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## e-Inclusion

### **Issues to be addressed at Track 4 Workshop on e-Inclusion at the Council of Europe Forum for the Future of Democracy on 15-17 October 2008 in Madrid**

#### *The problem*

The concept of empowerment can be found at the roots of democracy. Power is to be shared, the citizen is to be empowered. How should this be done? A discussion on this topic stresses the roles of citizen education and information. Access to education about the nature of the democratic dialogue is essential in order to understand its possibilities for participators. It is important to understand what is to be shared, and what organisational possibilities that exist.

Interest is today directed towards new means to support dialogue and participation. The concept "participation" can be seen as central here. The word points at a situation where citizens are given access to "parts" of decision making influence. It is worth discussing what parts this concerns. How much decision making can be shared, and what are the consequences concerning responsibility?

It is natural that these possibilities for participation concern all who have interest in taking part, not just a few. We find ourselves in front of a democratic problem. How can we ensure that there will not be groups that risk being marginalised, and somehow even may be left outside?

In order to be successfully present in these dialogues there is a need for *knowledge* about the concepts to be discussed, as well as about the *language* used, and about the *method* to reach a result. We can create forms for dialogues with influence for large groups of hungry participators, and we can communicate in languages that are natural and understandable to all members of these groups. But such power sharing is not always principally supported, and given access to adequate resources.

The concept "inclusion" relates to participation for all. No one should be left outside. Today's technology is supportive here. Inclusion surely is relevant for rational use of e-Government services, and even more, it is simply of fundamental concern for e-Democracy. A decision making situation where not all concerned have adequate possibility to be present, often turns out to be problematic.

Resource consuming conflicts and friction may then occur. An open and efficient democracy avoids this, and thus saves resources for society.

### *Access to the dialogue*

The Internet has created new possibilities to participate. No longer do we need to rush to the Forum Romanum to take part in discussions about the creation of a new piece of Roman culture. We can do it at home or at the office. But – does this concern all of us? The answer is no, there are digital barriers that separate certain groups from others and from possibilities to take part. Not all of us have access to the knowledge and efficient technology that is needed for participation. When the issues to be discussed are of democratic importance, we here have a democratic problem.

Participants with different cultural background often express themselves differently. The ability and desire to listen also differs. A successful dialogue is built on tolerance and generosity between participants. Human rights in the large has counterparts in the small.

Digital barriers surely can be of different nature. Dialogue asks for interactivity where, for instance, speed of communication is relevant. Naturally, availability of adequate broadband is helpful, even though narrowband still can transport parts of important democratic dialogue. As is widely observed by now, quantitative measures show that the availability of network capacity differs quite a bit between countries.

When democratic citizen participation supported by access to the Internet is considered important, it can be seen as a problem of political importance and magnitude to support connection of groups that still are outside and disconnected. Unfortunately, the “last” groups here tend to be the groups with specifically complicated resource demand.

This resembles the situation for mail. For how long should we continue with last century mailmen, when the use of paper based mail decreases so rapidly?

### *The need for knowledge*

Although we find ourselves at a European situation where increasing numbers of citizens are digitally connected, it will definitely take time for all to get there. Also, there may be new social groups today that face new communication borders. For quite some time there will still be groups who are left outside - even though modern network technology is made available. Political measures to qualitatively connect these groups are considered desirable by many. These measures relate to gender concern, they concern groups like the elderly, they concern people with

low education or income, they concern people who live at a distance, and they concern people who are cultural newcomers to a country.

Common to several of these groups is a need for adequate knowledge that often is not mainly of a digital nature. Consider the situation for a person that newly has arrived in a country. For cultural reasons, she or he often is unable to participate fully and democratically in society. The problems concern unfamiliarity with the country's basic values, and with its language and social organisation.

It may be seen as democratically important to provide means for cultural citizen connection, as a basic platform for political participation. This often connects to a demand for continued education over time, as both technology and forms for democratic participation tend to be moving targets.

### *Organisation*

Citizen participation in democratic processes has wide content. Different participants stress different types of participation. Early parts of concern contain the situation to be present and informed (physically or virtually), others include possibility to be able to suggest initiatives and to take part in agenda setting, others still to take part in discussion, to be present at the decision making moment, and also to share certain responsibility for the decision taken.

Two mainly different levels of ambition can be noted here, one is to be *informed*, the second to be able to *take part* in deliberative processes. Different types of organisation are concerned for these.

Citizen panels or electronic town meetings certainly can be different in form and size. It is often a challenge to decide how these should be organized. Who should be invited to participate, how and for how long? Should a citizen panel somehow be structured? The concept "citizens" in fact most often is used for persons who mainly are characterized by the fact that they belong to a certain politically decided community. Virtual possibilities challenge several types of barriers. Problems concerning inclusion surely may occur here.

The needs for planning of mature citizen participation in a society's democratic processes tend to demand increasing concern. In this, we may note that the important support of an e-democratic development concerns pure technological measures to a possibly decreasing extent. Access to the Internet is increasing. The last nine letters in the word "e-Democracy" place themselves increasingly in focus.

With the use of generous participatory attitudes in society at large, today's perceived democratic deficit can be turned into its opposite.