will be of immense value in driving the future growth of e-inclusion
and e-participation.
III. TRANSFORMING THE G2C MODEL

Expanding the public’s access to ICTs and broadening the reach and affordability of these technologies and services is an important first step, and much emphasis has been given to these issues by governments and donors alike. But why is it imperative for developing countries to invest in e-government?

Since e-government aims to make government more effective, transparent and accountable in the global knowledge economy, it naturally follows that in so doing, it will be better positioned to promote human development and ensure good governance. Therefore, the objective of e-government should be to transform itself to be more citizen-centered.

In putting citizens first, governments are required to be more responsive to citizens’ needs and inputs. In other words, the natural progression of effective e-government is towards e-consultation and e-participation in order to promote more citizen-centric services. But how will that be manifested? Will “citizen-centric” e-government be identified primarily with the availability and quality of online services? Or will it be determined by the nature and volume of e-consultations? How can the process be made meaningful? What kind of indicators should be developed to measure the impact?

Another compelling argument for investing in e-government can be made from a macroeconomic perspective: government constitutes a significant part of the GDP and therefore has a significant impact on the economy. As such, ensuring efficiency and effectiveness in government is not only essential, but highly desirable in order to improve its functioning and its ability to promote national development. A more efficacious government will also be better prepared to engage more fully in the global economy and to make use of the opportunities of globalization.

Issues for Consideration

The promotion of e-participation in evolving democracies should be undertaken with caution in terms of managing expectations. Many developing countries are nascent or evolving democracies, and therefore have not experienced conventional democratic practices that involve consultation with, and the active participation of, citizens. Under the circumstances, designing e-government programs will have to consider the limitations of technology in promoting participatory government unless the process of democratization is already underway.

Political will: The success of e-government rests largely on the political will of governments to engage citizens in an inclusive process that leads to participatory decision-making. The difficulty has been – and continues to be - in developing appropriate tools that can effectively measure policy outcomes as a result of e-participation. Some recent attempts however, are noteworthy, such as the Government of Canada’s ‘Citizens First’ tool for measuring client expectations, priorities and satisfaction (in actual percentages) with government services at all levels of government,
including tracking changes over time, and the client surveys and feedback from citizens in the UK on the quality of online services.

**Expectations from e-government:** The issues are twofold: (i) countries need to be fully aware that incorporating ICTs in government will not automatically lead to promoting greater efficiency and effectiveness without a fundamental transformation of the internal workings of government; and (ii) the use of ICT alone cannot accelerate the democratic process because the process itself has to be thought through so that the use of ICT is designed to promote and nurture it.

A critical element in measuring the success of e-participation is not how the “e” in e-government automatically translates to a more inclusive form of government, but how ICT can facilitate and promote the evolving notion of citizen participation in shaping policies.

**Shortcomings in management:** Management failure is often cited for lack of improvement in public service delivery because public services can be overwhelmed by matters of internal administration, such as technology, and burdened by complex restructuring efforts, with little regard to the needs of the end-user. There seems to be little understanding of how to ‘virtualize’ public services beyond the technical or organizational change.

**Over-emphasis on “e”:** Despite the growing number of e-participation endeavors in developed countries, citizen interest and engagement in politics and policy-making has been declining. This apparent contradiction stems from the fact that e-inclusion measures have mostly focused on accessibility issues, overshadowing other inclusion factors such as taking steps to e-enable existing social inclusion policies. In other words, e-health, e-education, e-social services, etc, should focus more on health, education and social services per se, rather than on “e”. As a result, e-participation has not necessarily translated to improved public service delivery or desired policy outcomes, resulting in decreased levels of confidence in government.

**Tracking policy outcomes:** The trend in some governments is increasingly towards linking e-consultations and e-participation on specific social policy issues to their outcome, i.e., policies that directly relate to improving the delivery of public services. As a result, governments are under pressure to publish survey results, audit reports and legislative action on their official websites that have resulted directly from the online policy deliberations, as information and feedback to the public. However, such examples are few and far between.

The more obvious and successful attempts at measuring e-consultation is through e-voting, e-referendums and e-surveys. It is relatively more easy to publish the results, provided that the questions are not open-ended that require subjective evaluation of individual responses. Active participation, however, requires a great deal of thought about how to design the interactive process in order to generate meaningful feedback,

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as well as how governments should manage online interactions with the citizens and moderate the discussions in an unbiased manner. The latter process, by its very nature, presupposes a certain level of maturity on the part of both the government and the citizens.

