

Contextualising Local e-Democracy

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation, fragmentation of society, technological development, medialisation, and individualisation have changed the preconditions for democracy. These changes are, to a large extent, direct and indirect consequences of the developments toward global informational capitalism, resulting in increased interdependence, erosion of boundaries, and increased technological mediation in social action and interaction.

Along with these contextual changes also new principles and forms of governance are in the making. They include such dimensions as the erosion of the traditional basis of political power, the rise of non-governmental organisations, increases in partnership relations between public and private organisations, and the emergence of a new order in global governance. It goes without saying that our democratic systems and processes are not insulated from these pervasive changes in governance.

The result seems to be diminishing opportunities for meaningful participation and involvement, in spite of the fact that there are increases in the number of reforms and quasi-democratic improvements. The most dramatic aspect of this change can be summarised by saying that what happens locally in the globalised world is not anymore based on locality-specific values or local determination, but is determined by a wider set of interdependencies and networks. Local matter are, thus, locally "situated" but not locally "determined". This is both theoretical and practical challenge to local democracy.

One of the most visible features of recent discussions about democratic reforms is attached to the potentials of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). We are not living only in the age of globalisation, but also in the age of "informatisation" or information society development, which is closely intertwined with globalisation of the world economy and

other contextual trends. This has brought new ideas to the agenda for democratic reform: increased use of ICTs in democratic processes is expected to increase transparency and pluralism, and thus to contribute to the overall democratisation of societies. Moreover, there are more direct changes new practices of electronic democracy or e-democracy may bring about, if incorporated into the democratic system. In general, ICTs provide a set of technological tools, which may help to maintain the functionality of the democratic system in a globalised world.

TOWARDS NEW LOCAL E-GOVERNANCE

Crisis of democracy and local communities

The pervasive influence of global networks and corporate agenda, harmonisation tendencies of regional economies (the EU in particular), and the imperative of global competitiveness have changed the role of local community as a locus of democracy. As Castells (1989, 346-347, 352) puts it, "the local state, and therefore peoples control over their lives, will fade away, unless democracy is reinvented to match the space of flows with the power of places." This development has caused no less than a crisis of democracy, which has many faces. It is about the legitimisation crisis of the state due to the fact that the state is losing much of its sovereignty, about challenges to the collective identities and the concept of citizenship which may lead to different kinds of fundamentalist movements, and about the problems in the credibility of the political institutions and systems. We may ask, for example, whether the existing party system has become obsolete as a mechanism of political representation in the network society. (Castells 1997, 342-343). Thus, in spite of the creation of the modern institutions of representative democracy, people seem to have lost much of their ability to influence the conditions of everyday life.

As said, people's opportunities to affect their local conditions, and to use the local political arena for this purpose, are gradually weakening unless local authorities and communities are given power to regulate and to influence on the basic mechanisms that condition the daily existence of citizens. Here the revitalisation of local democracy may be part of the solution. Castells (1997, 350-352) has identified the following potential paths of democratic reconstruction in which local democracy has a vital role: (a) creating and developing democracy at a local level, (b) utilising the opportunities offered

by electronic communication to increase awareness and to enhance political participation and citizen involvement, and (c) the rise of the symbolic politics and political mobilisation around 'non-party political' causes (e.g. green politics, humanitarian concerns, and feminist movement).

Even if local democracy is part of the recipe for better democracy, there is another challenge that may undermine this potential. We have witnessed the emergence of a kind of "postmodern" condition, which is visible in the form of alienation, individualism and fragmentation. People have lost much of their sense of community and become generally less dependent on communal social and economic ties. Moreover, these ties are less "material" than what they were in older times. Yet, as most of the fundamental aspects of our daily lives are rooted in the environment and functioning of a specific local community, there seems to be a persistent need for better local democracy.

Challenge of new local governance

As contextual and institutional changes affect practically all aspects of the democratic process, communities and public organisations must try to take care of deal with context-locality mediation by new policies and methods. As pointed out by Borja and Castells (1999, 246), it is local governments that have a chance to build a democracy of proximity and of participation and thus, to help to reinforce the integrating collective identity. Yet, this can hardly be realised if a wider framework of global governance is not designed to support these efforts.

Changes in the way local authorities operate and interact with other local actors have been expressed as the transformation from government to governance. Even if the concept of governance is used rather loosely and sometimes in an unspecified manner in various contexts, the basic message is clear. Local governance is a term which "seeks to capture the shift away from a system in which local authorities were the key actors in their localities to one where decision-making authority and service provision is shared among a range of agencies. Local authorities are increasingly working alongside other public, private and voluntary sector organisations in providing services for a locality.", as put by Pratchett and Wilson (1996, 2-3). The field of governance relations is illustrated in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Local governments' governance relations (cf. FITLOG 1999).

These views have been widely discussed since the late 1980s. For example, Manuel Castells in his seminal work *The Informational City* (1989) concluded that when facing the 'supersession' of places by a network of information flows, local communities have to design new strategies. He emphasised two "vertical" directions by building a dual strategy of (a) representing interests upwards and (b) grassrooting local government. Thus, local authorities should connect with other self-governing communities in order to create networks and alliances to counterbalance the power of the networks of multi-national corporations and neo-liberally oriented policy-making institutions. In line with this, Pycroft (1996) has paid attention to local authorities chances to utilise such resources as local structures, partnerships, and articulation between local and higher level organisations. The other aspect of dual strategy is to mobilise local civil society to support a collective strategy by fostering citizen participation. Such an effort lies at the very core of revitalisation of local democracy.

