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E-democracy: opportunities and risks for local authorities

Committee on Culture and Education

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Summary

Information and communication technologies offer local authorities exciting new opportunities to improve the effectiveness of their work and increase voter participation and engagement.

Citizens are increasingly turning to online collaboration and social networks for political mobilisation and debate. The challenge for local authorities is to respond increasing expectations and demands for more open, transparent, accessible and participatory governance.

Careful management and sound methodology are essential to minimise the risks that accompany these new developments, to avoid public disillusion and ensure adequate protection of the individual.

¹ L: Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions
ILDG: Independent and Liberal Democrat Group of the Congress
EPP/CD: European People's Party – Christian Democrats of the Congress
SOC: Socialist Group of the Congress
NR: Members not belonging to a Political Group of the Congress



A. DRAFT RESOLUTION²

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. Technology offers local authorities unprecedented opportunities to consult their electorates and improve the effectiveness and transparency of their work. By 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 models to be adopted, but important lessons have already been learnt and there are clear principles to be applied.

5. In the light of the above, 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 it is 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 provisions of facilities for public meetings and debates;
- publish a guide of good practice of local and regional authorities in this area.

² Preliminary draft resolution and preliminary draft recommendation approved by the Committee on Culture and Education of the Chamber of Local Authorities on 2 March 2009.

Members of the Committee (the names of members who took part in the vote are in italics) :

I. Demchenko (Chair), *A. Botnari*, *A. Bryggare*, *A. Cook*, *R. Della-Bianca*, *K. Dombrowicz*, *V. Eble*, *A. Erzen*, *D. Ghisletta*, *J.A. Heddegaard*, *R.A. Hughes*, *A. Juhas*, *T. Kedziora*, *JP. Klein*, *A. Koopmanshap*, *V. Gebel*, *S. Luca*, *S. Medvedev*, *A. Nemcikova* (alternate: *I. Babicova*), *J. Nilsson*, *H. Richtermocova*, *P. Russo* (alternate: *L. Valaguzza*), *W. Schuster*, *M. Sidukhina* (alternate: *V. Belikov*), *G. Spartanski*, *JL. Testud*, *C. Tovar Rodriguez*, *K. Virvidakis*.

Secretariat of the Committee : *A. Bartling* and *T. Lisney*.

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:*

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

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

B. DRAFT RECOMMENDATION³

1. The development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) offers local authorities exciting new opportunities to connect with their voters, to improve the effectiveness and transparency of their work. By introducing electronic democracy (e-democracy) applications, local authorities can increase participation and voter engagement and improve the quality of life at local level.

2. Citizens are making increasing use of ICTs for political mobilisation and debate. Local authorities need to seize the opportunities offered by this new reality, to keep abreast of developments and to embrace the new facilities available to them.

3. E-democracy, although still in its infancy, is evolving rapidly. While there are no clear-cut models to be adopted, important lessons have already been learnt and there are clear principles to be applied.

4. The strength of democracy lies in the level of participation in the political process. The uptake of technology is an opportunity to widen that participation. Care must be taken that it does not at the same time create new groups of marginalised citizens.

5. E-democracy is largely a bottom-up phenomenon, with much of the activity happening at the local level. However, the application of technology to democratic processes at the local level has implications for democratic practice at all levels.

6. *In the light of the above the Congress,*

a. bearing in mind the conclusions of the 2008 Forum for the Future of Democracy (Madrid, 17-18 October 2008),

b. bearing in mind the work of the Council of Europe Ad Hoc Committee on Electronic Democracy (CAHDE),

c. bearing in mind its own reports recommendations on e-democracy, notably:

- Young people and new information and communication technologies: a new opportunity for local democracy [Resolution 207(2006)];
- E-tools: a response to the needs of local authorities [Recommendation 248 (2008) and Resolution 266 (2008)];
- Electronic democracy and deliberative consultation on urban projects [Recommendation 249(2008) and Resolution 267(2008)];

³ See footnote 2

- The digital divide e-inclusion in the regions [Recommendation 263 (2009) and Resolution 282 (2009);

d. bearing in mind Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1860(2009) and Resolution 1653(2009) on electronic democracy,

7. *Recommends that the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers:*

a. give follow-up to the Madrid Forum for the Future of Democracy, encouraging public bodies at all levels to make use of ICTs to consult citizens;

b. pursue the work begun by the CAHDE, examining the potential of e-democracy for improving the quality of local democracy, increasing capacity building and promoting civil society initiatives in this area;

8. *Recommends that the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers call on member States to:*

a. recognise the positive contribution that e-democracy applications can make to all areas of local governance;

b. support and encourage local initiatives in e-democracy;

c. assist local authorities in implementing the recommendations contained in the accompanying resolution on e-democracy by:

- providing central services of tools and resources to local authorities;

- facilitating exchanges of experiences;

- taking due account of the risks and barriers to e-democracy and developing good practices for local authorities to manage them;

d. use European Local Democracy Week to pursue and promote new e-democracy experiments.

e. promote research on the potential health risks associated with the use of information and communication technologies, particularly among young people.

C. EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

Introduction

1. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) offer local authorities and their constituents new opportunities for enhancing their democratic decision-making processes. By examining the experiences of local authorities to date, a number of issues and risks for local authorities and citizens in implementing these tools can be identified. By adopting a rigorous methodological approach to ICTs, local authorities can avoid pitfalls and obtain optimal results.

1. The social and political impact of ICTs

2. Information and communication have long been central to human activity. The forms and technology used to communicate, generate, understand and exchange information have a considerable impact on the way that human activity is carried out. The rapidity with which new information and communication technologies are emerging, new and innovative uses of these technologies are being invented and being shared across the world is creating a dynamic and fluid environment for modern societies and impacting deeply on their nature and functioning.

3. Economic social cultural and political activities are being transformed by ICTs and the Internet. The relationship and balance of power between citizens, governments, businesses, civil society and other stakeholders is deeply affected, both directly and indirectly, by this constant technological evolution. We are witnessing a redistribution of power in this new and rapidly evolving setting, with the new

media and the Internet becoming the epicentre and enabler of a wide range of activities including information, communication, learning, work, business, politics, human relationships, networking and entertainment.

4. The Internet is becoming the canvas for the social life of an increasing part of the population. The exponential growth of social networks like Facebook and Myspace have important social implications. Some people are enthusiastic about the opportunities for hundreds of millions of people to reach out to others across the world, knitting their social web with people they would never otherwise meet, sharing ideas and knowledge, crossing geographical, social, economic and cultural barriers. Others feel threatened by this virtualisation of social life, perceiving it as isolating the individual behind a screen, breaking down traditional social networks and activities, raising the spectre of mechanisms that make the worst Orwellian scenarios possible, bringing massive monitoring and control of human interactions a step closer.

5. In the political arena we are witnessing the rapidly growing impact of the web in many ways. People that had neither voice nor influence, through online social networks and the powerful, easy to use, online publishing and dissemination tools, have become leaders of a new “online generation”.

6. The Internet and in particular the social networks like Facebook and Myspace and others with specific objectives and dedicated user communities⁴, bringing together hundreds of millions of users, are making a big impact on how politics are conducted. The Internet has become the battleground of political protest and political engagement.

7. Citizens are increasingly using the Internet and social networks to measure their power and their numbers, declaring themselves for or against a cause or policy, both at the international and the local levels⁵. The ease with which a large number of people can mobilise in support for or against an issue is without precedent. Although it is an expression of public will that takes place outside the traditionally accepted channels and methods of political and civil action and thus could be dismissed as volatile and “virtual”, the numbers of citizens who gather online are often so massive that policy-makers are unable to ignore them⁶. Such Internet enabled citizen engagement for or against causes and policies often translate into “real life” actions. The heavy organisational structures, which were once necessary for citizens to effectively organise and mobilise themselves, are giving way to widely available online, real-time, free to use web tools⁷, making it much easier for citizens to react to a given issue.

8. While the mass media remain the dominant forum for political communication in most countries, they are suffering an increasing loss of audience in favour of the more pluralist political fora which are appearing online. The web is slowly but steadily becoming the new turf of politics, enriching it with new and innovative practices, which are more adapted to the realities of an interdependent and increasingly globalised world.

9. With the emergence of freely available and easy-to-use tools for the online exchange of views and debate (such as blogs, forums, social network sites and others), democratic practice is becoming richer in ideas, and wider in its reach, both in terms of the population involved and the variety of institutions and organisations affected, from central governments to small local associations.

⁴ Powerful networks can appear at very short notice, responding to a strong motivation of a group of people, ranging from crisis responses (e.g. Katrina Hurricane and Tsunami relief fund-raising and crisis management information delivery) to political campaigning (e.g. Obama organising his volunteers and fundraising online).

⁵For political rallies and protest marches organised on-line, see for example <http://www.q8rally.com/> organized by the “Make Poverty History” campaign.

⁶ There are groups on Facebook which have attracted more than two million people, such as <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=14612150958> which campaigns for lower gas prices.

⁷ Such as <http://www.meetup.com>

2. Why e-democracy?

10. The past few years have witnessed the emergence of e-democracy⁸ as the field of practice and research where politics and the theory of democracy meet with the new information and communication technologies and the Internet in particular.

11. Democracies are sometimes accused of having reduced the role of the citizen to its minimal expression of voting once every four or five years. A lack of transparency and accountability, as well as cases of corruption and clientelism, are to be found even in long established democracies, resulting in disaffection and disengagement of the electorate.

12. The emergence of new ICTs and the Internet have radically transformed the landscape of politics on both sides, offering to both politicians and citizens a powerful set of tools to inform, discuss, engage, organise, decide, implement and follow-up on policies and actions.

