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Electronic democracy and deliberative consultation on urban projects

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Summary:

Public authorities at all levels of governance are having to face up to public disengagement from politics and the public's lack of confidence in politicians and political institutions. These trends call for renewed democratic practices, the provision of greater transparency and reinforced citizen participation in decision-making processes.

Electronic communication tools can significantly improve deliberative consultation on urban projects. They enable the presentation of complex issues in a high-quality and comprehensible manner thereby facilitating transparency and the expression of individual and collective viewpoints.

However, cyberdemocracy requires a learning process and indispensable changes in attitudes and behaviour on the part of the authorities, the public, associations and business. Elected representatives themselves try out new tools which encourage dialogue with citizens thereby reinforcing their representativeness.

R: Chamber of Regions / L: Chamber of Local Authorities
ILDG: Independent and Liberal Democrat Group of the Congress
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Preamble

This report forms part of the Council of Europe's work on "Good Governance in the Information Society". It is based on the contributions and discussions at the Symposium on E-Democracy organised by the Council of Europe and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities on 23 and 24 April 2007. It also provides a contribution to the Council of Europe's 4th Forum for the Future of Democracy (Madrid, 15-16 October 2008).

The need for democracy and public participation are the focus of current political debate. Local authorities are experiencing great technological transformation and have a key part to play in spreading the use of information and communication technologies and, more generally, in building the information society. They are embracing a new digital era which requires them to alter their practices and move towards electronic administrative procedures.

It is difficult today to envisage urban planning or development projects or the construction of public amenities without involving the public and the various local stakeholders. Information, dialogue and a local approach are now essential aspects of action by public authorities and proper consultation before projects are launched is recognised as vital to their success.

There have been substantial changes in consultation processes in recent years, with legislation and regulations being adopted in many Council of Europe member States. However, the complexity of urban areas and the difficulties involved in obtaining the views of the public mean that there is no single type of consultation that fits for every issue.

Cyberdemocracy, also known as e-democracy offers a vital tool for implementing proper consultation. The more general use of the Internet and its functions, the democratisation of access and the spread of new information technologies are now opening up new prospects for fostering public debate and involving the public very closely in the decision-making process.

Nevertheless, e-democracy is sometimes accused of merely simulating participation, not being taken up by the public or being used to sideline representative associations. In fact, it brings about changes in attitudes and behaviour on the part of the authorities, the public, associations and business. It involves a learning process for all concerned. The public and associations learn to define their respective roles in universally accessible consultation processes. Elected representatives themselves try out new tools for consolidating their representativeness.

Cyberdemocracy has great potential because larger numbers of citizens have easier access to more extensive and more transparent information. This enables them to keep abreast of the progress of projects and keep track of their implementation. This transparency of public authorities' actions can help restore trust in politicians and bring about greater understanding of their motivations and choices.

1. Introduction

The Internet is now well established as an everyday medium, alongside newspapers, television and radio. Just as many business transactions and purchases are currently made online, it seems natural to use the opportunities of the Internet to involve citizens in the development of their local communities.

In the field of urban planning and development, *cyberdemocracy*, or *e-democracy*, means information and participation arrangements that enable every interested citizen or institution to find out about objectives, requirements and current or planned projects anywhere in the urban area or its immediate district, making it possible for them to assess the spatial and other effects of current and planned projects in their immediate area or citywide. E-democracy also enables them to express their views.

To clarify the concept it is necessary to distinguish *cyberdemocracy* from *e-government* in the building/planning field. When, for example, a developer submits a building project to the city planning authority and the authority seeks the views of other departments, we are dealing with standard procedures in which the "issuer" and the "receiver" are clearly identified. Here we are talking about *e-government* as applied to the planning field.

*Cyberdemocrac*y in urban planning matters should mean something more radical than that. It has to do with overall development of the town or city in a very wide range of fields, with making clear the spatial implications of such development, and with initiating a continuous opinion-forming process about the future shape of the town or city. E-democracy in this sense is concerned with everyone and all institutions, their information needs on account of an extremely wide range of interests, their views on plans and projects and their desire to make their wishes clear and to influence decisions.