**Tracking grassroots e-engagement:** ICT is increasingly being used in a variety of different ways to influence policy, both directly and indirectly. E-government interaction is traditionally defined as government-to-government (G2G), government-to-citizen (G2C) and government-to-business (G2B). However, innovative, pro-active, bottom-up, grassroots-led approaches are being tried in some countries to force governments to engage with their citizens. In Bangladesh, for example, one of the most prominent national newspapers has started a campaign to solicit viewer comments/feedback by email on policy issues that should be reflected on the ballot in the upcoming elections in late 2006. Another example is the BBC’s Action Network which provides a public forum to discuss policy issues and solicit viewer feedback on any number of issues on the legislative agenda in the UK. This new form of e-participation is neither a top-down approach nor led by governments. But how can these innovative mechanisms be monitored and measured?

**Challenges facing e-inclusion and e-participation indicators:** The European Commission’s i2010 vision includes e-government as a crucial part of it main policy dimensions. The focus is on making e-government inclusive and on addressing the digital divide. In reviewing the National Action Plans (NAP) for Social Inclusion (2003-2005), a recent report commissioned by the EU states that e-government endeavors seem to be

“…more of isolated initiatives and actions than broad ranging strategies. As a matter of fact, only few NAPs attribute a really strategic importance to e-Inclusion while most National Plans choose to focus on other priorities. We are still far from a system of indicators which could really allow the monitoring of progress at national level.”

The report further states that it is difficult to assess the status of e-inclusion in the countries reviewed. In other words, it is unclear whether the countries are only at the initial stage of declaring their “intent”, at the planning stage, or actually engaged in fully implementing the initiatives. The difficulty stems from the fact that often the objectives may have been determined but details regarding specific measures, projects, approaches, targets, financial envelopes, etc., are yet to be worked out. Statistical data still requires a great deal of improvement and e-inclusion targets need to be defined more clearly. In fact, only a few Member States have defined any indicators.

**Marketing/publicizing e-participation:** One of the main reasons for lack of interest in e-participation stems from the fact that public authorities do not take the trouble to market the initiative or explain the use and advantages of e-participation efforts.

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19 eEurope Advisory Group – WG2 – e-Inclusion: Final Report, 2005
**Overuse of e-participation techniques:** While e-participation models of consultation do much to promote democracy, there is also reason for concern that overuse of these techniques can undermine the democratic process.\(^{20}\) Direct democracy has many advantages, but if e-consultation is misused, it will undermine the democratic system by undercutting the responsible decision-making processes of the elected representatives or policy-makers.

**The downside to e-participation:** Considerable thought needs to be given to the issue of how much e-consultation and e-participation is desirable and can be managed by governments. There is always the question of what citizens are actually capable of contributing and reasoning. It is possible that engaging an uninformed and ignorant citizenry could be counter-productive and “lead to errors in judgment and bad policy decisions.”\(^{21}\)

**Democratic disengagement:** Furthermore, technology fatigue, lack of credibility in government, and “democratic disengagement”\(^{22}\) all beg the question whether a new e-democracy framework is needed to revive citizen participation.

### IV. INNOVATIONS IN ICT TO PROMOTE E-PARTICIPATION

The development of socially inclusive policies should have, as its objective, providing access to ICT-related services to the largest possible number of people and communities in order to improve their participation in a knowledge-based society and economy. The process should be facilitated, either directly or through intermediaries, by taking proactive measures to neutralize socio-economic differences such as education, location, employment, disability, age or gender.

To achieve this objective, alternative devices could be considered as viable means for promoting e-government and e-participation, through multi-channel strategies and solutions, such as cell phones, community computing, etc. By its very nature, inclusive, e-government implies that pro-active measures should be taken by governments to ensure that public services are available and accessible to all and that digital exclusion through e-government is avoided at all costs. Cell phones, speech technology & wireless networking, for example, could make e-participation more accessible to those with little or no educational attainment, as well as hard-to-reach and marginalized groups in society, thereby narrowing the digital divide.\(^{23}\) The ‘Village Phone Program’ promoted by the Grameen Technology Center is one example of a successful outreach programme.\(^{24}\) A critical issue in incorporating the use of ICT in government is to keep the gap between the “information rich” and the “information poor” from widening further.

