Challenges and solutions of citizen engagement in developing countries

The results of the analyses suggest that the more time individuals spend on the Internet, the lower their degree of trust in government and lower level of citizen compliance.

However, our results also suggest that such negative effects of the Internet can be moderated through citizens’ increased use of e-government.

(Tobin Im, Wonhyuk Cho, Greg Porumbescu and Jungho Park, 2010)

Abstract

Current developments of the Internet and growing number of individuals that are spending time on the Internet are forcing governments of developing countries to make one of the two choices: first – to close down the internet and thus trigger the development of the country or increase the use of e-governance strategies. Obviously, the Governments can’t opt for the first option, and this has been proven by the recent UN Nations E Government Survey 2012: “The steady improvement in all the indicators of the e-government development index has led to a world average of 0.4877 as compared to 0.4406 in 2010.”

The current paper summarizes the challenges that developing countries are facing while implementing citizen participation strategies and solutions/best practices achieved by e-government bodies or civil society organizations in developing countries.

Recommendations are oriented towards national E-Government Units or National multi-stakeholder initiative groups that are responsible for national e-transformation agenda at the country level.

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The first, probably most important challenge, of a citizen participation process is “**how to ensure an accurate representation of a variety of interests in society**” (Pitkin, 1972, pp. 61–2). Some studies suggest that a consultation process is not representative (Marshall, Brent, 2005). Public consultations are generally not representative from the scientific point of view and this may skew policy deliberations in detrimental directions (Buss, Redburn, Guo 2006). Most public meetings are sparsely attended and those who show up often represent organized interests, certain institutions, have a certain agenda, and are far from representing the interests/views/positions of a broader community.

- **Start at local level (with small rural communities).** It is much easier to ensure a proper participation of all community members in a rather small community. Local public administration can be much closer to its citizens and the level of engagement can be much higher. The ICT tool in itself is not enough to engender participation: a process of engagement is necessary. It is a misleading assumption frequently made with regard to citizen engagement, be it ICT-enabled or not, that the simple creation of channels for citizens to interact with government necessarily engenders citizen participation. This might be true in certain cases, but often, citizen engagement should be supported by different tools and instruments. The right methodology also ensures a proper representativity in the consultation process. Other advantages lay in a much clear understanding and ownership of the problems being consultation.

A good example in this context, is a Vote Mock Elections project implemented in Moldova back in 2008-2009: 19 communities had to organize a vote mock elections exercise, with support of locally trained moderators and of youth initiative groups that worked on identifying community based problems together with Local Public Administration, that identified solutions for the problems, and formulated at least two proposals that the community members were invited to vote for. The level of engagement and participation of community members was high compared to project indicators. Mayors of the participating communities acknowledged that these exercise brought twice or three times more community members together for Vote Mock Elections exercise than they managed to bring to the regular annual community meetings during their 2 or 3 years mandate.

- **Research approach to public consultation.** Each and every single case/situation is different and unique in its own way: given that the public consultations’ goals, target groups and strategies applied are different! This makes the application of standard

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2 Sociological Spectrum, Volume 25, Number 6, November-December 2005, pp. 715-737(23)
solutions almost impossible. Each consultation process requires a very thorough planning of the a) objectives (define the level and focus of consultation)\(^4\), b) target groups (define all groups that might have a stake in the consulted issue and number of citizens from each target group that should be consulted/involved), c) appropriate consultation methodology and tools (include at least 2 tools to reach the same target group) d) plan needed resources and partners support e) plan a proper communication/feedback strategy after the end of consultation process.

- **Multichannel consultation methodology.** ICT is being used differently by different target group and this aspect is still evolving. Very often involvement of marginalized communities requires “offline” communication channels, but a mixture of various “offline and online” strategies is most appropriate approach. In most of the cases a proper consultation methodology requires use of direct, mobile and internet strategies in order to reach/involve all target groups to ensure a proper representation (number of citizens from each target group). At the same time there is a continuous fusion of all online and offline tools which should be taken into consideration while planning a consultation process. For example the organizer can increase the participation of an offline round-table by providing remote participation opportunities – this allows participation of targeted marginalized groups (Ex., people with disabilities, migrants, citizens from distant geographical areas of the country, beneficiaries of certain public service, etc.)