Local authorities in particular have a key role regarding democratic culture: the decisions taken at their level often affect the environment people live in directly and visibly. Municipalities are particularly well-placed to make maximum use of cyberdemocracy procedures.

In technical terms, cyberdemocracy is based on information provided through the Internet which, in the urban planning field, often employs geographical information systems because of the relevant spatial factors. Other types of information concerning, for instance, political structures and legal requirements also play a part. This provides the basis for Internet tools such as web forms, online forums, chat rooms, online surveys and even referendums (see appendix 1 for a summary of cyberdemocracy tools). These tools enable online dialogue processes to take place, thereby involving citizens in opinion-forming and decision-making processes through new communication channels.

There is widespread agreement about the technical potential of cyberdemocracy tools to improve information and communication in participation processes (e.g., OECD 2004):

- Online participation processes are easier and cheaper to access than physical meetings and allow for greater flexibility in time, thereby reaching a larger number of people,
- many people do not like to speak in front of larger audiences and prefer to write comments in a forum,
- information can be visualised and animated,
- different levels of aggregation of information can be offered and linked,
- online processes allow for interactivity, permitting more in-depth consultation, and support deliberative debate,
- individual replies and comments can be published and shared,
- online processes allow for greater transparency of dialogue and are easier to monitor and evaluate.

In general terms, greater civic commitment and increased legitimacy of urban planning decisions can be expected in relation to those – primarily younger – groups for which the Internet and other electronic channels are the preferred communication medium. In this respect, the use of cyberdemocracy tools involves adaptation to new communication channels and habits.

In practical terms, it is the various dimensions of towns/cities and urban development which affect citizens and which require citizen participation of one form or another:

- properly organised use of the urban territory and as conflict-free reconciliation as possible of the land-use needs within it;
- the town as a locus for the production of goods and services, whether for super-regional markets or for the local population. This includes public services, which in each case need to be seen in terms both of service supply and job provision;
- the town's/city's constant need for renewal, whether on account of ageing infrastructure, ageing buildings or new demands on its capabilities;
- the social requirements of the town/city as a community, its social and economic make-up and its disadvantaged groups (for example: immigrants, jobless persons, families and children);
- requirements of specific parts of the town;
- shifts in local demography because of population ageing, changes in family structure and falling birth rate in most countries in Europe;
- the townscape, whether as historic heritage or from the standpoint of shaping it for optimum amenity;
- sustainability aspects of urban development, whether in terms of environmental protection or people's health;
- the town's/city's constant exchanges with the surrounding district;
- the town/city as contributor to overall European or national output and prosperity (often with a particular focus and with labour specialisation in producing specific goods or services);
- within the network of towns/cities, a particular town, geographically, may be an important logistical node.

In these and other contexts a wide range of factors come into the planning picture:

- the institutional framework for urban planning and development;
- information requirements and supply and the recipients of information;
- making information available in a way that optimally ensures the desired dialogue;
- organisation of dialogue between interested citizens and institutions on the one hand and officialdom (specialist departments or political decision-making bodies) on the other.

2. The institutional framework for deliberative consultation

To ensure that citizens and institutions are fully informed, all levels at which urban development projects are discussed, whether at the preparatory or implementation stage, have to be taken into account:

- The urban development level is the policy one which overarches the specialist sectors and which, by means of guidelines and statements of key objectives, sets priorities in the light of demographic, social and economic factors and trends whilst taking into account the town's overall capabilities and responsibilities;
- At the level of urban departmental planning, policy is translated into specific objectives for which specialist norms and planning methods/procedures are applied – in the traffic/transport field, for example. This includes application of national and regional standards and legislation;
- The urban-planning level draws up projects for implementation in the town/city. Its basic function is to organise the town/city into zones for different purposes (land-use planning) and deal with detailed planning according to the planning and building regulations, whether in relation to individual building projects or a part of the town/city;
- The statistics, survey and urban research level provides the all-important informative, user-friendly and wide-ranging electronic basis for cyberdemocracy;

- Finally – and particularly in this area – it is necessary from the outset to involve civil society, interested and knowledgeable citizens, associations and institutions, as an increasingly relevant level for discussion of the town's/city's future. Good government on the one hand, and good governance on the other, entail a shift from the top-down planning approach to a democratic, participatory conception of planning. This ranges from formal hearing and participation rights to discussion of urban development projects in citizen forums. It encompasses both expression of needs and expectations at the preliminary stage and participation in the implementation phase.