\(^{20}\) “Inquiry into Electronic Democracy” 2004, by Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee
\(^{21}\) = Promise and Problems of E-Democracy, OECD, 2003
\(^{22}\) E-Participation in Local Government, IPPR, 2002
\(^{23}\) Wireless Networking for the Developing World, 2006
\(^{24}\) http://www.gfusa.org/technology_center/village_phone/
This new direction in the transformation of government is called mobile government, or “m-government.” It is a subset of e-government where ICTs are limited to mobile and/or wireless technologies like cell or mobile phones, and laptops and personal digital assistants (PDAs) connected to wireless local area networks (LANs). M-government, which is being used in several countries, including Sweden, the Netherlands, Malta, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, China, and the Philippines, can help make public information and government services available anytime, anywhere to citizens and officials. Examples include sending security alerts, reminders to renew licenses, results of medical examinations, tax returns, etc. Most of these endeavors are still at the experimental stage and limited in scope, but they nonetheless presage a dramatic shift in the traditional roles and functions of government.

The relevance of m-government lies in the fact that it is particularly suited for developing countries where Internet access rates are low but mobile phone penetration is growing rapidly, particularly in urban areas. Globally, the number of mobile phones has surpassed the number of fixed/wired phones. This is the case in 49 middle-income and 36 low-income countries, including Burkina Faso, Chad, Honduras, Indonesia, Jordan, Mexico, Mongolia, Nigeria, Philippines, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa. According to a recent study, the population of global SMS users will grow to 1.36 billion in 2006.

Another innovative tool as part of e-participation solutions in the UK is the launch of the VOICE toolkit, a “suite of easy-to-use interactive tools for creating and developing e-communities where citizens, communities and authorities can come together online to discuss issues, work in partnership and share information and ideas. The VOICE toolkit includes e-participation, e-consultation and website publishing tools to support the e-enabling, as well as develop existing e-enabled parish and town councils, the voluntary community sector, neighborhood groups and other local initiatives.”

V. WHAT’S NEXT IN E-GOVERNMENT?

Any discussions about the future of e-government will have to address the following questions:

- To what extent will e-participation facilitate the functioning of government?
- Is e-participation feasible without first achieving literacy rates, internet connectivity and universal access that prevail in developed countries?
- How can governments evolve from e-government to e-participation?
- What are the technological, political, social and cultural impediments to e-participation?

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25 http://www.worldwidewords.org/turnsofphrase/tp-mgo1.htm
26 http://www.egov4dev.org/mgovdefn.htm
27 http://www.publictechnology.net/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=4823
How can developing countries bridge the digital divide with the developed countries?
Will the existing lag between the developed and developing countries further exacerbate the divide?
What measurable indicators can we use to assess the impact of e-participation?

These questions can be effectively answered only if the objectives of e-inclusion and e-participation are clearly understood and delineated by stakeholders. Socio-economic, cultural and political environments will largely determine how these initiatives can be realistically designed and implemented in their respective countries.

So, how much of the policy terrain should be covered by the new empowerment agenda? Should empowerment be defined in terms of gaining political clout or, should it also incorporate economic empowerment, empowerment in the workplace or feeling empowered as a consumer?

And last, but not least, what would genuinely empowering public services look like and how do we guide the reform process to ensure that outcome? What would be the characteristics of the empowering state, the distribution of power within it, and the nature of relationships between it and the private and voluntary sectors?

To promote e-participation, what should governments focus on?

(a) **Targeting specific groups** only (e.g., the underprivileged, women, youth, the marginalized, those living in remote areas)?
(b) **Targeting specific issues** of greater concern to the majority of the citizens, such as social benefits, job creation, maternal and child health care, etc? Should they be issue-based or policy-based? Or,
(c) **Selecting a small number of priorities** that require meaningful dialogue and have a high policy impact?

Policy discussions have to focus on addressing the above issues before determining any other requirements, such as technology, access and connectivity issues. Another critical consideration in the uptake of e-consultation and e-participation initiatives is the time factor. Adoption of new technology takes time to be accepted, understood and adopted. Although the accelerated pace of globalization is compelling governments to invest in internet technology and by extension, in some form of e-government, a rush to embrace ICT for use in government could backfire unless e-government strategies are designed and developed within the socio-cultural, economic and political context of the country. Expectations should therefore be realistic in terms of what is achievable given resource constraints, adequate time for adoption and implementation, and socio-political considerations.