The role of ICTs in local democracy

It has become evident that in order to develop genuine electronic democracy (e-democracy), the introduction and utilisation of ICTs need to have a close connection to the revitalisation of the democratic theory and practice. Such an approach requires a citizen-centred approach, broad involvement of local civil society, and an optimal utilisation of new institutional and technological mediation tools. For example, if local authorities need to adopt the dual policy of representing interests upwards, on the one hand, and grassrooting their activities, on the other, it is obvious that ICTs will have a

crucial role in both kinds of governance processes.

For understandable reasons the introduction of ICTs in local governance has started from local administrations, but the use of ICTs in the promotion of democratic values and practices must be based on a demand oriented and a citizen centred approach. At the level of individual citizens a well-functioning e-citizenship needs to be developed, so that citizens are able to utilise new democratic tools as a natural part of their medialised environment. Citizens must also be encouraged to work and act together and to create local networks and associations, and their abilities to utilise new ICTs in their political and civic activities should be supported (see Gross 2002). Such civic groups, community networks and e-communities need to be strengthened as a part of the fabric of local democracy as they

- contribute to local pluralism
- are a source of residential area-specific information and feedback
- provide a platform for local exchange of information and (moderated) deliberation
- provide a pool of local knowledge, voluntary work, and other forms of engagement
- help to increase the commitment of residential areas or communities to local development.

CITIZEN INFLUENCE IN E-DEMOCRACY

The process view of e-democracy

Obviously, the ICTs can be used in all phases of political decision-making: planning and preparation, the decision-making act, and discussion and assessment concerning the consequences of the decisions being made. The Mmajority of contemporary democratic theories approach the issues of 'rule by the people' by equating 'rule' with decision-making, which in the area of local e-democracy refers to e-voting that serves the representative democracy and binding online referendum that is at the core of direct democracy. Yet, formal decision-making is only one part of the process in which democratic influence and control are exercised. Thus, reinventing democracy for the information age will require much more than designing electronic means to make direct e-voting possible. The forums in which citizens exercise their influence have grown in number and complexity. These elements are outlined in Figure 2. It describes four basic aspects of the democratic

process (preparation, decision making, implementation and evaluation) and their counterparts at the level of the utilisation of e-democratic tools.

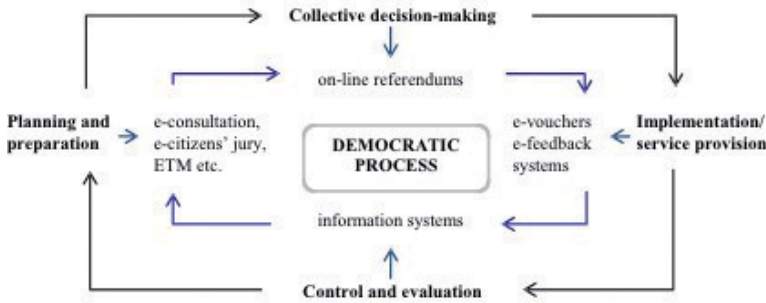


Figure 2. Process view of e-democracy: functions (outer circle) and e-tools (inner circle).

Following the ideas of Brants, Huizenga and van Meerten (1996, 243), we may distinguish two domains that characterise the political process in representative democracies: a discursive public sphere is accessible to all to obtain information, voice opinions and in general to participate in debate, and a decision-making sphere is where the wants and desires articulated in the public spheres are selected, formulated in policy, decided upon and executed. The claim of genuine e-democracy is that under its framework, the distinction between the two spheres and the inherent hierarchy disappears. Experiments in this field share the aim of narrowing the gap between local politics and citizens, but a reality check indicates that access to decision-making sphere is easier in theory than in practice. What this implies in e-democracy projects may be summarised by saying that if e-democracy experiments remain at the discursive public sphere only, their true potentials will not be utilised, but rather, may even lead to frustration and alienation in the long run.

Critical aspects of citizen participation and influence

A challenge for democratic theory is to provide analytical tools for understanding new demands resulting from profound societal changes, and also to open new horizons to how to organize 'rule by the people' in the global information age (Castells 1996). In a practical sense this translates into the following critical questions (Anttiroiko 2003):

1) How the contextual pressures and challenges condition democracy?

- 2) How to improve the institutional mediation mechanisms of a democratic system?
- 3) How to develop and apply new technological mediation tools in democratic governance?
- 4) How to take into account the varieties and levels of political issues in democratic reforms?
- 5) How should different phases of a democratic process be developed so that the democratic processes become smooth and inclusive?

The first task to be undertaken is to contextualise the field of citizen influence and participation. This means that changes in social structures, institutions and mentalities have to be identified and taken into account when assessing the processes and outcomes of the democratic system. The major issue is that as complexity, corporate power, and global interdependency increases, there is no point in maintaining that revitalisation of democracy is about e-voting or about setting up electronic discussion forums.

The second element, referred to here as institutional mediation mechanisms, determines how citizens can or may influence and control collective decisions. These mechanisms have a decisive role in operationalising different models of democracy. These arrangements belong to the very core of the functioning of the democratic system. (Anttiroiko 2004).

Thirdly, uses of technological mediation tools as such are transforming the field of public governance and citizen influence. Contemporary societies rely heavily on different kinds of mediation tools and channels of influence, varying from letters to the editor to the use of cable TV, networked computers, and mobile and wireless applications. (Anttiroiko 2004).

Politics and policies deal with practically everything that has a collective nature or relevant social dimension. Thus, political issues vary greatly, likewise our abilities and willingness to influence them in respect of the nature of these issues.

Bottlenecks in the development of local e-democracy

A key obstacle to harnessing the potentials of local e-democracy is, among others, reluctance of administrations and political representatives to grant the local civil society more decisive role in local governance. On the other

hand, also local people are not always that interested in participating in community development processes even if such a chance is offered to them, which reflects individualisation of society and a kind of postmodern mentality. There are also problems in e-readiness, which have an impact on how e-citizens and e-communities are or can be involved in democratic governance. Lastly, one of the most important issues is how the activities of e-citizens and e-communities are integrated in the legitimate institutional arrangements and systems in order to guarantee the functioning of democracy and thus providing motivational basis for a wider citizen involvement. These factors are presented in the form of a chain of citizen involvement in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Factors that suffocate citizen involvement.