It goes without saying that electronic information and communication procedures can provide effective support to this modern conception of planning as a two-way process, with the municipality as local authority on the one hand and the municipality as active civil society on the other.

It is important to clarify the institutional basis because it should be clear who provides information and interprets it and who picks up information and interprets it in the light of personal requirements. Basically, each level can be involved in either capacity. What is crucial is that everyone involved should be prepared or encouraged to take on this dual role.

3. High-quality information for successful consultation

Democracy as a collaborative system is meaningless and unworkable without the preliminary provision of information. A client-oriented approach and quality information are keys to acceptance, and thus success, of attempts to build dialogue. This basic consideration points to the need for cyberdemocracy to be treated from the outset as a broad information and dialogue platform for the community at large rather than just a tool to be focused on individual projects.

The urban community as the primary social structure is made up of a variety of interests and requirements and an extensive range of possible information recipients amongst the population. The following are only a few possible examples of interest groups:

- the whole population,
- the population of a particular area (in a regeneration context, for instance),
- groups with special needs, such as children and young people, senior citizens and people with disabilities,
- providers and users of public facilities,
- local residents who actively concern themselves with local culture and local amenity,
- the business community – particularly businesses that meet local needs – when it aligns its investment decisions with those of the town/city,
- directly affected professions such as architects or town planners.

The objective of transparency means that there are a number of requirements regarding how information is processed:

- "Urban development project" is not understood here as concerning only new buildings or new infrastructure of some size or the architectural or physical renewal of part of the town/city. Smaller or less extensive changes to the town's use structure or the way the town functions are included because, in aggregate or in combination with social and economic trends, they may have deeper effects than spectacular individual projects. A further point is that, given population trends, large scale projects such as new residential estates are the exception in most European towns/cities;
- Information should not be provided piecemeal according to internal, departmental fields of responsibility but should be seen in terms of the whole urban picture. It would run counter to the objective of positive citizen response to information availability and participation opportunities if blueprints, priorities and plans were presented separately and with no regard to two-way exchange. Electronic technology makes it possible – as further explained below – to overcome the practical difficulties that hitherto have stood in the way of a comprehensive, user-oriented approach;

- Translation of information from specialist language into everyday language is an absolute prerequisite if information is to be interesting and accessible;
- Transparency of the available cyberdemocracy processes is also necessary. Citizens need to be clear about who is responsible for the processes, how their contributions are dealt with, whether they will receive replies and the extent to which they can influence decisions.

Cyberdemocracy also needs to be used to provide various kinds of additional background information so that a range of options and arenas for action become apparent:

- information about the current political agenda of the mayor and the municipal council, giving an indication of future urban development projects. Possible tools here include newsletters and RSS feeds, as well as council information systems through which municipal council meeting schedules, agendas, reports and minutes can be consulted online;
- information about the legal and institutional underpinnings of planning work, the town's responsibilities as a level for development of informed local opinion and how urban planning interlocks with the regional and national levels;
- information about the changes in the basic approach to urban development and planning – the concepts and methods developed in the 1970s and the paradigm shifts in the view of what urban development's purpose is, with sustainability assuming particular importance;
- information about the findings of urban analysis, forecasting and research. Departments have comprehensive and detailed knowledge which needs appropriate packaging to be accessible to the citizen.

A further important point is that urban development addresses not only present plans, but also older parts of the urban fabric that are now seen as items of architectural heritage worth preserving. It encompasses matters that look set to become urgent future issues and objectives which can only be accomplished through different stages and over the long term. Information that remains static receives little attention and does not enable people to follow the situation.

Overall, a great volume of online information about the relevant municipality is quickly built up. It is therefore all the more important for users to be able to navigate and find information easily on municipal websites. It must be possible to access interactive online functions from municipalities' homepages without having to search around.