It goes without saying that from an accountability standpoint, more thought has to be given to understanding how best to capture the results of e-consultation and e-participation endeavors. The results should be assessed by specifically outlining measurable indicators and linking policy outcomes to the process, which would then be published for public review.
Lessons gleaned from the limited examples of e-consultation initiatives include the following:

**E-participation at the local level:** Lessons of e-participation initiatives from OECD countries show that centers of power and the locus of citizen empowerment is progressively devolving to smaller units of government, i.e., from the center to the local level and from the local level to communities and neighborhoods (e.g., the UK, Sweden, etc). In the UK, for example, the creation of the ‘new empowerment agenda’ is an attempt by political parties to address a growing sense of powerlessness among the general public and to the crisis of participation being faced by the political and governing institutions. It is also a response to a cultural climate in which citizens demand more control over decisions that affect their daily lives.

**Use of Open Source Software:** To make the transition to e-government and e-participation generally acceptable globally, investments have to be made to indigenize the local content matter, so as to incorporate linguistic, culture and social considerations, as well as to gain the public trust. One of the means to do so relatively quickly and easily is the open source software or free software, also known as FLOSS or FOSS. The basic idea behind open source is very simple: FOSS programs are programs whose licenses give users the freedom to run the program for any purpose, to study and modify the program, and to redistribute copies of either the original or modified program (without having to pay royalties to previous developers. It can be used copied, studied, modified and redistributed without restriction, which is highly significant for developing countries because it represents a viable alternative to the traditional licensing model that can help to free up public funds. “Affordability aside, the adoption of FOSS also presents opportunities for industry and capacity development, software piracy reduction, and localization and customization for diverse cultural and development needs.”

**Focus on service delivery:** Increasingly, the focus of e-government is shifting towards the improvement of public service delivery. Since public services are mostly provided at the local level, it is an issue that most governments have to address head-on. Moreover, with a dramatic increase in urban populations worldwide, governments increasingly have to cope with the rising expectations and demands in cities and local communities. Under the circumstances, localizing the provision of public services is becoming more of a necessity than a matter of choice, challenging both national and local governments alike.

**Consensus-based policy-making at the local level:** Unlike at the national level, local authorities seem to be increasingly more inclined to engage in issues-based consultations (such as, for example, in neighborhood planning and building purposes), and consensus-based decision-making which facilitates better acceptance, adoption and implementation of laws, regulations and ordinances.

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28 [http://www.ippr.org/articles/?id=2044](http://www.ippr.org/articles/?id=2044)
29 [http://www.iosn.net/about/news/iosn-nodes](http://www.iosn.net/about/news/iosn-nodes)
What lessons can national governments learn from local level e-participation and e-consultation initiatives?

- Since local government bodies are smaller in scope, they have more experience in engaging a greater number of citizens in e-discussions and consultations, and can provide valuable lessons for national governments in designing and developing their e-government strategies;
- Experiments in innovation, whether in the use of technology or in the type of political engagement, is easier to start and less risky when experimented at the local level;
- The degree of local autonomy will determine the degree of citizen engagement. So, if the result of e-participation is felt to be beneficial to the local communities, national governments – which are traditionally very risk averse – may be more willing to experiment with it as well. It should be kept in mind however, that policy innovation in this field cannot be left to the local authorities alone, but should be taken in conjunction, consultation and with the support of the central government and supporting bodies.

**Research into new interactive technology:** The EU is investing in the HOPS EU Research Project to improve the accessibility and delivery of public services by creating a new “delivery platform” that will combine automated human voice interaction with innovations in ICT. In other words, the new system is expected to integrate e-services with voice activated technology so as to enable both the computer-literate and illiterate to easily access e-services and information, thereby bringing the largest number of people within the ambit of online services.30

It is apparent from the multitude of approaches and innovations in ICT and related tools that much research and thought is being expended by governments and the private sector alike, on ways to: (a) connect with the citizens by expanding e-government and e-services; (b) develop policies to promote more inclusive e-government; and (c) develop strategies to enable greater citizen participation through a consultative process for consensus-based decision-making. Notwithstanding the plethora of choices, some pertinent questions still remain:

- How will governments determine the appropriate combination of policies, tools and technology for developing e-government and e-participation strategies?
- Will resource constraints compel governments to restrict the development of e-government and e-participation?
- How can governments effectively map their evolution or transition from e-government to e-participation?
- How will governments define e-participation? Will they be used to fit their policy objectives, or vice versa? Will they translate to political, economic and social empowerment of citizens?
- And lastly, what type of indicators will be required to assess performance?