

# ENABLING EUROPEAN E- PARTICIPATION



07/12/15

Telecentre Europe's Position Paper on Enabling  
European E-participation



Author: Gabriela Ruseva  
Editor: Gabriel Rissola

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

# ENABLING EUROPEAN E-PARTICIPATION

## TELECENTRE EUROPE'S POSITION PAPER ON ENABLING EUROPEAN E-PARTICIPATION

In an increasingly digitalized society, e-participation and e-citizenship are becoming key aspects of citizenship. Public finance healthcare and social services are all going online. The Internet is becoming *the* place to express our opinion, participate in the decisions that concern us, to raise a problem and find supporters for a cause.

This paper comes at a time when EU relevance to citizens is decreasing. European Union's institutions are therefore looking for ways to redefine EU citizenship<sup>1</sup> and create more open and cost-effective e-services<sup>2</sup>.

*This paper consists of four parts:*

1. *e-participation* terminology
2. An overview of the three aspects of *e-participation*
3. Main Argument: *e-participation* is much more than modernising public administration through ICT. We should make sure that citizens have the necessary digital skills to benefit from this modernisation.
4. Recommendations for policy makers and calling for a more holistic approach on *e-participation* and *e-citizenship* based on digital literacy and empowerment of all European citizens.

### SUMMARY

Our recommendations are the result of a broad consultative process conducted by Telecentre Europe within its community of practitioners.

During the e-Participation Day on May 7<sup>th</sup> 2015, participants of events in 11 countries responded to a questionnaire on different aspects of the usefulness of EU and national e-participation tools. In September this same year during our Annual Conference, more than 80 telecentre leaders looked at existing digital tools, discussed their actual use by citizens and the role of telecentres, libraries and civil society in fostering e-participation.

---

<sup>1</sup> DG JUSTICE recently launched a public consultation on EU citizenship, accessed here: [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/newsroom/citizen/opinion/150826\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/newsroom/citizen/opinion/150826_en.htm) on 28th Oct. 2015  
<sup>2</sup> <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/open-government>

## Part 1: Key definitions

*E-governance*: a new way of carrying out more transparent and open governance, which consists in government and public administration reform through the use of the Internet and ICTs.

*E-participation*: citizens' participation in administration, service delivery, decision making and policy making through the use of the Internet and ICTs. As with participation in general, the purpose of e-participation is for citizens to have their say and make a change.

While *e-governance* consists of top-down government initiatives, *e-participation* is a wider concept including all stakeholders in the democratic decision-making processes.

*E-participation tools*: the ICT solutions that governments use to provide public services or that different stakeholders use to engage citizens in the policy making process and enable them contribute to it (e.g. voting & polling online, campaigning through web surveys, online petitions & consultations and chat forums, among others).

## Part 2: Three different dimensions of e-participation

E-participation is a much broader concept than e-government, as it denotes the engagement and active participation of the civil society and its organisations<sup>3</sup>. We identify three differentiated dimensions of e-participation:

**1. E-government services**: this dimension is the most institutionally used. This type of e-participation tools offer in a digital format a wide range of public services that are also physically available, in order to improve their efficiency, quality and cost-effectiveness.

Examples at national level are online elections (France, Germany, UK, etc.); online administrative procedures and social services, such as electronic ID (e.g. <http://eid.belgium.be/en/> in Belgium or <http://www.dnielectronico.es> in Spain) or e-government services meant for providing more understandable and transparent information (e.g. Estonian e-government initiative). Most public institutions have their own website where all their activities and resolutions are accessible. Some national parliaments also offer their debates in streaming. At EU level, examples of such services are Europe Direct Information Centre <http://europa.eu/contact/> and SOLVIT <http://ec.europa.eu/solvit/>.

