# Chapter 7
# Empowering Society Participation in Public Service Processes

**Bruna Diirr**
*Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), Brazil*

**Renata Araujo**
*Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), Brazil*

**Claudia Cappelli**
*Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), Brazil*

## ABSTRACT

*Several discussions enforce the need for a greater engagement of society in public issues and show how ICTs can enhance it. This chapter presents the idea of conversations about public services. It is argued that by making society aware of how a service is provided—its process—citizens may develop a better attitude for interacting with government and other service users. Both society and governmental service providers can discuss problems, correct available information, and increase their knowledge about the processes, thus providing closer ties between them. This chapter also presents a tool designed to support these conversations and the results obtained with a case study of its use. The results suggest that conversations have stimulated interaction among citizens and services providers as well as allowed service improvement opportunities.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The increasing adoption of ICTs has been enforcing discussions on how these technologies could increase society involvement and participation in the practice of Democracy (Grönlund, 2009). It is expected that ICTs allow the government to be open to citizens, offer new channels for disseminating information, and improve operations and integration within and between governments. In society's perspective, ICTs could increase citizens' awareness, trust and participation in public issues and decision-making (Allen, 2004; Bryant, 2006; Charalabidis & Loukis, 2012; Hague, 1999; Mahmood, 2016; Oates, 2008; Shirky, 2008).

E-Democracy and e-Government initiatives argue that society's involvement through ICT follows an increasing scale of relationship between government and citizens (Arnstein, 1969; Femers & Wiedemann, 1993; Gomes, 2004; OECD, 2001). At lower levels, government and citizens have distinct roles and responsibilities, while roles and responsibilities are interchanged at higher levels. It is discussed that closer ties between government and society, i.e. greater interaction and collaboration among them, a better understanding about the public information and issues, interchange of roles and responsibilities etc., must start from the most basic levels of participation and continuously evolve towards higher participation levels.

However, claims still arise about the challenges for ICTs wide adoption (Andersen, Medaglia & Henriksen, 2011; Classe, Araujo & Xexéo, 2017; Mahmood, 2016; Tavares, Soares & Estevez, 2016; Winters, Karin & Martawardaya, 2014). Despite the efforts made to increase public services quality, it seems that citizens feel uncomfortable to use online services due to the lack of information about how it is executed and by whom – usually "invisible" to citizens. The way that information is presented to citizens, with an excess of bureaucracy, complexity of rules and lack of transparency, also affects citizens' ICTs adoption. In addition, government cannot always monitor service execution from citizens' perspective to address their specific needs. This can cause misinformation, lack of confidence in the service and indifference to the practice of Democracy, creating a "distance" between service providers and users.

This work presents an approach based on conversations about public services that encourages closer ties between service providers (government) and citizens. Public services are explained to citizens using process models, about which citizens and service providers can discuss, exchange information and increase shared knowledge about the service provision. A tool was designed to support this dialogue and to organize and analyze relevant information obtained from it, serving as a basis for the service improvement as well as an artifact for empowering citizens' participation. The proposed approach is evaluated in the context of a democratic public institution