An example from the World Bank Institute’s ICT4Gov program: ICT allow citizens to give ongoing feedback in real-time of how satisfied they are with public services. ReportVoice helps monitor the execution of projects and help assess how good of a job Governments agencies are doing – for example in providing access to water.

In a number of the poorest neighborhoods in Kinshasa, DRC, ICT4Gov is using mobiles to collect citizen feedback via SMS on the state of water points and water services. The data informs a Bank funded Water sector reform project.

- **Increase role of Social Media.** Do not invest in development of additional platforms in case similar platforms already exist: for example social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter or Youtube became very popular during past years and it is most likely that citizens active in these media will migrate to other new similar platforms. Monthly active users on Facebook in 2012 were nearly 850 million, 250 million photos are uploaded every day, 20% of all page views on the web are on Facebook, 425 million

\(^4\) Inform, Consult, Engage, Collaborate or Empower – Source: The International Association for Public Participation
mobile users, 100 billion connections\textsuperscript{5}. These creates enormous opportunities for participation which can be valued by the Governments.

- **Cross-selling.** Use of already existent communication channels is much more efficient as opposed to creation of new tools (which usually requires significant time for getting citizens use them). Using existent call center services or community meetings/events to integrate additional consultation questions into existent processes.

- **Partner with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs).** In many cases, civil society organizations may engage/represent interests of marginalized groups and play the role of social intermediaries. They may organize consultation processes within its group and share a unified position on behalf of the group they represent. An additional advantage to involve Civil Society Organizations is that they usually have better expertise in planning and facilitation of public consultations.

- **Partner with Mass Media organizations.** It is crucial to involve mass media as a partner during the planning process to ensure the ownership of the process, planning of appropriate media tools and share of resources. Mass Media will contribute to significant increase of citizen participation and may deliver targeted messages to selected target groups.

- **Apply deliberative democracy tools where appropriate.** Mini-publics: citizens’ juries, planning cells, consensus conferences and deliberative polls. While there are some important differences, all four models share significant design features: participants are selected using random sampling techniques; they are brought together for a period of between 2 to 5 days; independent facilitation aims to ensure fairness of proceedings; evidence is provided by expert witnesses who are then cross-examined by participants; citizens are given an opportunity to deliberate amongst themselves in plenary and/or small group sessions before coming to decisions\textsuperscript{6}. Online adaptations of the mini-publics have its limitations that should be taken into account.\textsuperscript{7} They are not representative in the conventional sense of being a statistical mirror of society, but mini-publics can have ‘some claim to representativeness’ by ensuring that ‘the diversity of social characteristics and plurality of initial points of view in the larger society are substantially present in the deliberating mini-public’\textsuperscript{8}.


An example from the World Bank Institute’s ICT4Gov program in Brazil: In Brazil the ICT4Gov Program is working with **four Bank operations**: two at the state level (1 DPL\(^9\) in Minas Gerais and 1 SWAp in Rio Grande do Sul) and two at the local level (1 DPL in Belo Horizonte and 1 DPL in Rio de Janeiro). The work is carried out on three different fronts, bringing together technologies and participatory design methods to foster: 1) **Citizen feedback in the delivery of public services** 2) **Transparency and engagement in budgeting processes and 3)** Crowdsourcing of public policies.

With policy crowdsourcing citizens have the opportunity to come up with policy solutions to major challenges that they face. For instance, in a recent process in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, citizens were invited to come up with solutions to improve the health sector in the state. For those who did not have access to the Internet, buses equipped with Internet access and trained personnel travelled across the poorest areas of the state to collect ideas from the least privileged groups. As a result, at the end of this process there were **50 policy priorities** selected, through a process that generated over **1300 citizen proposals with 122,000 popular votes**. The policies selected have been integrated in the health strategy of the state.

