

Chapter 3

The Soveria.it Project: A Best Practice of E-Government in Southern Italy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a best practice of e-government and e-democracy implemented in Southern Italy, the Soveria.it project. The project was part of a wider strategy pursued by the local administration of Soveria Mannelli started in the early 1990s to promote the use of information and communication technology. Ultimate goal of the strategy was to turn a small and less technologically developed town into a modern fully wired information technology-city. This case is relevant not only for the change produced from a technological, bureaucratic, and social point of view, but also for some of the limits encountered. The latter demonstrate how a too heavily top-down approach can be a weakness for stimulating the growth of less developed areas and provides a possible solution for it – i.e., a better understanding of the society's needs and a stronger partnership with civil society and local firms. The chapter analyzes the project origins, its technological and organizational aspects, its impacts and its limits. It then summarizes the main lesson learned.

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INTRODUCTION

Started in a small town in the Calabria region, Southern Italy, the Soveria.it project was a pilot experience for e-government and e-democracy in Italy. Its importance is twofold. First, it was a forerunner among the e-government projects implemented in Italy. Second, it sheds some light on crucial issues regarding the design of economic policies for relatively economically poor and technologically less advanced areas. The chapter describes the social and economic context of Soveria Mannelli town; the main technical aspects of the Soveria.it project; its social and economic impact; and finally some of the crucial aspects of replicating a similar initiative in different areas.

According to a research conducted by the Italian research institute Censis, only 26% of families living in Soveria Mannelli owned a personal computer and 11% of them had Internet access before the Soveria.it project started, in 1998 (Censis, 2003.) A few years later, in 2003, these figures were more than doubled – i.e., respectively 66.7% and 40% – while the Italian averages were 51.3% and 38%. Soveria town was then defined as the “... *Comune più informatizzato d'Italia* ...” or (i.e.) the town most intensively using information technology in Italy.

The Soveria.it project started with the aim of realizing the first example of fully Internet wired town. This meant to provide every family with connection to the Municipality public administration network via Internet. Aim of the project was thus that of transforming the technological infrastructure of the Municipality administration and imple-

menting an e-Government and e-Democracy plan. By 2000, several info-structure were built giving the population of Soveria Mannelli Internet access and information technology-oriented services free of charge: the City Center for Information Technology (i.e., the Centro Comunale di Valorizzazione Informatica) and the City Media Center (i.e., the Mediateca Comunale.) These provided on-line access to self-certification procedures for public file and documents, the municipality budget and economic plans, and the Municipality tax database. The project also allowed to create a crucial tool for e-democracy: The access to the meeting of the City Council via video conference. Soveria Mannelli was the first case in Italy, in 2003, where the City Council publicly approved the annual budget after broadcasting the session via video-conference and introducing 100 amendments proposed by the citizens connected via internet in the finally approved bill. Finally, Soveria.it delivered specific high-level training programs, web-services for job seekers and employers, and certified basic training programs for school students, teachers, public employees, retirees, and unemployed.

Though under a different name the Soveria.it project is still in progress today. The pursued goals are now slightly different: To deliver the European Computer Driver License to the entire population; to maintain full connection of the Municipality public school system; to maintain the operational broadband wireless connection over the entire area of Soveria Mannelli free of charge; to implement a video-camera integrated system covering the town called SIT (i.e., “Sistema Integrato Territoriale.”)

The architecture of the Soveria.it system was based on three main pillars. The technological infrastructure is the first: A local network connecting via Internet the City Council, the Municipality Administration, up to 500 families, and 7 teaching institutions. The Multimedia Center is the second, which gives access to a vast collection of cultural, historical, artistic multimedia contents, sites, and

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