13. Creative and innovative use of ICTs in the democratic process can provide potential solutions to well known “democracy issues” and bring new hope and opportunities for citizens and policy-makers alike to rejuvenate and reinvigorate our democracies.

14. Through online tools and web platforms, citizens have the opportunity to be better informed about issues they care about, find about other fellow citizens that share the same interests and start sharing information and exchanging views as well as organising their collective action, online or offline. The Internet has opened up immense learning opportunities for both citizens and policy makers. Online tools such as wikis enable people to share their knowledge and expertise, creating communities of excellence. By letting everyone contribute to knowledge sources, and participate in discussions, debates and actions they help foster a culture of participation effectively empowering both citizens and politicians.

15. The ever better performing and freely available online collaboration and community building platforms create new opportunities for groups of citizens to collectively tackle ambitious initiatives, in ways never thought possible before. The Opensource community⁹ has demonstrated the potential of ICTs to efficiently manage online collaboration and the pooling of resources to tackle large tasks. Another example is the collaborative encyclopaedia Wikipedia, now used as a reference worldwide. ICTs go beyond information sharing and experience exchange, effectively empowering citizens by enabling their efficient collaboration online and offline.

16. E-democracy is not a panacea for all the ills which afflict democracies, but aims at effectively and efficiently supporting democratic practice through a set of technologies used and implemented through a solid methodological and theoretical framework.

17. New possibilities have emerged for deeper and more systematic interaction between citizens and decision makers. New tools and methods are appearing which can enhance democratic decision making processes and practices, bringing the citizens closer to their authorities and politicians closer to the citizens.

18. The use of online tools can facilitate citizens' access to relevant information and facilitate discussion among citizens and between citizens and policy makers, enabling better comprehension of political issues and increased citizen participation in decision making processes. Online tools can help bring about greater transparency through the sharing of information, facilitating the monitoring of local authority policy implementation and the accountability of policy makers.

⁸ E-democracy, previously known as cyber-democracy, was coined by combining “electronic” with “democracy”. It refers to the application of ICT to democratic processes and is closely related to and complemented by other “e” concepts such as e-Participation, e-Inclusion, e-Voting and e-Citizenship, as well as theories and practices of deliberative democracy and participatory decision making processes. The field is constantly evolving both in theory and in practice.

⁹ The Opensource community, numbering tens of thousands of members who pool their time and skills to projects beneficial to the community, has managed to develop, deploy and constantly update highly performing Operating Systems and complete Office suites. These products are then made available for free online. This collaboration succeeded in producing high quality software that would normally be developed only by large corporations, requiring huge investments in time, personnel and infrastructure.

It can therefore help policy makers deliver better informed policies, taking stock of citizen and expert opinions more efficiently, with less effort and greater transparency than was possible before.

3. The promise of e-democracy

19. Some observers claim that the Internet, by allowing for mass exposure of ideas to people and of people to ideas, has become a new agora, offering a second youth to ageing democracies, an antidote to the "consenting democracy" where citizen risk turning into passive consumers. A vibrant democracy requires engaged and active citizens, informed policymaking and accountable politicians.

Better informed

20. Citizens need to be properly informed on policy maker's views, different policies and options, and how these will affect their daily lives. The proliferation of independent or alternative sources of information and the ease of access to information on the Internet is believed to have an important positive impact on citizens' awareness of local politics.

21. The new tools bypass traditional unidirectional mass media communication to provide a wider spectrum of opinions and discussion spaces, allowing citizens to search specific details and aspects which are often omitted by mainstream media. Online tools allow citizens to report on events they witness, discuss, evaluate and react to information online, providing a rich and formative experience which they do not get with the packaged news offered by traditional media.

22. The power of these online information tools, many of which are freely available and simple to use, is that they provide the possibility for the first time to create a collective memory of events and ideas, countering the ephemera and trivia in traditional media. By allowing users to cooperate online to collect, organise and analyse facts across a larger period of time, interesting trends and features can be exposed, enriching and deepening the level of understanding of citizens.

23. On the other hand, the fact that anyone who thinks that they have something important to say can just publish their views with a click of a mouse has an adverse effect on the quality of information available online. Rating mechanisms and reputation systems have helped counter this problem, but users still need a good level of general education and experience to be able to evaluate the quality of information and to recognise disinformation and propaganda.

24. For selecting relevant information, the same mechanisms that exist in the off-line world still determine to a large extent the behaviour of online citizens. The authority and reputation of the source is important; reputable offline sources bring their reputation to the online world and vice versa. Nevertheless, powerful, cheap and simple online publishing tools have democratised the world of information. Bringing to the public eye not only the views of professional journalists and others who succeed in making themselves heard in the mass media, but anyone with a story or an interesting angle, the Internet has flattened the pyramid of information and the power stemming from it.