Similar methodology is recently used in pacified favelas in Rio de Janeiro Municipality: **crowdsourcing tools and methods are used to assess the quality of service delivery in pacified slums and also as a means to identify solutions to the challenges faced by the population.**

Noteworthy, the technology used for the crowdsourcing is the fruit of a collaboration between **Rio Grande do Sul state and Princeton University, a partnership that has been initiated and facilitated by WBI\(^10\)**. The technology initially used in Rio Grande do Sul is now replicated in Rio de Janeiro and is expected to be scaled to other municipalities and states in the country in the months to come.

**Lack of trust in government.** Practice of citizen engagement in different countries shows a low participation (Buss, Redburn, Guo 2006) due to lack of trust in government. This barrier might be felt right away or in repeated organization of participative processes.

- **Plan and allocate resources to build the ‘response capacity’ of the government.** At the end of any consultation process, citizens should receive feedback on their feedback, thus, knowing what views have been considered, what were not and why. The focus should be on the “returning citizens” – this is the best strategy to increase the number of citizens that are involved in the continuum of the consultation processes.
- **Ensure transparency of the process – “Where did my recommendations go”**. Citizens’ input should be valued and made accessible online at all stages of the consultation.

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\(^9\) DPL – Development Policy Loan  
\(^10\) WBI - World Bank Institute
process: planning, submission of input, processing of the input, informing about recommendations received and accepted, as well those which were not considered for finals, and why.

**Complexity of the issues to be decided and low competences of the citizens.** Individual citizens attending the consultations often find out that the issues addressed are much more complex and goes beyond their level of understanding, expertise or experience. This results in frustration among both citizens and policymakers. Government officials must also deal with irrelevant or not-targeted recommendations publicly given by citizens who are invited to participate.

- **Start at the local level by selecting clear, evident problems** in infrastructure, education or health. Local, community problems are much easier to understand and have practical/empirical solutions in comparison to regional or national political discourse which is abstract and theoretical in most of the cases.
- **Facilitation of the process (offline and online) is a crucial success factor.** First, all stakeholders should be part of the process and all stakeholders mean a very diverse groups in terms of skills, knowledge and attitude. Second, in order to ensure a proper participation each stakeholder should understand the issue discussed and express freely their opinions and arguments. Involvement of an external facilitator with a solid facilitation experience and participative approaches, will significantly contribute to success of the process.

**Limited resources.** A proper consultation process requires resources: expertize, software, logistics, etc., especially if implemented at the local level. Below are some practical examples on how to address the problem of resources.

- **Social Media** offers a wide range of free tools. Besides sharing text, photos and videos social media offers a growing number of additional services and apps to: create webpages, group share, polls, events, chat, video broadcasting, create presentations, video-chat, collecting options and voting, sharing files, report on problems, learn about the best schools, others. It is much more efficient to use existent free platforms by engaging social media leaders in the consultation process.

With support from World Bank, there were a number of Open Data/Crowd Sourcing applications created during 2012 in Moldova that aim at engaging more actively citizens in such issues as education and schools with [www.afla.md](http://www.afla.md) - a checkmyschool type of tool for Moldova that allows to find information on schools as well as provide feedback on various aspects of the schools that are turned into ratings. Another platform is [www.buget.md](http://www.buget.md) – that helps understanding the
public budget expenditures; [www.alerte.md](http://www.alerte.md) – (a fixmystreet type of tool), that helps citizens report on any municipal problems/issues to the capital city Mayor’s office.

- **Civil Society Organizations** in most of the countries are ready to contribute with expertise in research, facilitation, evaluation and provide volunteer support in logistics. Civil Society Organizations may facilitate the consultation process with marginalized communities – collect, process and share data in a structured way.

- **Existing communication channels.** Any government provides certain services to its citizens (education – school, health - medical center, others) and has some communication channels already established to provide these services (call centers, websites, face to face interactions). Infuse brief/short surveys or polls into the already existent communication channels with citizens which don’t require substantial additional resources.