There are number of factors in each society which inherently tend to suffocate citizen involvement, thus leading to a kind of vicious circle of democracy. What tool-oriented e-democracy experiments have usually done is to direct their interventions to either e-readiness or supply-side of the process – infrastructure, equipment and applications – thus failing to see the bottlenecks in e-transformation in democratic governance.

E-DEMOCRACY POLICY

Aspects of e-democracy development policy

Obviously, there is no one and only "right way" to develop local e-democracy. Yet, some lessons have already been learned. First, ICT should not be the focus of an e-democracy project; the focus should be on people and democratic practices. Second, in many cases gradual changes are easier to set up, especially if the overall context of the experiment is conservative. Thus, small-scale solutions are in many cases more realistic than panaceas

like the electronic town meeting. Similarly, we may agree with Coleman (1998) suggesting that e-democracy should be developed “not in terms of some kind of technopopulist dystopia of rule by endless uninformed plebiscites, but by enhancing and nourishing the vital soil of meaningful public deliberation”. In order to reach this end, it would be useful to develop the concepts and practices of e-democracy by using interactive technologies which permit them to be tested by citizens. It is only this way will public governance become more transparent and inclusive and reflect the needs and patterns of behaviour of ordinary people.

e-Democracy has a potential that goes beyond exiting political institution, or that even challenges the legitimacy of political institutions or the establishments of society. For example, if some people were not allowed to express their views in traditional forums, let's say, printed journals (e.g. letters to the editor), they may utilise WWW pages or establish e-journals of their own in order to ensure that their voice could be heard. Taken broadly, computer-mediated communication (CMC) seems to have the potential in general to affect democratisation, through fast and inexpensive dissemination of information, increased channels, increased numbers of voices, specialisation of audiences and more interactivity. Thus, e-democracy should not be reduced to individual acts of voting from home terminals or even interaction between administrations and citizens or other stakeholders. Its potentials are much broader and much more fundamental to civic rights and social life.

Development stages of e-democracy

One way to systematise the democratic use and development of ICTs is to apply the model of development phases of e-government, which highlights the steps and the order of actions to be taken when proceeding from the current situation towards the e-government vision. The phases that have generally been observed to be sequential in e-government development are usually presented in a four-fold scheme: web presence and information provision, simple interaction and two-way communication, advanced interaction and transaction services and e-transformation in government (see e.g. Macintosh et al., 2002, 235). When applied to e-democracy, this model can be combined with the vision, goals and contextual elements of the development of local e-democracy, as illustrated in Figure 4.

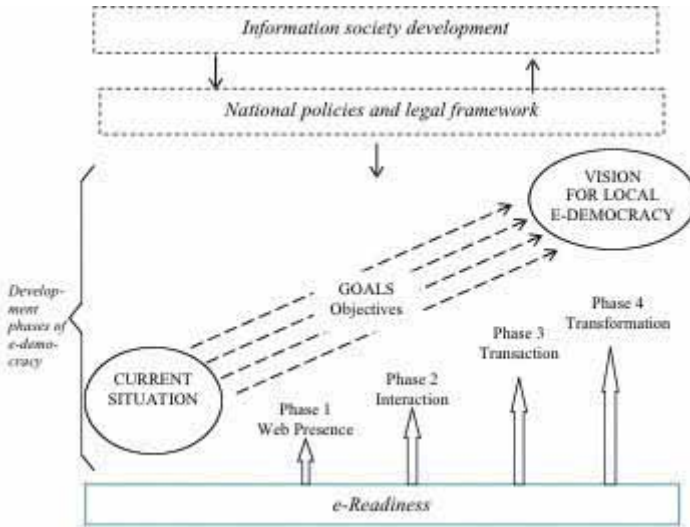


Figure 4. Local e-democracy: development stages in context.

An important message of the figure is that e-democracy can be developed through such basic phases as provision of information, two-way communication (e.g. feedback), political interaction and transaction (e.g. e-consultation and e-referendum), and fully transformed practices and systems of democratic e-governance. This kind of schematic view of the development phases of e-democracy may provide only a general idea of preconditions of the major transitions from one trajectory to another. Strategic development of e-democracy requires more tailored models in which each societal and local context, institutional arrangements and technological solutions are discussed and assessed in detail with a view to each e-democracy application and its specific requirements.

FUTURE TRENDS

We are doomed to develop new forms of democracy in the world of uncertainty. There are such 'megaprocesses' as increased interdependence, technological mediation, partnerships, and individualism that affect our ways of thinking and acting. These challenges are illustrated in Figure 5.

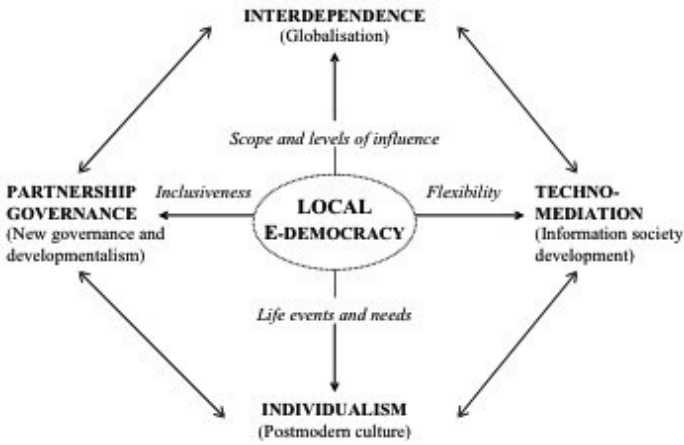


Figure 5. E-democracy and the 'megaprocesses' of global development.

According to Becker and Slaton (2000, 158-209, 211), the future of e-democracy is closely linked with the development of four major movements: global direct democracy movement, new democratic communications systems, the adoption of new mediation mechanisms and transformation of political organisation via the Internet. The features of the coming age of direct individual citizen power that will complement all improvements in representative government and expansion of normal community politics include the following:

- stronger demands for and improved practices of direct democracy
- better understanding of the common direct democratic theory
- increasing use of Scientific Deliberative Polling, voting from the home, electronic deliberation and comprehensive ETM processes
- more weight to broad-based consensus building and non-hierarchical, quantum-style conflict resolution
- increased use of random sampling (e.g. Scientific Deliberative Polling)
- emergence of the new forms of electronically based democratic political organisation (e.g. cyberparties).

Long-term consequences of such a positive turn in the development of democracy are that (1) citizens regain a substantial measure of influence over their government at every institutional level, (2) domestic policies develop toward a fairer allotment of wealth and social services, deeper understanding or sustainability, and more stable social dynamism, and (3) there

will be a positive healing of the human psyche and spirit during the intermediate stages of the Information Age (Becker & Slaton 2000, 211-212).

What may be in progress is the formation of a mosaic-like democracy in which a considerable part of legitimate decision-making takes place in different public forums, within a third sector, in the realm of civil society, and occasionally with the help of market mechanism. At the same time a formal political system may, provided the democratisation really affects the course of events, develop toward new participatory forms. New mediation tools and new virtual spheres for electronic democracy are evidently in the making, and they undoubtedly matter. But still, it is likely that only modest democratic gains can be made through electronic means, if the focus is too narrowly on ICTs (Raab 1997, 166). It may well be that the most profound impacts the electronic means of democracy have on society are in contemporary societies in building open information systems and public discussion forums, activating public discussions and communications, and strengthening user democracy. It may take decades until we experience radical changes that affect the role of political institutions and political culture. In all, we can fairly say that political life and democracy are in a state of confusion on the threshold of the new millennium, and e-democracy is certainly one of the items in the reform agenda that has a lot to give when envisioning the future democracy.

Local democracy matters, at least at the level of rhetoric. Local democracy and related topics have for long been on the agendas of international development organisations, thus emphasising the relevance of local reforms for social and economic development. One of the major official recognitions of the relevance of local democracy is The European Charter of Local Self-Government (Strasbourg, 15 October 1985), which sets out the principle that effective local self-government is essential to democracy. In Europe local and regional level has been given a new, even if minor role in the multi-level governance system of the European Union. In spite of a range of these kinds of official recognitions of the importance of local democracy, innovations in democratic practices have remained modest all over the world. It also looks that it is far from clear what the role of local democracy will be in a wider system of multi-level governance. Yet, there are also changes that evidently pave way to a renewed local e-democracy. A cornerstone is the improving web presence of public institutions with a wide range of information, communication and interactive services. The other fundamental factor

is the overall democratisation through wider everyday use of the Internet. Third element is the increased number of community networks and virtual communities in different parts of the world. Last but not least, there are hundreds of experiments in e-democracy and e-participation which may not have met all the expectations, but have nevertheless taught us important lessons and provided insights of what the future e-democracy may or may not be built on. The fact that the bulk of these experiments have been established and/or sponsored by public authorities and development organisations, does not nullify their significance. All such experiments have considerably improved our understanding of the requirements and issues of local e-democracy.

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The empirical base of the White Book : the European program e-AGORA, the Academy of e-democracy

Context. The European program e-AGORA can be situated in a context of convergence between democratic practices at the local level and the use of technologies of information and communication. It finds its origins in “Network – democracy in the city”, an initiative of the European program URB-AL. This Network, coordinated by the town of Issy-les-Moulineaux, in France, intended to develop a lasting collaboration between cities of Latin America and Europe on the topic of local democracy, by enabling cities of both regions to exchange their practices, know-how, expertise, and to set up common programs to specific problems, mainly regarding citizen participation at the local level. 11 programs, financed by the European Commission (70%) took place both in European and in Latin-American cities, between 1999 and 2003. For instance, the implementation of the participative budget in Issy-les-Moulineaux resulted from the Brazilian experience, acknowledged all over the world and presented to ANDRÉ SANTINI, deputy-mayor of Issy-les-Moulineaux, during a “Network” meeting in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, in May 2000. More over, Issy-les-Moulineaux used its wide experience in the use of ICTs to update the local administrative apparatus, and take into account the demands of citizens by providing them with increasingly innovative services.

It is this broad context that guided the program e-AGORA: encouraging communication between different local bodies and focusing on citizen participation at local level. Starting from the official report which revealed the apathy of citizens with regard to participation at local level, and from their lack of trust in governments, e-AGORA, the Academy of local e-democracy, intended to take advantage of the opportunities offered by ICTs to improve the consultative process and citizen participation, and to revitalize democracy at local level, while at the same time continuing to use the usual methods of consulting the population.

The Program e-AGORA, presented in April, 2003, was accepted in July, 2003, and started on the April 1 2004, for a duration of 25 months (from the April 1 2004 to April 30, 2006). It was financed by the European

Commission (70%) and by the cities and organizations which took part in it (30 %).

e-AGORA, the ambition of a local and international action. The Academy of e-democracy was intended to be an emblematic window on the creation of innovative practices of e-democracy for both regions, by means of a high level of visibility, exchange and extension impact both nationally and internationally. It was its ambition to participate in the widespread motivation of searching for concrete solutions to the needs and demands of the population at the local level, by providing a concrete interpretative key to the mechanisms and correlations of local governments and citizens: the wider participation, the higher transparency; the necessity of associating all the elements of society in a true partnership, and the necessary resulting corollary of the division of local power. At the local level, e-Agora intended to be a sort of incubator favoring the emergence and supporting innovative and adapted local democracy practices, and a centre of communication on local democracy issues. At the international level, the Academy of e-democracy wanted to contribute to the strengthening of international exchanges regarding the co-production of innovative practices and to equally contribute to the promotion and development of experimentation; and finally to the setting up of a center which would enhance better practices.

Purposes. e-Agora aimed at setting up an “Academy of electronic democracy”, i.e. a place of meetings, experimentation, information and training, in order to promote the use of ICTs, and to support, in so doing, the modernization processes related with practices in local democracy. The local governments who participated intended focusing on innovative approaches to citizen participation, including citizen initiatives and concretely setting up e-governance. These stages are meant to support the emergence of a new socio-political culture, which rests on the enlargement of the panoply of means and tools of participation; on the modernization of decision-making processes; on the implementation of more adapted local public policies; on the increase in communication between local authorities and citizens. It was a question of supporting and improving already existing processes; of strengthening and consolidating the links and relations between councilors and society; of enhancing and strengthening local government transparency in order to contribute to the rise of a common culture of local democracy with the help of ICTs, and to the emergence of a participative democracy.

The participating cities, diversity as an attraction. The Latin-American countries in political transition, mainly Brazil and Chile, are very receptive to policies of better governance. That is why the Brazilian and Chilean cities participating in the program were sensitive to the importance of being informed of practices on both sides of the Atlantic, in order to include as many people as possible in these processes. The European cities in the program are linked by a traditional twinning agreement, and are at the heart of the new Europe which is taking shape, being therefore in accordance with requirements of modernity and citizenship. The heterogeneity of the chosen territories (size - population – different social, political and economic situations) allows us to stress the homogeneity of the political will to learn from each other for the benefit of all. This heterogeneity is a decisive factor, because it enables a confrontation of very different approaches to the challenges and expectations of the program. In fact, due to the broad range of differences regarding the political cultures and the organizational structures of these cities, the experiments and results are significant and useful to a larger diffusion of the program.

Initially, e-Agora was composed of two European cities: Issy-les-Moulineaux, in France, and Frameries, in Belgium, two Brazilian cities: Rio Claro and Juiz de Fora, and also Viña del Mar, in Chile, and the ONG ENCUESTRO, from Chile. These cities were chosen because of their active participation in the previous activities of the Network. It is noteworthy that the projects composition was modified due to political changes: Rio Claro was replaced by Ipatinga in Brazil, and ONG ENCUESTRO by the Territorial Observatory of the Centre of Environmental Studies of the State University of São Paulo, Brazil.

The external partner was expected to contribute to the monitoring and capitalization of the whole program, in view of its wide academic and practical experience.

Civil society, the young, local agents and political decision-makers, a real involvement. The chosen targets were political authorities, local civil servants and members of society, represented by a group of citizens and young people representative of their respective cities. The heterogeneity of targets intended to take into account the different references of each city. e-Agora contacted a minimum of 62 and a maximum of 107 direct beneficiaries. These should transmit and share their knowledge with their counterparts, their neighbors, who would become in turn new multipliers of knowledge. We could estimate the number of indirect beneficiaries

at a minimum of 124 and a maximum of 214 persons. The targeted groups were identified by the cities of the program. Their involvement in the project should lead them to directly apply policies and local strategies, or to become updated and acknowledged interlocutors. At any rate, they would all be experienced and trained referents, who would contribute to disseminating the results of the project to their respective organizations. e-Agora tried to meet the needs and expectations expressed by the targeted groups, by means of different tools used during the conception stage. The choice of targets expresses the political will of the town councilors to become involved in new political methods and to implement different practices. It takes into account the expectations of the local civil servants as to the access to information and training which would allow them to implement new policies. Finally, it meets the will of those citizens who wish to become again, by participating more, the center of local policies. As to the political authorities involved, it was a question of considering, at first, the results regarding the identified direct and indirect beneficiaries, and then, all citizens, in both the medium and long term. It is also the integration of practices, the use of new tools, and the popularization of the new culture which would appear from the program, that would represent the core factors leading to the involvement of all citizens. As to the group of citizens and young people, the focus was put on organizing meetings where they could exchange and debate on practices of participation, commitment to the local life of their cities, and their awareness and ability to discover and produce local participation tools.

e-Agora, three “poles” of activities. The activities met, first of all, the needs and expectations of the cities. These needs and expectations were collected at different stages: the commitment of local political authorities - new local governance; surveys sent to the local administrations and citizens; analysis of the data provided by the cities; and finally, analysis of the economic and socio statistical data. These data and the intention of each city to elaborate a scheme to promote participative collaboration (and to reinforce their links of collaboration) contributed to the consolidation of the activities. These latter were conceived and defined from an integrated and consistent perspective. Every group or “pole” would generate specific results. Their interrelationship would also produce particular results. e-Agora was to be accomplished by three big poles of activities.

A pole of experimentation, to develop stronger tools of citizen consultation adapted to each city, in order to enhance citizen participation in local life

and decision-making processes. Initially, the plan was to set up ICT tools to support the processes of participative budget in Issy-les-Moulineaux and in both the Brazilian cities participating in the project. In Frameries Belgium, a more intensive consultation by means of ICTs was planned ; and in Viña del Mar, in Chile, the intention was to consult the population as to the definition of a local program of actions using ICTs, on the basis of the Program of Local Information of Issy-les-Moulineaux (the coordinating city of the project). As we shall see in the following chapter, the initial intentions could not be kept for all the cities. For strictly political reasons – change in government in the three Latin-American cities –, the Brazilian town of Rio Claro was replaced by Ipatinga, and the Chilean city of Viña del Mar completely changed the nature and initial objectives of the project. For institutional and organizational questions, the experimentation in Issy-les-Moulineaux was also reoriented to meet more specific needs. Only the Belgian city of Frameries kept its initial experimentation.

A pole "Training", using electronic means. Its goal was to produce training programs on the use of ICTs to update local life and implement e-local democracy. The success of the program would depend on the ability to meet the needs of information and training of each city - elected representatives, local administration and citizens- in connection with the processes and necessary tools to update their practices of local democracy. To achieve this objective the cities decided to implement a training scheme which would follow the systematic process of e-Agora: experimentation, training and diffusion. The training scheme was intended from the beginning to deepen the knowledge of management of local government, by putting it in perspective with the contribution of ICTs, and by integrating it into a vision of e-governance. In order to implement this training scheme, each city had established a pre-diagnosis of needs, which was to be deepened to properly center the already collected needs and adapt it to the evolution of these needs and practices. The subjects of the different training sessions would follow the evolution of e-democracy and e-governance. The final modules of training might meet the needs, necessities and potentials of the cities in order to give appropriate training to as many people as possible. That is why a specific session might also enhance the participants' knowledge of political and administrative systems and deepen relations between the cities so as to better understand their realities and consequently the fundamental requirements in order to successfully set up the program. The modules and subjects might cover the different aspects of local and munic-

ipal management in order to confront them better and to focus on new practices and issues related to e-democracy. Without going into detail – this training program will be described below with the support of Professor Leonardo Avritzer, from the Federal University of Minas Gerais and the Brazilian Federal Ministry of Education –, a diploma and an innovative program by distance education was offered to the members of e-Agora and other organizations from 14 countries. More than 150 participants pursued the professional Masters in “e-local democracy and new forms of governance”.

A pole of promotion and diffusion of knowledge and results. The diffusion of the program and its results was intended, in order to encourage its promotion both nationally and internationally.

A website and networks were launched. The site was conceived to allow each city to manage its corresponding linguistic version. It is necessary to note that the taking over of the site by the members of the project did not present the expected results. A close link with the former members of “Network – Democracy in the city”, other networks of the Program URB-AL and networks of cities and experts was established since the beginning to incite debate. The participation at national and international conferences (Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Canada, Finland, Germany, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, France) allowed the different members to promote the program. e-Agora was an important participant in the 6th Worldwide Forum of Electronic Democracy (2000) in Issy-les-Moulineaux. This Forum gathers opinion makers from national and local governments, parliamentary institutions, international organizations, society, private companies. e-Agora presented the partial results of its activities on September 28th and 29th, 2005. A White Book, synthesis of all the results of the different activities of the program was then envisaged. It is the object of this book. It takes into account different characteristics of e-Agora: the advantages and potentials as well as the restrictions and limits of the experiments. It is intended to be a guide for the elected representatives, local civil servants and actors of society who would like to take advantage of the existing experiments. It has a long-term vision, and highlights strategies and policies for local authorities who want to enhance their processes of local democracy, to update their practices and to put citizens at the center of their interests. This White Book will be presented to the public on March 30th, 2006, closing date of e-Agora, in Issy-les-Moulineaux. It will be published and diffused in each city of the project. A specific strategy will be undertaken to diffuse it.

e-Agora, a collaborative approach. Conceived as cooperation, the program was closely elaborated with the partner cities in order to identify their motivations, define their first needs and expectations with regard to their local administration and citizens. This cooperation stage allowed us to assess the degree of involvement, the role of each city and the projects implementation. Another essential feature was participation, which was maintained throughout the program. This was also expressed by the involvement of all the cities at each stage. The permanent exchange between the cities (experiments, methods, know-how, expertise, background) was the foundation of an essential dynamics. These specific collaborative approaches permitted a real interactivity between the members and resulted in mutual studies. The analysis of the needs and the continual evaluation of the objectives allowed the monitoring of all the activities of e-Agora. The projects foundation was supported by the high degree of participation and involvement of all the members. It is indisputable that, given the different local contexts, it is this stage which brought an additional value to each partner. This method of management was intended to enable a permanent access to information, in order to structure the implementation process, to contribute to the carrying out of the activities and to point out problematic situations and adapt them to each specific context. Every stage should enable the cities to become aware of their structural and financial potentials in terms of human means, and also to analyze their capacities in terms of institutional means in order for them to be capable of bringing improvements to the existing contexts and implementing new adapted solutions to their processes of local democracy. It was also important to set up a working method which respected cultural, social, sociological, institutional and political differences.

The coordination of e-Agora, an extension of network experiences.

The e-Agora foundation relied on the guideline defined by "Network – local Democracy", namely, promoting practices of local democracy. But it was actually focused on ways of promoting local e-democracy by building up a unifier domain of innovative actions, of diffusion, strengthening and support to local democracy processes. In order to achieve these goals, e-Agora provided an identical coordination structure for each city, composed of a political and technical administrator and a guiding committee, whose composition criteria were left to the cities. As to Issy-les-Moulineaux, a political leader representing the local authority coordinated and directed all the activities, making sure of their implementation in accordance with the objec-

tives. The technical representative was in charge of realization and promotion. The guiding committee was composed of representatives of each city and met for the first time at e-AGORAs opening meeting in Viña del Mar, in July 2004. This meeting was intended to reiterate, clarify and distribute missions and tasks. On political grounds, it was a question of consolidating the measures already taken by the municipalities to make sure of the proper development and evolution of the project. On operational and technical grounds, it was a question of distributing administrative, financial and technical tasks, meeting the actors involved and clarifying their role and expectations. The guiding committee also met during the technical visit organized by Issy-les-Moulineaux in September, 2004, whose goal was to identify and choose, in order to develop and set up, the participation tools to be tested. This visit was a precondition to the feasibility studies on consultation tools and to their implementation. Finally, it met in September 2005 during the 6th Forum and took stock of the last activities to be held until the conclusion of e-Agoras activities. Additional technical meetings were made possible by video-conference and all the Internet means. e-Agora benefited from experience and expertise acquired from the Networks coordination. It took advantage of it to better organize the activities presented below.

Marie Virapatirin

Experimentation in local e-democracy

Methodology. Each experiment followed a similar working process, structured on a methodological framework whose double objective was to set up the necessary means for the right sequence of experimentation, while allowing the people involved to share the same vision and the same level of information, two fundamental aspects to the success of the program. In order to elaborate this methodological framework, a survey was sent in advance to the five participating cities. As to the human, material and financial means, they were conceived within a methodology defined by the elected representatives, the local team, the local partners and the team of experts, based on the nature and goals of the experiment and the specific context of each city. Therefore, this approach allowed the cities to follow the orientations and expectations of e-AGORA program while taking into account local specificities.

Expertise. A team of experts monitored each experiment. Under the leadership of the program's coordinator, its contribution was mainly to set up and to support the application of the methodological process, while supervising the orientation and implementation of activities in different relevant domains such as communication, organization, technical means, coordination and monitoring. The evaluation was done by a fixed team in order to assure objectivity. This approach was considered the most appropriate.

The framework document. The first stage consisted in elaborating the experimental framework together with the representatives named by each city. It took into account:

- the existing framework (namely, the initial context upon which the program had been built) and particularly the features of the cities – the population and neighborhood profile –, its size, its practices in democracy, and its use of ICTs;
- the nature of the experiment itself, by identifying a way of improving local democratic life, and by defining the ICT means which could better favor this improvement in comparison with existing practices (in public life, on the basis of the ICT means actually used by the population);

- the participants and people involved, those from the local team as well as the local (public and private) partners; their role in the project; the working planning; the calendar fixed by e – AGORA; and local agendas. The latter was an essential point as to the completion of the general sequence, because every plan was conceived to be based upon a local event, allowing us to link the experiments to a public and concrete reality in order to get an optimum visibility and to favor the broadest participation possible;

- criteria and data allowing us to assess the experimentations impacts, from both the qualitative and quantitative perspectives.

All these elements were validated by all the project representatives, and a « framework document » was elaborated in order to us to define a homogeneous and shared framework. Later, this document provided the evaluation team with the necessary tools to better apprehend the context and goals of each experiment.

Visits on place. The teams of experts visited each city repeatedly to take stock of the situation at different stages of the program:

- beforehand, for the elaboration and finalization of the working framework, and through meetings with the local teams and partners,

- in the course of the project, to take into account the needs and to advise the representatives,

- during the evaluation, when all the people involved (local teams, partners and population) were contacted by means of discussions and evaluation meetings.

Feasibility studies. On the basis of the framework documents, a certain number of elements regarding the experiments required short feasibility studies.

Discussions and conference calls. Regular exchanges took place between the local teams and e-AGORAs experts, mainly by conference calls and e-mail exchanges, due to the distance and time zone differences which separated the different participants.

The regular use of ICT tools for communication, especially chats and e-mails. In spite of the distance and the multiplicity of participants, the programs deadlines were met and, mostly, the jointly fixed targets were reached. This working organization was made easier and possible thanks to the use of ICTs, which contributed a lot to facilitating the constant communication between all the protagonists. Thus, in addition to telephony, there were various exchanges via electronic mail and instantaneous messages (or chat). It is this context of preparation and supervision that allowed and facilitated the implementation of the experiments.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIMENTS

Juiz de Fora, Brazil. The implementation of a Participative Interactive Budget in this municipality was initially planned. The goal was to increase citizen participation in the process of definition of budgetary priorities, through the integration of Internet tools.

It is important to stress that based upon the already existing experience of Ipatinga, the system was adapted to the reality of Juiz de Fora. Such a strategy turned out to be unproductive in terms of concrete results. The quality of the process implemented by the former administration being questioned, the Participative Budget was dropped in 2005; at the same time, the incoming authorities said that a new system of popular participation would be created. Consequently, e-AGORAs coordination decided to wait for the new proposal to define the integration of the ICTs to the new process. Nevertheless, up to the last moment (July 2005), no concrete proposal was presented to the coordination.

The question of the government transition, the absence of a political agenda compatible with the projects goals – at least up to the fixed deadline – and a different logic of administration adopted by the local authority are certainly some of the many reasons that obstructed the implementation of a concrete experiment in electronic democracy.

In short, one learns with the experience of Juiz de Fora to think more about experimental replication, the constraints linked to eventual adaptations, and the role political variables added to technological variables, may have in the effective implementation of practices of electronic democracy.

Frameries, Belgium. The municipality of Frameries, Belgium, is a result of the fusion of five former towns, including the city of Frameries (www.frameries.be). With 20.706 inhabitants, Frameries is a city where there exists a strong contact between politicians and citizens. In spite of the very recent introduction of its e-governance system, one can already request most of the documents and access other information by Internet. For Frameries, integrating the project meant enlarging the social and political integration of the most needy. The challenge consisted also in linking these persons to the public authorities, to encourage participation without driving them away. The chosen alternative was to set up a medical centre whose purpose was to offer free medical services to the less favored members of the population. This choice also took into account the fact that the subject (a medical centre) would not provoke a future preclusion of the use of the

Internet as an e-democratic tool.

Concrete measures were taken to this effect, such as the setting up of new access centers, and the installation of ten new computers in those already existing. Such access centers were conceived by the local authority to offer a free Internet service to the population of Frameries. In order to develop this activity, trained instructors were hired to receive users and to organize the running of these centers.