While itself spatially defined, the town is involved in interchange processes which are not spatially bounded. It is part of a "functional space" which includes daily movement between the town and its region, and inside the town there is similar circulation through areas with characteristics of their own. These interconnections both inside the town and between the town and its region are another important area for cyberdemocracy.

4. Making the most of geodata systems and urban modelling tools

Use of media tools and visual presentation of information are key requirements for successful cyberdemocracy. Thematic maps to various scales – in some cases with accompanying explanations – are the classic tool for urban development. Maps have been produced since the late 19th century (when the first systematic countrywide small-scale surveys were carried out all over Europe) and have been continually refined since that period. The advantages of maps are obvious: they allow spatial features to be taken in at a glance. The disadvantages of the traditional map are its cost and inflexibility. For example, it is impossible to combine different types of content; content that is unimportant for the particular purpose cannot be removed; and it is difficult for maps to show changes across time. Unlike electronic data, maps are not multimedia tools, nor are they location-independent.

We are seeing a revolutionary shift away from conventional town and country surveying and the conventional town or area map on which thematic maps (such as the land-use plan) have hitherto been based. They are being replaced by data systems which retrieve a wide range of information electronically and allow the particular information items required for the particular purpose to be combined in issue-specific maps to the most suitable scale and in the ideal medium (3D, for example).

The technological progress in this field offers a powerful boost to cyberdemocracy, in particular in facilitating transfer of urban-planning and urban-development information between levels or between specialist departments, and with great flexibility for all parties involved. There are three basic types of geodata:

- single-point infrastructure, for example public buildings for delivery of various key municipal services,
- network infrastructure – information about movements and supply,
- urban land according to the various uses of it and intensity of use; stable use or changes of use, (regeneration/renewal).,

Advanced municipal geodata systems cover areas such as digital terrain models, road networks and land registers, development plans and land-use plans, nature reserves, habitat conservation areas and green space registers, aerial photographs, localised data on population structure, public amenities, sport and leisure facilities, tourism and catering, plots available for sale and standard land values, etc. For security reasons, details of water, gas and district-heating networks and sewers are not usually published online. In principle, there are demanding requirements in terms of ongoing updating of geodata. Outdated or incorrect data undermine the credibility of the municipalities concerned.

Some municipalities publish online maps on specific topics, for instance giving details of all services and facilities for children and young people in their area, including playgrounds, kindergartens, schools, advice centres, leisure activities and sports clubs, etc.

At present, it is mainly larger towns/cities which provide three-dimensional online images of urban areas, with the trend being to offer views from various perspectives. Three-dimensional images are also available on universally accessible websites such as *Google Earth* and *Microsoft Live Search*. A particular advantage of three-dimensional images as regards urban development is the possibility to simulate and visualise drafts of planned building projects, allowing for easy assessment of the optical and aesthetic aspects onscreen.

Further development of three-dimensional urban imaging involves the use of metadata to record the history data of the relevant images, i.e. the time when they were taken and the quality. This also makes it possible to provide graphic illustrations of changes in townscapes over time. In addition, it is likely that the EU Directive INSPIRE which aims to establish an infrastructure for spatial information in the European Community will speed up the provision of geodata at municipal level, although the focus of the Directive is not on citizen participation but on harmonising and standardising geodata infrastructure systems in the various tiers of public administration.

Interactive features within geodata systems permit individual use of the maps, either for private purposes or as a basis for participation in municipal processes. Examples here include measuring areas and routes, inserting textboxes and bookmarks and highlighting sections of maps or particular points on maps, and then sending off the data by e-mail. This makes it easy, for instance, to request additional information from the municipal authorities. Furthermore, the maps individual citizens have made up and added to online can be saved on their own computers for subsequent use.

The spread and further development of online geodata systems at municipal level is reducing the information advantage which municipal authorities and office holders have over the general public. This is a key requirement to enable the public to participate in urban development on an equal footing is therefore satisfied more fully than before.

5. Fostering citizen participation

According to Innes and Booher (2004), most justifications for public participation in planning are covered by five purposes:

- Through participation, decision-makers can find out what the public's preferences are and take account of them in their decisions,
- Decisions can be improved by incorporating citizens' local knowledge,
- Public participation can advance fairness and justice,
- Public participation helps ensure legitimacy for public decisions,
- Participation is offered by planners and public officials because the law requires it.

Most laws on regional and urban planning require some kind of consultation, because almost all urban issues and plans concern a variety of different stakeholders with often conflicting interests. First of all, other administrative units or public entities responsible for aspects such as nature conservation or protection of historical monuments have to be consulted. In addition, NGOs representing civil society often have to be consulted as well. They must be formally invited to formulate their concerns or objections, and the planning offices are obliged to consider these arguments and also discuss them in public meetings. Furthermore, most laws on regional and urban planning provide for the consultation of the public. If decisions are taken without these stages in participation, they may be annulled by courts. Furthermore, there are formal rights of appeal.

The link between participation and sustainable communities was made explicit in the 1998 Aarhus Convention[1]. which recognises that:

> "…in the field of the environment, improved access to information and public participation in decision-making:
> - enhance the quality and the implementation of decisions;
> - contribute to public awareness of environmental issues;
> - give the public the opportunity to express its concerns;
> - and enable public authorities to take due account of such concerns;
>
> …aiming thereby to further the accountability of and transparency in decision-making and to strengthen public support for decisions on the environment...".

The European Commission is party to the Convention and has launched two directives implementing the Convention in 2003 (Directive 2003/4/EC on public access to environmental information and Directive 2003/35/EC providing for public participation in respect of the drawing up of certain plans and programmes relating to the environment).

Beyond these formally guaranteed consultation rights, there is a broad range of mechanisms for deliberative consultation. As a reference, the Recommendation (2001)19 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe regarding the participation of citizens in local public life draws the attention of member States and other stakeholders to the need to:

> "give citizens more influence over local planning and, in a general manner, over strategic and long-term decisions [...] and ensure that direct participation has a real impact on the decision-making process, that citizens are well informed about the impact of their participation and that they see tangible results. Participation that is purely symbolic or used to simply grant legitimacy to pre-ordained decisions is unlikely to win public support. However, local authorities must be honest with the public about the limitations of the forms of direct participation on offer, and avoid arousing exaggerated expectations about the possibility of accommodating the various interests involved, particularly when decisions are made between conflicting interests or about rationing resources."

Recommendation (2004)15 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on electronic governance ("e-governance") states with regard to e-democracy that "the use of Information and Communication

[1] UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters: http://www.unece.org/env/pp/

Technologies (ICT) in the democratic processes should be made available where it is considered that this would be an effective means of:

- strengthening the participation, initiative and engagement of citizens in national, regional and local public life;
- improving the transparency of the democratic decision-making process and the accountability of democratic institutions;
- improving the responsiveness of public authorities;
- fostering public debate and scrutiny of the decision-making process."

In terms of what is called "deliberative consultation", Recommendation (2001)19 of the Committee of Ministers invites member States and other stakeholders to:

> "…make full use, in particular, of [...] more deliberative forms of decision-making, i.e. involving the exchange of information and opinions, for example: public meetings of citizens; citizens' juries and various types of forums, groups, public committees whose function is to advise or make proposals; round tables, opinion polls, user surveys, etc."
>
> "Introduce or, where necessary, improve the legislation/regulations which enable:
>
> i. petitions/motions, proposals and complaints filed by citizens with the local council or local authorities;
>
> ii. popular initiatives, calling on elected bodies to deal with the matters raised in the initiative in order to provide citizens with a response or initiate the referendum procedure;
>
> iii. consultative or decision-making referendums on matters of local concern, called by local authorities on their own initiative or at the request of the local community;
>
> iv. devices for co-opting citizens to decision-making bodies, including representative bodies;
>
> v. devices for involving citizens in management (user committees, partnership boards, direct management of services by citizens, etc)."

One the one hand, cyberdemocracy tools provide alternative channels for basically the same (offline) mechanisms. On the other, they provide new channels like advanced geodata systems.

Considering the range of forms and devices of involving citizens mentioned in Recommendation (2001)19 regarding the participation of citizens in local life, a somewhat broader and more differentiated classification seems more appropriate. As responsiveness of local government is frequently mentioned as an important trust-building feature, cyberdemocracy should not be restricted to procedures and devices offered and initiated by public authorities and political bodies, but should also include initiatives started by citizens, NGOs or business. Indeed, there are recommendations to local authorities and representatives to encourage and support these kinds of activities as well.

