

Chapter 9

E-Participation for Equity in Low-Income Neighborhoods: A Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

New Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), in particular mobile phones, have proved effective in increasing participation of some sectors of the population in public affairs. ICT are helping to take government closer to the people, making it more transparent and responsive. However, little has been done to help citizens participate online throughout the policy cycle and even less to engage the most vulnerable communities in such processes in order to increase equity. This chapter presents the conceptual framework for e-participation in low- and middle-income neighborhoods, reviewing first the main features of traditional participation and later the strengths and weaknesses of e-participation. As with traditional participation mechanisms, e-participation can be effective if it increases political equality and therefore needs to help engage all social groups including the most vulnerable. However, ICTs can also be limiting and even backfire as they cannot replace a broader participatory process and an institutional design that needs to enhance political equality, avoid elite capture, count on expert opinion, and build on traditional methods of participation. This chapter ends by applying this framework to a slum-upgrading project in Mtwapa, Kenya. The Mtwapa e-participation platform is presented as a proposed institutional design in a low-income context that aims to facilitate an effective process through comprehensive and inexpensive ICT-enabled citizen participation.

INTRODUCTION

New information and communications technologies (ICTs) have proved to be effective in engaging citizens in public affairs. ICTs can remove distance and time and are helping to take government closer to the people making it more transparent and

responsive. Hundreds of opportunities are being offered to citizens in poor areas and in slums to expand their voice, be heard and in some cases be better serviced by local or national authorities. Throughout the world, energetic citizens are developing new ways and applications to express their concerns and needs to their communities

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and governments. From the Vijana Forum in Tanzania and the Palestinian Friendship Center for Development in Gaza (online advocacy groups) to mapkibera.org in Kenya (citizen mapping) to the Khanyisa Youth Network in South Africa (community radio), engaged citizens and youth in particular use old and new technologies like radio, SMS-based applications or social media to speak out (UN-Habitat, 2012b).

These experiences prove how ICTs are no longer an exclusive business for public policies in wealthier countries but also for low-income countries, defined as having a gross national income per capita lower than 1,035 USD. Low-income countries are increasingly interested and ready to adopt new technologies to support their policy making. In 2012, one quarter of all countries worldwide committed to considering the results of e-participation in the policy-making process, including among others Bolivia, Brazil, Hungary, India and Panama. 25 countries (13% of the total) reacted to the feedback received from citizens concerning the improvement of their services, including Brazil, Croatia, Egypt, Mongolia or Oman (United Nations, 2012).

However, little has been done to help citizens participate online throughout the policy cycle in both high and low-income countries and even less to engage the most vulnerable communities in such processes. Only a few experiences have gone a step further and have tried to not only augment the voice capacity of some segments of society but have also created feedback mechanisms that have increased the capacity of the local government to act and have achieved an increased responsiveness and delivery of public authorities. This is the case of local Chief Kariuki in a town near Nakuru, Kenya, who, after creating a Twitter account and receiving the trust of the local community, was able to get real-time information from citizens about burglaries and other incidents which in turn resulted in a sharp decrease of crime rates in the area he was responsible for (UN-Habitat 2012a). The Kariuki experience is an example of how

ICTs can not only support accountability but in fact become a full component of public services at the local level.

At the same time, integrated ICTs platforms that support the policy cycle in a comprehensive manner are rare which in turn creates inconsistent participation from only a few social groups in some instances of the policy cycle. UN-Habitat, together with another 17 public and private entities, is developing a full ICTs policy cycle platform through the Future Policy Modeling research initiative (FUPOL.eu) that aims at bridging this gap.

In addition, better coordination among different levels of government is required for effective ICT-enabled public policies. According to recent surveys, countries around the world are moving from a decentralized single-purpose organization model to an integrated unified whole-of-government model contributing to efficiency and effectiveness (United Nations 2012). It is recognized that “while it is important to continue with service delivery, governments must increasingly [place] greater emphasis on institutional linkages between and among the tiered government structures in a bid to create synergy for inclusive sustainable development” (United Nations 2012), creating more coordinated, cohesive, and integrated processes and institutions.

The use of ICTs is happening while low-income countries are trying to address other global mega trends: rapid urbanization and the youth bulge. While the youth (aged 15 to 24) represent over 1.2 billion people worldwide and is largely located in developing countries (87%), urbanization growth rates in these countries is high at 2.4% in 2010 with for instance the African urban population expected to double in the next two decades (UN-Habitat, 2013).

This is coupled with rampant poverty and informality. Inequalities are rising in cities in Asia and in most of Africa whereas in Latin America and the Caribbean those have slightly narrowed. In high-income countries, those rates have steadily increased for the last 30 years (OECD, 2011).

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