25. The emergence of Blogs backed by multimedia content sharing sites such as YouTube and Flickr and more recent web-tools such as Twitter¹⁰, along with the exponential growth of mainstream social network sites and dedicated participatory news websites, have helped citizen journalism become an important news source for a growing part of the online population. Their success has prompted mainstream traditional news outlets to integrate this trend on their own platforms by offering tools such as i-Report, "World have your say" or Reuter's YouWitness to fend off competition by increasingly mature and reliable citizen journalist networks¹¹.

¹⁰ www.twitter.com. This "micro-blogging" tool offers a simplified way for users to communicate and exchange short messages with their network (140 characters). The real time delivery of information and the contrast with the more complicated interfaces of more mature networking tools such as Facebook have made it popular. It is also used by large news operators, Barack Obama, the UN Secretary General and a growing number of politicians.

¹¹ i-Report (CNN - <http://edition.cnn.com/ireport>); "World have your say" (BBC- <http://worldhaveyoursay.wordpress.com>); Reuter's YouWitness (www.reuters.com/youwitness). Citizen journalist networks include <http://www.newsvine.com/>, <http://globalvoicesonline.org/>, <http://www.groundreport.com/>

26. ICTs are revolutionising not only how information is shared and disseminated, but also the very nature of this information, as citizen networks and civil society collaborate to produce, combine, evaluate, and use information in quantities and ways never previously possible, giving rise to the new concept of “crowd-sourcing”.

27. Another important “Net-effect” in making citizens “better informed” is the possibility ICTs provide to make public sector Information easily accessible and help process it into valuable information for the citizen. A huge amount of interesting and valuable data is collected and generated by public institutions. An intelligent combination or overlaying of seemingly uninteresting datasets can reveal interesting Information patterns and trends.

28. Providing access to public sector information is being actively pursued by some governments which have set standards to ensure the information is put online by all public sector bodies to facilitate it being used and processed by others¹². Others, however, still follow the principle of minimum necessary information disclosure, or make it available in unusable formats (such as image scanned PDF files). Increasing transparency in public bodies raises the issue of what information can be disclosed. It requires new mechanisms to be put in place to allow public officials in all sectors to provide access to information, rather than delegating this to their public relations personnel.

29. In parallel to public services, a growing number of efforts are carried out by civil society organisations to obtain, analyse and publicise public data. Some organisations go to great lengths to make public information available to the public, when public authorities fail to do so.¹³

30. Such civil society efforts are sometime so successful that governments, instead of trying to create and provide their own public sector information services for their citizens, have found it more convenient to facilitate access to the raw data for citizens and civil society, encouraging the latter to provide innovative services to the citizen using this data. Whereas this approach has merits, civil society organisations, often underfunded and loosely organised, cannot substitute for public bodies' obligations to provide high quality information and services to citizens, nor can they guarantee the long term sustainability of these services. Nevertheless, a public-civil society partnership, if not relied upon exclusively, can become a creative and fruitful one. Connecting the public services with the most dynamic and active segments of society, it can result in innovative services and efficient delivery mechanisms, using a greater variety of channels and the latest technologies.

More engaged

31. A vibrant democracy requires its informed citizens to be an active part of policy formulation and policy making processes. The Internet, whether in the form of blogs, social networks, official fora or purpose built e-democracy online applications, has started to bring political debate back to the citizens. One example is the city of Bristol, which has been at the forefront of developing e-petitions to enable the public to influence local decision-making¹⁴.

¹² See for example the work of the UK Office for Public Sector Information (OPSI) www.opsi.gov.uk

¹³ One of the most innovative and influential eDemocracy Civil Society organizations in the UK and across the world is MySociety (see www.mysociety.org). They have created practical websites such as www.theyworkforyou.com where they recompile public sector information and combine it with multiple sources so as to provide a very easy to digest yet rich content to citizens, detailing in this case the activity of the UK parliament, providing both daily reports and long term analysis and trends. The success of their approach is such that MPs themselves seem to favor using this site instead of the official UK Parliament site to track debates and issues, as well as their own overall activity. Other related sites include www.whatdotheyknow.com and www.theyworkforyou.com/freeourbills

¹⁴ See the article on Bristol on the Improvement and Development Agency for local government website <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageld=7831705>.

32. Interactive policy making has been shown to be beneficial, with discussions, debates, deliberations, polls and even binding votes being implemented online by a steadily growing part of democratically organised bodies, from central governments and political parties to the local authorities and associations¹⁵.

33. While online participation cannot completely replace the feeling of community that physical meetings can offer, given the generalised scarcity of time and lack of participation in traditional structures, online spaces can usefully complement real life participation, allowing citizens to engage any time of the day at their own convenience. Taking into account the known issues of digital divide and the democratic ideal of equal opportunities for all citizens to participate, such electronic means are to be seen as complementing and enhancing rather than replacing other forms of participation.

34. ICTs can help to bring disaffected citizens back into the democratic debate by making participation easier or more attractive, in particular to young people. It can also help politicians cope better in managing their information and workload. However, ICTs and e-democracy applications cannot be considered a miracle solution for re-engaging citizens. Beyond the issue of available means and technologies, there is the need to create a culture of participation and civic education. E-participation experiments and projects sometimes fail to attract the numbers of participants intended, not because of poor technology or methodology, but because citizens themselves have been felt excluded from the political process for too long for them to suddenly re-engage with politics and politicians.

35. Nevertheless, this deficit of participatory culture is gradually being overcome in the various social networks and participatory websites which are increasingly populated by non-expert, non-partisan, non-activist segments of the population, serving as an ever expanding and empowering learning space for greater engagement on a variety of issues.

Greater accountability

36. Democracy requires transparency and accountability throughout the policy-formulation, decision-making and policy implementation process. The Internet provides an ideal platform to bring about transparency and to track policy implementation. It has become relatively easy to make the relevant information available online for citizens to consult, leaving public bodies with little excuse not to do so.

37. ICTs and online platforms allow citizens and civil society to collaborate to develop and deploy efficient policy and policy maker monitoring tools and processes. Through web enabled tools and efficient online collaboration and exchange of information, citizens and civil society can consolidate the political memory and attain the necessary historical depth for analysing policies, policy makers and results. This capacity of being able to follow up on policies and politicians based on real facts, overriding the mass media effect which often omits important details, is powerful and empowering for citizens¹⁶.

38. Online tools can therefore contribute in many ways to enhance (not substitute) the democratic processes and practice, responding in practice to some of the weaknesses observed in terms of more pluralistic and higher quality information, easier and wider citizen participation in policy formulation and decision making processes as well as greater transparency and accountability of policy makers and institutions.

¹⁵ The City of Hamburg has demonstrated how the intelligent introduction of e-participation applications can increase citizen engagement in local political debate. See Lührs, Rolf et al: How to grow? Online consultation about growth in the City of Hamburg. (http://www.tu-harburg.de/tbg/Deutsch/Mitarbeiterinnen/Steffen/paper/dexa_03.pdf)

¹⁶ The potential of these tools and networks was recently demonstrated when a civil society organization was able to detect an effort made by British MPs to exempt themselves from the obligation to be scrutinized on their expenses, and by rallying online (through Mails to MPs, Facebook Groups, Twitter Alerts and other) played an important role in changing the government's plans. The draft legislation was abandoned. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/7842402.stm)

Local authorities as e-democracy enablers

39. Local authorities are the authorities closest to the citizens, affecting and being affected by them in a more immediate and everyday way than most other public authorities. While local administrations face important challenges (depending on their geography and demographics) they are often more independent and flexible in the way their policies options are formulated and implemented, compared to regional and national governments. As a result they constitute the ideal level of governance for testing new concepts and ideas for rejuvenating democratic processes using ICTs.

40. The local e-democracy pioneer in Europe since 2000 has been the United Kingdom. Its e-democracy programme funds an important number of pilot projects and tests a variety of tools and methodologies, from electronic voting to citizen consultations at municipal level. Experiments are now being carried out in many European countries, with varying levels of intensity and depth, depending on the political will and the resources allocated. The example of Trikala in Greece shows how a small city can have positive impact on the engagement of its citizens through a well thought-out implementation of a wide range of e-democracy applications¹⁷.

41. In most cases the success of such projects depends more on the political will to engage with the citizens, thus setting up mechanisms that will effectively and efficiently support such practices in the long run, rather than the number of projects and the amounts spent over them. Although external funding can be helpful in setting up e-democracy initiatives, they will only succeed if a serious commitment is made by local authorities to engage the necessary resources to deliver results.

4. Prerequisites for e-democracy

42. For e-democracy initiatives to thrive, it is necessary to ensure that three essential preconditions are satisfied:

- Citizen and policy maker access to technology and skills;
- Citizen re-engagement strategies and the creation of a participatory culture;
- Deployment of e-democracy initiatives and tools based on sound strategy and solid methodology.

4.1 Breaking the Digital Divide, accessibility and capacity building

43. The term "Digital Divide" refers to the uneven distribution of access to ICTs and the Internet and their benefits among the general public depending on where they live, how much they earn and their level of education. The digital divide tends to mirror and sometimes reinforces traditional social divisions, be they economic, social, cultural, linguistic, gender or regional. When planning to use technology to enhance the democratic processes through tools such as e-democracy platforms, it is important to realise that, if the digital divide issue is not addressed, there is a risk that those who will benefit from e-democracy will be those already "on the good side of the fence", exacerbating traditional divides by adding a political dimension to them, rather than resolving them.

Accessible infrastructures and networks

44. A priority in combating the digital divide is to make ICT Infrastructures and the Internet available and accessible to all, either for free or at a very low price. This aspect of accessibility includes the access to electricity and Internet networks, as well as the access to Web enabled terminals and computers.