- **Partner with youth groups and women.** Youth and women are an extremely valuable resource at the community level. First, by involving them into all stages of the consultation process we ensure that their voices are part of the process; second, these groups have a great capacity to motivate/engage other community groups to involve in participation process.

Public servants and social media. There are many reasons why public servants avoid using social media. It is perceived as chaotic, anonymous, unstructured and not an appropriate way to provide public services. However, it provides enormous opportunities for public services delivery, informing and consulting citizens in a much more opened way.

- Many countries have launched social media Guides/Codes for public servants. (Ex. UK in May 2012, Moldova is in the consultation phase as of November 2012). The main ideas behind these Guides or Codes of practice are: The government should interact with citizens in the places they are already. Social media apps offer a big variety of tools to interact and engage citizens in consultation processes. Social media offers the possibility to be more transparent and accountable. Social media offers the chance to be part of the current debates/dialogues.¹¹

Compromising on freedoms and privacy.

The combination of Internet and mobile phone has created a fast moving global digital communications environment. While there were threats to privacy long before the digital age,

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the current challenges have changed significantly as the Internet has increased the capabilities of governments, businesses and individuals to intrude on the privacy of others\textsuperscript{12}.

As internet developed, cheap interactive digital communications become easier and more affordable, and at the same time allow to monitor others in a speedier, cheaper and more efficient way. The Internet has enormously increased the potential impact upon the privacy rights a person has in both their identity and the treatment of their personal data (According to UNESCO Global Survey on Internet Privacy and Freedom of Expression).

The same report states that, in broad terms, the Internet:

- Enables the collection of new types of personal information
- Facilitates (and economically demands) the collection and location of personal information
- Creates new capacities for government and private actors to analyze personal information
- Creates new opportunities for commercial use of personal data
- Creates new challenges for regulation given the transnational nature of the Internet.

An increased presence of public servants and public institutions online, and especially in the social media, will lead to limitations of privacy. As a simple example, a fiscal inspector may wonder whether citizen X has paid his taxes after seeing a photo of his new car posted online. Similarly, a social service inspector may wonder on the capacity of a citizen to educate his children or a policeman may start an investigation regarding public behavior or political views based on a private video shared online or on the comments made. “The Indian government has been lobbying 22 online companies to scrub content deemed “anti-religious” or “anti-social.”\textsuperscript{13}

- In order to avoid cases when citizens ‘run away’ or ‘hide’ from public servants by ‘migrating’ to other networks, each public institution should develop standards, codes and terms of use when it comes to personal data circulated via social media channels. Initiating investigations on these data should be based on standards and proper regulatory framework.
- However, public servants may contribute to the increase of online privacy and freedoms of their citizens: by offering consultancy and support to anyone interested, by

\textsuperscript{12} Global Survey on Internet Privacy and Freedom of Expression, UNESCO, 2012  
\textsuperscript{13} Alex Fitzpatrick, Google, Facebook Censor Themselves in India After Court Order, 2012,  
http://mashable.com/2012/02/06/google-facebook-india/
facilitating informational campaigns and persecuting private companies or public servants who do not respect the standards and the adopted rules.

Public servants face today, more than ever, a continuous increase of the challenges when it comes to citizen engagement, and not only:

- Increasing pace of change
- Technological developments
- Changing perceptions
- Increasing expectations
- Changing environment¹⁴

To address these challenges in a constructive way, the entire thinking paradigm requires a change: current theories and practices of public administration require new competences from public servants and the capacity to play several roles. They are required to play the role of researchers (while planning, collecting data and evaluating the participation process), the role of facilitators with excellent experience in participative approaches to facilitation and ICT literacy to be able to learn and use various new mobile and web applications.

It is without any doubt that information technology is changing the relationship between citizens, politicians and public servants. And these change is crucial ...

ICTs are creating a more networked society, enabling greater collaboration with citizens. All these have a wide ranging impact on how public services are organized and services delivered, and in turn, determine the quality of life of the regular citizens.

¹⁴ Key challenges facing public sector leaders: themes from the Ashridge Public Leadership Centre essay competition 2007