Both offline and online, citizen participation therefore also fundamentally affects the distribution of political power in a democracy. In representative democracies, elected representatives have key decision-making powers. Any calls for increased citizen participation therefore also raise the issue of how much power elected representatives should give up. The challenges to cyberdemocracy and e-participation in general and in the urban development field in particular are therefore not only technical but also concern issues of political culture and the legal foundations for citizen participation at municipal level.

Trust between the public and elected representatives and officials is a core element of political culture. A key requirement for local politicians and officials is to establish and preserve public trust. This can be achieved if there is total transparency about the rules of participation, for example, how are citizens' contributions dealt with? How are they taken into account in decisions? Greater public motivation is also achieved if the decision-makers agree beforehand to implement the results of participation processes. However, the extent to which decision-making power can be transferred to participating citizens also depends on the level of professional and scientific expertise required for a particular project. Examples here include the environmental impact of a project or the impact of a new shopping centre on businesses in town/city centres or the surrounding areas.

The traditional forms of participation cannot be replaced entirely by electronic tools, as the latter require Internet access and – in the case of urban development projects with digital maps – powerful transmission networks and computers. In most European countries, however, the latter are not available to fairly large sections of the population ("digital divide"). But electronic tools can supplement and improve existing participation procedures. Examples here include increased transparency through the insertion of comments on digital maps, the publication of statements with requests for comments and keeping track of the processing of inquiries and objections.

E-tools must therefore be combined with traditional participation procedures. Their particular contribution depends on how attractively they are designed, how much key data they contain and how well contributions are analysed, compiled and fed into the decision-making process.

6. Local cyberdemocracy: case studies

Studies on local cyberdemocracy initiatives show that there are interesting good practice examples for many forms of participation. However, it can be seen that the Internet has so far primarily been used to provide information and receive questions or comments from the public. It is only rarely that it is used for dialogue or for binding votes or referendums.

The Local E-democracy National Project in the UK offers probably the largest and best documented set of experiments with cyberdemocracy at the local level in Europe. In their survey of local government websites of all 408 local authorities in England and Wales, Pratchett *et al* (2005) found that 32% of all council websites offer some kind of online forum, and that online questionnaires were used by just over a third of authorities (37%). On the other hand, information, for example on the council and access to councillor web pages and e-mail addresses, is provided by almost two-thirds of the local authorities. The authors conclude that the take-up and implementation of different cyberdemocracy tools varies considerably across local government and that local authorities are already using many of the tools of cyberdemocracy but that there is much more that they could be doing.

In Germany, the Initiative eParticipation analysed the websites of all 82 larger towns/cities with regard to citizen participation procedures. In 2005, compared to 2004, there was an increase in the number of cities offering some kind of citizen participation. While information about the government structure and decision-making procedures is evaluated positively, there are only 13 cities which offer some kind of informal participation on a few selected topics. Regarding formal participation and consultation processes as to land-use planning, 48 out of 82 cities provide information about the offline procedures, but only 17 allow online submission of comments. The report therefore concludes that citizen participation via the Internet is still an exception (Initiative eParticipation 2005).

In a comparative study on local cyberdemocracy initiatives covering Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States, Peart and Diaz (2007) found innovative and interesting examples that involved increasing transparency and promoting citizen participation in the governing process. Participation includes online voting (Estonia, Switzerland), e-consultation – e.g. online forms, chat sessions with mayors, questions and answers by text messages – and discussion forums. An advanced example of deliberative interaction is the e-petitioner of the city of Bristol (UK). This tool allows for networking of citizens with common concerns and for initiating petitions entirely online. Nevertheless, the authors indicate a generally low level of use of e-consultation and online forums in the case studies, which means that e-tools need to be integrated with other government efforts to promote participation and dialogue.