45. In areas with low population density or remote areas such as mountains and islands, the market incentives disappear, resulting in higher prices and poor or non-existent services. State authorities have intervened in some cases by subsidising service provision or infrastructure deployment to serve these areas. In order to further reduce the digital divide, municipalities in some countries (such as San

¹⁷ http://www.iris-europe.eu/spip.php?page=article_pdf&id_article=3656

Francisco) have begun to offer free wireless Internet access to their citizens, covering specific public places such as squares and shopping malls or sometimes the entire city. Recent experiments, including Trikala in Greece, show that the multiplier effects of such initiatives are important. However, many European Union member states are reluctant to proceed until the regulatory framework is clearer. Dublin City Council recently shelved its plans to offer wireless access for fear of falling foul of European Union state aid regulations¹⁸.

Accessible terminals and interfaces

46. Another barrier to accessing the Internet and ICTs is the cost of hardware. Although the IT Industry has evolved enormously over the last ten years, average prices decrease more slowly than might be expected. The introduction of cheap laptops (such as the OLPC¹⁹, ASUS and eeePC) would make online services accessible to lower income sectors of the population.

47. To further combat the digital divide, municipalities and cities have created public access points and municipal computer centres in libraries and other public service areas to make the Internet accessible to a greater part of the population, notably those segments that were previously completely excluded. While full PC penetration might never be reached, there is a promising trend towards the increasing convergence of technologies, which is spreading the use of Internet to TVs and mobile phones.

48. Interfaces and design, whether on hardware or software, play a critical role in making technology accessible. There is much scope for simplifying these, making the use of operating systems and commonly used software intuitive, simple and easy to use for the layman. Design interfaces should be easy to work with, to make ICTs and their benefits accessible to population groups that have not been trained or are unfamiliar with computers. The rapid take-up of mobile phones by all segments of the population demonstrates the importance of intuitive interfaces in facilitating adoption of ICTs.

4.2 Knowledge, skills and training

49. A minimum amount of training is required to make effective use of ICTs and the web. The quantity of such training is often in direct relation with the quality and user-friendliness of the interface of the systems used. Large training and up-skilling campaigns and initiatives have been launched in many countries to combat ICT and Internet illiteracy by teaching the basics of computer handling and the usage of essential tools.

50. The school remains the most important place to teach ICTs, but given the pace at which both tools and contexts evolve, teaching needs to focus on concepts and methodology rather than specific software packages and operating systems. It is important to move from a computer course that is taught like any other subject such as history or mathematics to a form of teaching which integrates ICT tools and Internet applications in all classes, thus teaching the use of ICTs and the web through real practice. This requires teachers to have a higher level of computer literacy than their pupils. Important efforts also need to be made in adult continuous vocational training and re-skilling, to keep up with the constant evolution of technologies and contexts.

51. The online delivery of public services can be a great incentive for citizens to learn and adopt the Internet and online tools, while at the same time improving the functioning and efficiency of government.

52. In addition to handling skills, dealing with the vast amounts of information available as well as the overlaps, contradictions and inconsistencies that can be found on the Internet, requires the development of critical faculties, to enable users to find and identify authoritative and reliable information and decide what tool is best for their needs. Information overload is a constant complaint, even among those with higher levels of computer literacy.

¹⁸ Wireless Internet Institute: Broadband wireless and European cities at the Public Access Crossroads, 2008 http://www.items.fr/IMG/pdf/080306_W2i_EuropeanCities_0208.pdf

¹⁹ One Laptop per Child Initiative, <http://www.laptop.org/en/>

4.3 The interest divide

53. E-democracy, like democracy in general, is also affected by an "Interest divide". It is often observed that, among certain categories of youth, politics and participation in traditional democratic processes and institutions are perceived as dull and uninteresting.

54. Innovative methods using e-democracy applications have been tested in a number of pilot projects in an attempt to re-engage youth in the political process by offering web-based participation platforms. However, the results have often been inconclusive. It seems that when people are not interested in participating in politics, it makes little difference to them in what form political issues are presented.

55. Concrete measures and long term re-engagement strategies need to be developed to create a culture of participation, encourage involvement to the community and public issues and re-engage citizens in politics, in particular the younger generations.

56. It has also been observed that those that are traditionally most inclined to participate in politics tend to be less familiar with ICTs and vice versa: it is older people who are more prone to getting involved in politics and who at the same time are usually less proficient in ICTs.

4.4 Re-engagement strategies and civic education

57. The best place to begin teaching people the functioning of democratic systems and their rights in them is at school. However, there are too few schools today that make civic education a priority. Improving the provision of civic education in schools will be decisive for future generations' comprehension of democracy and participation in its processes and institutions.

58. The Interest divide is sometimes also found in the policy makers themselves, who sometimes show little enthusiasm for debating with citizens about the decisions that they make on their behalf. The excuse often cited is that participatory processes are difficult and time consuming to implement in real life, whereas political decisions often need to be taken urgently.

59. Local government has an important role to play in making successful e-democracy initiatives, providing funding, implementing, promoting and adopting them to enhance their policy formulation and decision making processes and re-engaging in a collaborative relation with the citizen in tackling important local issues. As the policy making body closest to the citizens, local government has become the e-democracy field of predilection, the governance level at which most e-democracy initiatives have been implemented to date.

60. One of the most important and effective ways of achieving re-engagement of the citizen in the public sphere, beyond seminars and lectures, is active power-sharing initiatives on behalf of policy makers and public authorities. When done for real and not for show, such initiatives have succeeded in bringing back, step by step, citizens in the debate and participation and collaboration in creative problem solving initiatives.

61. One reason why large numbers of citizens remain uninterested in politics is that politics has been unattractive to citizens for too long. As the recent Obama experiment demonstrated²⁰, if authorities open-up to citizen contributions, ideas and debate, to help shape future policy that will affect their daily lives, citizens will not only respond and participate, but will enthusiastically devote time and energy to help tackle the issues at stake.

62. Local authorities have the capacity to create a conducive e-democracy environment to re-engage citizens at the local level. They can use ICTs to provide citizen friendly information on key issues and increase the transparency of their decision-making processes, thereby becoming more accountable and resulting in better policy implementation and evaluation. Through web-enabled platforms and offline initiatives they can create new possibilities for citizens to understand and to follow local issues in depth, to learn how and why to participate, to become aware of the rules and practices of political

²⁰ <http://change.gov>

debate and collaboration. This can engender an increased sense of responsibility and willingness to act and to participate in policy formulation processes.

63. Citizen participation can thus not only help local authorities better understand public sentiment for or against a given policy, but tap into citizens' contributions and ideas to formulate and implement better policies.

5. Risks and challenges for local authorities and citizens

64. For authorities that wish to implement e-democracy initiatives, there are several challenges to be overcome before the benefits become visible.

65. A major challenge is to manage the high expectations that such initiatives can generate. There is a natural tendency for citizens and policy makers to overestimate the changes and benefits that the various ICT tools and e-democracy services can bring, and expect results overnight. At the same time, given that this is a new and rapidly evolving field, there is a serious risk of underestimating the resources and planning required for such services to be properly set up and become sustainable.

66. The planning process entails more than the development and setting up of an IT application. The required transformations and reengineering of current information management, policy formulation and decision making mechanisms in order to deliver on the promise of e-democracy can be substantial and require considerable effort and long-term commitment both in terms of policy priorities and resources allocated. The resources involved can also be substantial.

67. The sustained allocation of resources is essential for the continued availability and smooth-running of applications and services. The adverse effect on the public when innovative and promising services are launched and then withdrawn after a few months should not be underestimated. Once citizens are offered the promise and means to get transparent, accountable government and to participate, a return to the previous situation can serve to inoculate them against any future initiatives.

68. Badly planned and poorly implemented projects can alienate the public and have the opposite effect than that desired. Internet services which function erratically, or are not regularly updated, give a poor impression. The act of making public information available on the web raises an expectation that it will be regularly updated and reliable.

69. Equally the provision of online deliberative and consultation spaces carries with it an expectation by the public being encouraged to participate and give their opinions on issues raised, that these opinions will be seriously taken into account and will impact decisively on the elaboration and implementation of adequate policies.

70. There are some delicate issues relating to the introduction of e-democracy initiatives. These may be interpreted as a mechanism to override elected representatives and institutional structures, doing away with the middle man to make the "voice of the people" heard. Such fears may be accompanied by warnings of a "push-button" democracy which will damage the very essence of democracy.

71. It is therefore important to make clear that the aim of e-democracy initiatives is rather to encourage citizens to see themselves as partners of the policy-makers, active participants engaged in the discussions and deliberations to forge future policies and evaluate past ones, holding politicians accountable and rendering government transparent.

72. There is also an issue of representation and weighting in the participation processes. When open participatory systems are deployed online, there may be a tendency for some parts of the population to be overrepresented and to influence decisions to a disproportionate level in their favour. This can depend on a number of factors including Internet skills, time available, knowledge of the issues and the ability to express opinions in a structured and convincing way. When controversial issues are discussed, networks may be mobilised to bring massive presence in the discussions pushing for or against a specific point of view. Whereas this can be seen as a legitimate democratic expression, it also risks the accusation of demagoguery. The results of such discussions and online consultations may be presented by policy makers as a sufficient public consultation, even though they may be far less representative than the results achieved by traditional opinion sampling methods.

73. Various approaches are being developed to tackle such issues. One approach has been to use demographics of participants in discussions and consultations or e-votes to weight the results against the real demographics of a given population. Others have chosen to use the results of such discussions as purely indicative, one way among others of collecting ideas and reactions on policies.