**2. Structured e-participation**: online structures and channels provided by governments or other stakeholders to involve a broad audience, formally process citizens' inputs and engage them in policy making in a structured way. The most common ones are online consultations and online petitions. E-consultations are a form of public consultations where an institution consults citizens on a specific issue when a project or a policy is being developed or implemented (e.g. the UK Department for Education (<https://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/>) or the Bulgarian Council of Ministers <http://www.strategy.bg>).

**3. ICT tools enabling grass-root citizens' initiatives**: open platforms for citizens' discussions and debate or using ICT and the Internet to start citizens' movements online. For example, civic movements use social media platforms to collect massive support and coordinate large amounts of people. In Spain, the anti-austerity 15-M movement started in 2011 throughout massive calls via Facebook groups & events and Twitter hashtags (#spanishrevolution,

---

<sup>3</sup> Specialised literature adopting a more formalistic approach may refer to it as e-Governance

#democraciarealya, etc.) and led to social networks and civic digital platforms like ‘Real Democracy Now’ (<http://www.democraciarealya.es/>) or ‘Youth Without Future’ (<http://juventudsinfuturo.net/>).

### Part 3: Gaps in the current institutional approach to e-participation

In theory, e-participation offers huge opportunities for all those involved: public institutions can open up towards their public and citizens can have a real chance to participate. However, in practice we are still far from this ideal.

Frequently, e-participation is made equivalent to e-government. This seems to be the case of the European Union institutions, especially the European Commission. The EC tends to consider that improving quality, transparency and efficiency of public services is sufficient to ensure citizens e-participation. The DSM Strategy Roadmap and the Riga Digital Assembly confirmed this by reducing the e-society debate to issues of e-government deployment.

This understanding of e-participation does not capture all its richness, and it is biased by a top-down vision. EU institutions are mostly concerned with the design of e-government services, but not whether citizens know about them in the first place (awareness), know how to access and use them (digital skills) or whether they are even interested on them (citizen’s needs analysis). Bottom-up initiatives as well as the fact that citizens need to have the right skills and genuine motivation to use the e-government services are neglected by this narrow interpretation.

Based on the above, Telecentre Europe invites the Commission to reflect on the following gaps in its approach to e-participation, and take the necessary policy action to overcome them:

- **Digital literacy remains an issue** – 47% of the EU population have low digital skills, 23% has none at all<sup>4</sup>. There is a significant geographical imbalance between Nordic countries and Southern and Eastern European countries. The DSM Strategy itself seems to be designed for Western and Nordic countries, and if the new e-Government Action Plan is based on it, it risks resulting in e-services which a large number of citizens will not use, due to lack of appropriate skills. Digital literacy is key to enable citizens to engage with public institutions online, use e-government services and have a say in policy-making, especially for digitally excluded groups such as elderly citizens, people living in rural areas or those with social and economic disadvantages. If policy makers genuinely want to enable all citizens to e-participate, any inclusive e-government plan should take provisions to ensure sufficient levels of digital literacy for all citizens. The e-Inclusion community represented by Telecentre Europe has been equipping citizens with digital skills during the last two decades and offers the EC to tackle this challenge together.
- **Lack of awareness and limited usability** – most of the participants in the first European e-Participation Day admitted their lack of knowledge of e-participation tools that were presented to them and wondered how the EU informs its citizens about them. They appreciated campaigns like the e-Participation Day and confirmed that they are much needed. With regards to the available tools, they underlined the need to make them less complicated and more user-friendly by, for example, limiting the use of institutional language. The online petitions and services such as SOLVIT were recognised as more relevant to individual citizens, whereas

<sup>4</sup> Scoreboard 2014 - Digital inclusion and skills in the EU 2014, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/news/scoreboard-2014-digital-inclusion-and-skills-eu-2014>

public consultations and the European Citizens Initiative were seen as more relevant for organisations and lobbyists.