Torres, Pina and Acerete (2006) conducted a survey of 35 cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants in 12 European countries. In 2003 and 2004, the websites of these cities were surveyed, with checks on 133 items. Items relating to cyberdemocracy include information about the mayor and council members, minutes and reports, press releases and facilities for citizen dialogue such as complaint boxes, forums and other types of democratic commitment and participation. While, on average, more than 60% of the cities' websites contain informational items and even 66% a complaint box, only 26% offer a forum and 37% other kinds of commitment or participation.

One study focused on online consultation in urban planning: In 2006, the German Institute for Urban Studies (Deutsches Institut für Urbanistik) assessed the effects of a change in the German Federal Building Act to allow the use of electronic media in town planning procedures, including participation

procedures for other public authorities and the general public. 61 to 68% of the responding municipalities publish their digital maps and documents on the Internet and use it for consulting the public, but only 12% publish comments they receive. The online facilities did not produce strong effects on the number of comments, nor did they save costs in the majority of cases. The most frequently mentioned obstacles and difficulties arising when using the Internet in participation processes concerned download time, hardware facilities of citizens and the readability of plans. 74% of the municipalities expressed a need for more support using the Internet for online consultation (Strauss 2006).

Overall, most of the presented studies use data material from the years 2003 to 2005. It is likely that further progress has been made since then. On the one hand, this is because more members of the public have broadband access. On the other, more cyberdemocracy initiatives are likely to have been launched.

There are only a few cases where different tools have been employed in different stages of a participatory process. This means, from an empirically-based perspective, that the use of electronic tools is still in a piecemeal stage of deployment and far from an integrated, systematic approach.

In the view of many observers, including the OECD, there is a need for further systematic investigation of cyberdemocracy tools in different applications. Evaluation efforts with scientific support should be stepped up. In order to make progress here, it would be useful to select one or two policy fields and launch action programmes in which the various tools could be employed at the different stages in the political cycle. If several local authorities conducted action programmes involving the same topics and objectives, it would be possible to analyse and compare the contribution of e-tools more systematically.

7. The way forward

The experience to date suggests a series of factors that contribute to the success of cyberdemocracy:

- Clear agreements between the relevant politicians, officials and computer experts. The division of responsibilities and the objectives should be clearly defined, for example local authorities' Internet forums must make clear who moderates them and according to which rules. It also should be agreed who compiles contributions by whom, for whom and under which conditions;
- The relevant politicians, officials and computer experts should be properly trained to use the instrument successfully. This applies not only to ICT skills but also to skills in marketing, project management and the structuring and effective aggregation of large quantities of data;
- For many years to come, it will remain the case that not all citizens have access to the Internet. Cyberdemocracy projects can therefore only be offered in addition to existing types of citizen participation. In all participation procedures, it must be ensured that no citizens are disadvantaged just because they do not have Internet access. The relevant legal requirements must be complied with here;
- The simultaneous use of cyberdemocracy tools and traditional methods of citizen participation involves additional costs which also have to be covered. This applies firstly to technology, staff and staff training. However, it also includes public Internet access points available to all citizens, with assistance also being provided for users. The funding should initially come from the local authorities themselves. In the case of more complex applications, however, contributions will also be necessary from higher-tier political authorities or from private sponsors;
- E-participation tools need to fit into existing technical systems. This applies particularly to local authorities' internal document management systems. However, it also applies to the citizens who participate and this means primarily having broadband Internet access for the purpose of downloading maps and plans. In this respect, it is particularly important that not only urban areas, but also rural areas, have access to broadband infrastructures;
- The relevant legal requirements must also be complied with in the case of e-participation. If legislation requires the identification of the participating citizens, or proof of the authenticity of the messages, provision must be made for this when e-tools are used, for example in the form of electronic signatures.

If the promise of improved citizen participation through e-tools is to be realised, proper account must be taken of the legal, financial, cultural and technical aspects. However, even though e-tools are still far from being used to their full potential, the positive examples seen in various European countries show that success is possible. It is still necessary to define more clearly the requirements for success and to promote joint learning processes between local authorities and between them and other political and administrative tiers.

8. Conclusion

Using electronic tools to reinforce deliberative consultation on urban development offers citizens an opportunity to be involved in shaping policies and making decisions on issues which impact on their daily life. It provides public authorities with a powerful tool to strengthen trust and dialogue between elected representatives and citizens.