74. While e-democracy initiatives are being implemented in many countries and have proven their value, the methodological and theoretical, even the technological aspects of it are by no means crystallised and continue to evolve.

75. There are also risks and challenges for citizens. If the preconditions for sound e-democracy implementations are not met, there is a danger for those not online or lacking the skills and basic Internet literacy such as the elderly, the disabled and low-income groups to become victims of a political divide, increasingly marginalised in the political process. Political engagement should not be dependent on having the latest technology and a computer science diploma. Steps to ensure that low income users have easy access to online services at public service points, and that participation platforms are simple and intuitive to use are crucial.

76. There is also a gender gap. As in traditional politics, online activity is dominated by middle-aged, middle-class males. While there is reason to believe that, with the steadily growing popularity of online applications, the user community will naturally broaden out, there is room for local authorities to introduce measures to encourage women to contribute more to online political debate.

77. The protection of the individual is a precondition for online participation. Online platforms can fall into the hands of people who seek to create profiling databases which match political views and convictions with individual citizens. However, there is also evidence that anonymity degrades the quality of political debate. To offset this, some service providers require participants to identify themselves to the provider, while guaranteeing to mask this information to other users. This mirrors the approach used in voting systems, where there are safeguards to identify all voters while the vote itself is anonymous.

78. Citizens also risk becoming disillusioned with policy makers. If they spend time to contribute their views and participate in discussions, they need some indication that their concerns have been taken into account.

79. Democratic societies have never been free from the dangers of demagoguery and populism. With the proliferation of discussion and participatory spaces and practice, there needs to be constant vigilance to prevent the emergence of extreme ideologies and communities. Careful moderation and legislation can go some way to preventing this, but there is also a need to improve civic and political education in the classroom.

80. The time factor is also a barrier to citizen participation. Modern society generates competing demands on an individual's time. Systematic and institutionalised participation requires considerable investment in terms of time, time to read, to get informed, time to discuss and debate, all these need to be taken from leisure or work time. Ideas to tackle this issue have included the introduction of regular "participation days".

6. Conclusions

81. In October 2008, the Madrid Forum for the Future of Democracy called on local authorities to embrace the opportunities of e-democracy²¹. Citizens are increasingly turning to online collaboration and social networks for political mobilisation and debate. The challenge for local authorities is to wake up to the new realities and keep abreast of developments, making the most out of this creative and participatory movement. The very nature of the Internet, based on voluntary collaboration, open and free for all, is closely connected to the basic principles that lie at the heart of democracy and an open society.

82. A growing number of democratically organised bodies, from federal governments and international institutions to local associations, academia, civil society and businesses are adopting ICT solutions to increase transparency, promote political debate and participation and enhance accountability.

83. With e-democracy applications, local authorities have unprecedented possibilities to realise the potential of active citizen participation, not only for the formulation of policy but also its implementation. It is up to local authorities to encourage and help set up the right framework to exploit this potential, while tackling the challenges and risks mentioned above.

84. Of these risks, the digital divide stands as paramount. A number of good practices and policies are emerging, with the potential to offset the effects of the digital and interest divide²², such as the provision of free public Internet points and wireless coverage in public spaces, the organisation of Internet literacy classes and workshops and the combination of electronic with non-electronic approaches. Schools have a special role to play by mainstreaming Internet use in school classrooms.

85. Local authorities need to tap into the numerous civil society organisations and associations, academia and research centres that have developed real and extensive expertise in the field, to help develop their own strategy and deploy initiatives, taking into account the lessons already learned²³.

86. There is a clear role for national associations of local authorities in making available and promoting suitable tools and providing advice and expert assistance. Strong support from government departments responsible for local government is also required in providing advice, resources and logistical support, assisting the development networks and enabling communities.

87. The Council of Europe Congress should continue to follow the issues raised by the application of ICTs to local democratic processes, analysing the benefits and the accompanying dangers, particularly in respect to their role in the changing face of local democracy. It should encourage the sharing of good practices to enable all sectors of society to benefit from the new opportunities that these technologies bring.

88. The opportunities offered by ICTs to rejuvenate democratic practice and enable citizen participation are real. Local authorities reluctant to adapt and adopt such practice are likely to face growing pressure and criticism from citizens, expecting such developments as the natural evolution of our democratically organised societies, towards open, transparent, accessible and participatory governance. The opportunities clearly outweigh the risks.

²¹ Madrid conclusions, para.21 : http://www.coe.int/t/dc/files/source/concl_final_madrid08_en.doc

²² A number of good practices are described in the 2009 Congress report "The digital divide and e-inclusion in the regions."

²³ Some places to start looking: <http://pep-net.eu>, www.democr-net.org, <http://e-democracy.org>, www.mysociety.org and many others. See also the work of the Council of Europe Ad hoc Committee on E-democracy (CAHDE).