

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 267 (2008)¹ Electronic democracy and deliberative consultation on urban projects

1. Electronic democracy, also known as cyberdemocracy, offers a powerful tool to counteract citizen disengagement and disillusion and to develop the dialogue and trust essential for good governance. Electronic deliberative consultation for sustainable urban spatial development offers a way to revitalise local democracy and citizenship by facilitating people's participation in shaping policies and decisions which impact on their lives and environment.

2. Electronic democracy for urban development requires strong political will and greater transparency and accountability from elected representatives and public administrators. It calls for a new mindset where citizens are at the heart of decision-making processes and where an ongoing dialogue between local authorities and citizens is established to ensure the sustainable development of communities.

3. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe confirms the principle of participation as recommended in the European Charter of Local Self-Government which considers that "the right of citizens to participate in the conduct of public affairs is one of the democratic principles shared by all member States of the Council of Europe". The Aarhus Convention² also affirms this principle and the right to information, particularly with regard to environmental issues.

4. With this in mind, the Congress believes that early and continued consultation has a beneficial impact on social cohesion and the environment. It observes the growing demand from citizens for information and dialogue concerning the future of their towns and cities and their environment. It suggests that electronic consultation tools offer local authorities an opportunity to work more closely and successfully with citizens.

5. Electronic democracy, or cyberdemocracy, also provides an opportunity to improve working methods and modernise public services and administrations and to offer interactive services in a multichannel environment. These developments, which favour virtual processes, enable online administrative procedures to be simplified and can reinforce the links between public authorities and citizens.

6. Public authorities have a dual role to play: as decision makers and service providers, on the one hand, and as an active player in society which informs, encourages and initiates change on the other. Electronic participation helps mobilise civil society in its entirety as well as reinforcing links between the different levels of governance.

7. Electronic media and visual display tools facilitate the presentation of complex issues in a high quality, contextualised manner thereby improving transparency, comprehension and citizen participation in processes which used to be reserved for specialists.

8. Innovative electronic tools enable public authorities to go beyond consultation on urban projects and create a new culture of citizenship which reinforces people's commitment to their locality and encourages them to develop informed viewpoints. Young people are often more inclined to use such tools which can offer a solution to the dissatisfaction and frustration with traditional political approaches felt by some young people.

9. The Congress is aware of territorial inequalities and limited Internet access for some sections of the population and some regions. Local authorities should develop social and territorial cohesion strategies to ensure that the entire population can actively participate in public life through access to the infrastructures and communication technologies used for deliberative consultations.

10. The Congress welcomes the work of the European cities networks which foster exchange of experience between European towns and cities on electronic democracy. It supports the Digital Local Agenda (EISCO 2007) which aims to promote an equitable information society for digital inclusion and innovative participation methods.

11. The Congress is delighted that the 4th Council of Europe Forum for the Future of Democracy (Madrid, October 2008) will be devoted to electronic democracy and it welcomes this opportunity to highlight the innovative experiences of local and regional authorities.

12. In the light of the above the Congress calls upon local authorities in Council of Europe member states to:

a. use information and communication technologies (ICTs) to improve public participation in local life and enable greater dialogue on the future of their towns and cities and their environment;

b. use traditional forms of participation in parallel with online tools and ensure their compatibility thereby making sure that everyone has the opportunity to participate and that both individual and collective opinions can be heard;

c. present urban developments within a mid-term and long-term spatial vision, in all towns and cities regardless of size, and fix the appropriate perimeter for the consultation process which takes into account the project's impact;

d. undertake electronic deliberative consultation on urban development which goes beyond the formal consultation required by existing legislation, by:

i. making use of all electronic tools to provide clear, transparent and rapid information on the issues under review while making sure that the information is not overwhelming;

ii. ensuring that citizens are fully involved from the agenda-setting stage and throughout the entire decision-making process;

iii. ensuring that the consultation process is balanced and does not over-represent particular interest groups; furthermore, extra support could be provided to disadvantaged groups to help them express their views by making available information mediators who can identify, aggregate and explain relevant information;

iv. making certain that the findings of the consultation process are taken into account at the decision-making stage according to pre-established transparent rules;

e. encourage participatory initiatives started by other urban development stakeholders and take particular account of citizen-to-citizen initiatives;

f. reduce inequalities of access to the Internet through the extension of broadband infrastructure wherever possible and the provision of free public Internet and multimedia access points;

g. train public administration staff and elected representatives on the management of information and digital

knowledge and, if required, offer training to citizens in use of the new tools;

h. work with stakeholders to raise awareness of the importance of citizen participation and electronic democracy in urban development and strengthen citizenship education in schools and for adults.

13. The Congress asks its Committee on Sustainable Development to continue its close co-operation with the Ad hoc Committee on e-democracy (CAHDE) and to prepare, along with the statutory Congress committees, its contribution on electronic democracy and the role of local and regional authorities for the Forum for the Future of Democracy (Madrid, October 2008).

1. Debated and approved by the Chamber of Local Authorities on 27 May 2008 and adopted by the Congress on 29 May 2008, 3rd Sitting (see Document CPL(15)3RES, draft resolution presented by H. Himmelsbach (Germany, L, NR), rapporteur).

2. United Nations Convention (1998) on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters.