

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 290 (2009)¹

E-democracy: opportunities and risks for local authorities

1. Electronic democracy (e-democracy) is transforming the political landscape across Europe. It is a bottom-up phenomenon, with most of the activity happening at the local level.

2. New technologies offers local authorities unprecedented opportunities to consult their electorates and improve the effectiveness and transparency of their work. Through e-democracy applications, they can improve participation and voter engagement and thereby improve the quality of life at the local level.

3. Citizens are increasingly turning to information and communication technologies (ICTs) to discuss local issues. Local authorities have a duty to respond to this, to keep abreast of developments and to embrace the new opportunities available to them.

4. E-democracy, while still in its infancy, is rapidly evolving. There are no clear-cut or general models to be adopted, but important lessons have already been learnt from its implementation and there are clear principles to be applied.

5. In the light of the above, and bearing in mind the conclusions of the 2008 Forum for the Future of Democracy (Madrid, 17-18 October 2008), the Congress calls on the local authorities of Council of Europe member states to:

a. embrace e-democracy, recognising its huge potential for regenerating local political life and improving the transparency and efficiency of local political governance;

b. devise appropriate structures for online consultation and encourage citizens and elected representatives to engage in online political debate on local issues;

c. thoroughly review their existing procedures when introducing new e-democracy applications, in order to avoid reproducing outmoded forms of working and communication in electronic form;

d. consider providing citizens with online access to their deliberations, decisions and debates;

e. consider taking the following steps to overcome the digital divide:

– the provision of free public Internet points and wireless coverage in public spaces;

– the provision of Internet literacy classes and workshops;

– the provision of broadband Internet access in classrooms;

– encouraging teachers to integrate Internet use into their teaching methods, providing appropriate training where required;

– continuing to combine electronic with non-electronic approaches, to avoid a sense of exclusion and alienation developing among those less familiar with ICTs; in parallel to online exchanges, ensure provision of facilities for public meetings and debates;

– publish a guide of good practice of local and regional authorities in this area;

f. ensure that e-democracy applications protect individual privacy and that users are informed if any user information is to be made available to a third party;

g. make use of European Local Democracy Week to promote new e-democracy initiatives;

h. consider introducing specific online services aimed at young people, with a view to making them more aware of political issues.

6. The Congress calls on the national associations of local authorities in its member states to:

a. establish Internet-based directories of good practice at the national level;

b. encourage local authorities to adopt a rigorous methodological approach to the introduction of e-democracy applications.

1. Debated and approved by the Chamber of Local Authorities on 14 October 2009 and adopted by the Congress on 15 October 2009, 3rd Sitting (see Document CPL(17)2, explanatory memorandum presented by A. Cook, United Kingdom (L, EPP/CD) and E. Van Vaerenbergh, Belgium (L, ILDG), rapporteurs).