- **Fostering bottom-up e-participation** is as important as developing open e-government services (i.e. open e-services, new digital tools & infrastructure). Our experience during the e-participation campaign confirmed that initiatives and e-participation tools at national and local level generate bigger interest in e-participation than EU initiatives, which seem too distant to the citizens. Therefore, further efforts are needed to create such tools at EU, which clearly explain the relevance of EU policies for the individual. They should be linked to national and local initiatives and issues. Telecentres can act as hubs for local democratic participation for citizens and other NGOs, educating them how to create their own initiatives using ICT and linking them to local issues.
- **Empowered citizens vs. passive consumers of e-government services:** True e-participation processes require more structured engagement of citizens as active creators of political and social content, tools and services. Empowering citizens should be done through organisations working with them on grass root level. Telecentres can act as intermediaries and enable the dialogue and exchange between citizens and institutions.

## Part 4: Recommendations

Telecentre Europe calls:

- Public institutions to partner with CSOs. The EC should encourage member states to partner with national and local digital empowerment actors.
- The EC to foresee targeted funding opportunities. Within the Europe for Citizens programme, for awareness raising on e-participation opportunities e.g. through supporting an annual campaign on e-participation (e-Participation Day). The pilot campaign conducted in 2015 by Telecentre Europe and its partners has already proven the lack of awareness and the need for targeted actions. Within the Horizon 2020 programme, to ensure that citizens get the basic necessary skills to take advantage of new open e-government services.
- The new e-Government Action Plan to be prepared by the EC in 2016 to propose measures for fostering digital and political literacy, as well as tools (either in the form of surveys or built-in to the online participation tools) to collect information on the usage of open e-government services and citizens' reactions, and to provide feedback to citizens on the results/outcomes of their participation.
- The EC to support capacity building of civil society organisations (CSOs) to inform and empower citizens to e-participate. It is demonstrated that e-facilitators can play a key role in enabling citizens' e-participation, especially when it comes to supporting disadvantaged groups such as seniors or low-skilled. However, telecentre trainers themselves lack sufficient knowledge about the existing e-participation opportunities. Telecentre Europe has taken first steps in this regard by creating Guidelines on e-participation and a

workshop scenario, but there is further need to enhance the capacity of e-Facilitators, e.g. through devoted training curricula on e-participation for trainers.

Telecentre leaders around Europe are interested and committed to promote e-participation and make the European e-Participation Day an annual awareness raising campaign. Telecentres and local community centres are well positioned to promote opportunities for e-participation among citizens, but they need support from European and Member States institutions. This is an open invitation to public bodies and other interested parties to partner together to foster e-participation in Europe.

## Sources

European Commission, *European eParticipation Summary Report* (2009).

<https://joinup.ec.europa.eu/community/epractice/document/eu-european-e-participation-summary-report>

Telecentre Europe, *Guideline for e-participation in European Union Policy-Making* (2015)

<http://euparticipation.org/guidelines/>

EC Digital Agenda website: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/>

e-UROPa project website: <http://euparticipation.org/>

Youth, ICTs, and Democracy in Egypt <http://tascha.uw.edu/projects/youth-ict-democracy-egypt/>

*Under the Radar: The Contribution of Civil Society and Third Sector Organisations to eInclusion,*

<http://ipts.jrc.ec.europa.eu/publications/pub.cfm?id=4339>

## About Telecentre Europe

Telecentre Europe is a European non-for-profit organisation (NGO) and a member based association with a central office in Brussels, Belgium.

We represent publicly funded telecentres/telecentre networks, ICT learning centres, adult education centres and libraries across Europe where children and adults can access the Internet, learn the latest digital skills and keep up to date with technology and community developments.

We coordinate a number of projects, programmes and campaigns that empower people through ICT by finding new paths to employment, community life, relevant information and staying in touch with friends and family. All our members and partners believe that Information and Communication technology has an enormous potential to combat social exclusion and poverty.

Contact: [contact@telecentre-europe.org](mailto:contact@telecentre-europe.org) | Rue du Méridien, 30 - 1210 Brussels Belgium | +32 (0)2 35 00 627