Comprehensive electronic consultation processes go beyond consultation on individual projects to address a localities' entire urban development strategy. Such approaches require strong political will from elected assemblies and transparent, modern practices from local administrations.

Cyberdemocracy calls for a new mindset where citizens are seen as being at the heart of decision-making processes and where elected representatives are fully accountable to their constituents. Innovative multi-channel tools, urban modelling and 3D software provide local authorities with unprecedented opportunities to offer comprehensive, high-quality up-to-date and user-friendly information and data.

Electronic deliberative consultation is relevant to all towns and cities regardless of size. However, it must not be forgotten that many people have only limited access to the Internet or may not have the necessary skills or confidence to use computers. It is therefore vital that local authorities use non electronic means of consultation in parallel with on-line tools and take measures to improve access to the Internet for disadvantaged groups and in isolated or peripheral areas.

People are increasingly seeking to live in cities where environmental concerns are central to decision-making and where appropriate public services encourage responsible mobility and consumption patterns. Developing deliberative consultation offers a powerful mechanism to develop sustainable towns and cities where people are committed to building a sustainable future for their locality.

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Appendix 1 Tools for cyberdemocracy

Main types of tool

ICT application	Activity and purpose
eParticipation chat rooms	Web applications where a chat session takes place in real time especially launched for eParticipation purposes
eParticipation discussion forum/board	Web applications for online discussion where users with common interests can exchange open messages on specific eParticipation issues, pick a topic, see a "thread" of messages, reply and post their own message
Decision-making games	These typically allow users to view and interact with animations that describe, illustrate or simulate relevant aspects of an issue; here with the specific scope of policy decision-making
Virtual communities	Web applications in which users with a shared interest can meet in virtual space to communicate and build relationships; the shared interest being within eParticipation contexts
ePanels	Web applications where a 'recruited' set, as opposed to a self-selected set, of participants give their views on a variety of issues at specific intervals over a period of time
ePetitioning	Web applications that host online petitions and allow citizens to sign in for a petition by adding their name and address online
eDeliberative polling	Web applications which combine deliberation in small group discussions with random sampling to facilitate public engagement on specific issues
eConsultation	Web applications designed for consultations which allow a stakeholder to provide information on an issue and others to answer specific questions and/or submit open comments
eVoting	Remote internet enabled voting or voting via mobile phone, providing a secure environment for casting a vote and tallying of the votes
Suggestion tools for (formal) planning procedures	Web applications supporting participation in formal planning procedures where citizens' comments are expected to official documents within a restricted period
Webcasts	Real time recordings of meetings transmitted over the internet

(Source: Sæbø, Øystein: Tools for electronic democracy, and DEMO_net 2007)

eDemocracy services for Deliberative Democracy

ICT application	Activity and purpose
Discussion forum (issue-based), E-Docket	Initiating, drafting and defining political issues, following up decisions
Invitation to submit suggestions	To inform citizens that they can submit suggestions to municipality
(e-) Referendum	To inform decision-makers about citizens' view on a particular issue. Often "for information"
Homepages	To inform citizens about timely issues and to educate them on possibilities for deliberative democracy.
On-line transmissions of meetings	To make decision-processes transparent, to follow-up decision-making of representatives
Citizen panel / "jury"	Getting information from a sample of citizens concerning a specific issue.
On-line questionnaire / Survey	Getting opinions from citizens on particular issue
E-voting / Membership ballot	Getting opinions from citizens / members of a community on particular issues.
"Your question"	Citizens can ask questions from politicians
Public opinion messages	Citizens express their opinions on legislation or local politics, transparency on whether public opinion has been followed on an official form
Real-time chat, Group-to-group chat	Citizens can contact politicians on-line to discuss about issues
Closed discussion forum	Party members can affect opinion within a party.
Expert panel	Collecting viewpoints from targeted debates to decision-makers
Formal consultation report	Choosing appropriate background documentation for a targeted debate
Feedback about targeted discussions	Informing discussants, which representative has been informed and how the discussion affects the decisions.

(Source: Table 3: eDemocracy services for Deliberative Democracy (Päivärinta & Sæbø, 2006a) in CAHDE(2007) 6 E

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