Besides these concrete measures, others were carried out as well, such as the development of a new virtual space at the local authority webpage, where citizens could send messages or questions concerning the municipality. In order to diffuse the launch of the medical centre and the website, different advertising materials were produced – letters, pamphlets –, and two reports were diffused by the local television channel, in the newspapers and radio; in addition, posters were posted up in public places.

The projects monitoring team analyzed the process through statistical data regarding attendance at the access centers, and through interviews with the technical team, politicians and users of the new system; moreover, Frameries' technical team provided statistical data concerning the projects implementation itself and the users' profile. An increase in the use of the webpage and a growing interest of the population were observed through the different stages of the project, though the interactive project has not reached the desired success yet. This fact can be explained by the limited possibilities of discussion with regard to the subject (launching a medical centre for the needy), since it is a point of agreement. On the other hand, only one out of three questions referred to the nursing home. As to the access places, the projects aim, which was to supply the needy, was fully achieved. These people are expected to acquire later, through the access centers, a better training which will allow them to better use the city's website for debates. Most of the users are young people and the success of this plan may be an important element in the social inclusion of the less favored sections of the population.

The results show a greater closeness between government and citizens, given the increase in the number of visits to e-AGORA's website, an increase in messages sent and in the number of users. Furthermore, positive effects were noticed which were not initially predicted, such as the increase in the number of visits to the library, in other words the generation of new customers by the installation of computers in this access center.

The improvement of this experiment through providing more information at the website will undoubtedly expand the range of possibilities as to the real-

ization of online debates. Since the data indicates citizens interest in this subject, the strategy must be to increase human resources and to launch new access centers. Finally, it is noteworthy that the use of ICTs in the case of Frameries reinforced the relation – already existing through the Centre for Social Welfare – CPAS – between local government and citizens. According to the Mayor, “ the more we use these technologies, the more we institute the citizens right to question, and the more we are present in neighborhoods “. The use of new technologies may bring a positive and real impact in citizen participation.

Ipatinga, Brazil. Located in the State of Minas Gerais, Southeast Region of Brazil, the municipality of Ipatinga [www.ipatinga.mg.gov.br] has nowadays 227.000 inhabitants, among whom 148.805 in the urban region (Source: Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics). Its Gross Domestic Product attained 2,93 billions of reals – about US\$ 1,31 billions in 2/1/2006 –, distributed as follows: 72,5 % coming from industry, 27,4 % from the service sector and 0,1 % of farming sector. The steel industry contributes first and foremost to this economic context. When it joined the project, Ipatinga already used the Internet as a tool of citizen participation, as part of the process of debate and elaboration of its budget. It allowed a higher involvement of the young and the inclusion of a group of inhabitants who generally were outside this process. In 2005, the municipality set up 16 points of public Internet access supervised by trained monitors. However, participating in the project considerably reinforced and stimulated the local team to extend the communication with the population. Therefore, the local team decided to use telephony as a new consultation tool. The results confirmed that this tool (associated with other means of communication) could be used in the consultation and information exchange processes, which would amplify the scope of the management processes and, at the same time, make them more transparent and decisions more democratic. Ipatinga used for this experiment a free telephone number (0800) available for a given period in four of the seven “regions” or neighborhood where the experimentation took place, which allowed citizens to point out their preferences regarding the local budget. Moreover, the local team also used mobile telephony – through SMS – to encourage the inhabitants of these regions to participate in the process, by indicating their preferences and attending the meetings. The Participative Budget in Ipatinga also used other means of communication with the population, through a dynamic advertising campaign which used posters and brochures, the written press, the radio, cars

with loudspeakers and television channels.

We would like to stress some aspects concerning the profile of the population who participated in this experiment. In general, they were people of very modest socio-economic level and were not members of political parties, had a low level of education and were often unemployed. One half of the interviewees were attending this kind of meeting for the first time, according to the evaluation teams report.

A slight increase in the number of participants was noticed between 2004 and 2005. Nonetheless, we cannot maintain that this result was achieved only by the use of telephony (it would be necessary to undertake a more detailed study). On the other hand, more than half of those who participated in the meetings to vote for the budget declared that it was the telephone calls that explained their attendance. This shows that a massive phone campaign can mobilize the electorate (people declared that the Mayor's voice had influenced them). However, only 5 % of the 30.000 persons contacted by telephone attended the debate meetings on the Participative Budget. This prevents us, for the time being, from maintaining that citizen participation can be reinforced in this way.

It was noticed that only 1/3 of the inhabitants used the Internet, and that the access centers were not much exploited. Few participated in both stages of the Participative Budget, namely the individual indication of preferences and the participation in collective debates during the assemblies polls, which is in passing indispensable for debate on collective life.

It is noteworthy that e-AGORAs monitoring revealed that, before the Internet was used for budgeting indication, meetings of this kind took place in every neighborhood of the city. From 2001 on, this was made easier by the Internet, but technicians do not consider, as already mentioned, the possibility of extinguishing these assemblies where Local Budgets priorities are submitted to vote. Among the potentialities of the electronic interactivity in Ipatinga, we must underline the increase in the participation of the young, which was one of the goals of the Participative Budgets program in this city. Since the inclusion of the Internet in the system of Local Participative Budget, a regular increase in participation by women was observed as regards the process of indication of preferences. In the first year of use of the Internet, the majority of the participants were men, but in 2005 women's participation exceeded that of men as regards the same process. Although it seems premature to establish a causality relation between the use of the Internet and the change in the participants' profile, it was the case and deserves more in-depth studies. It is necessary to underline, on the

other hand, that the greatest benefit for the group comes from the fact that it can jointly decide on the destination of part of the municipal budget through this program, and follow the activities of the local government, which associated with the use of ICTs increases the possibilities of a more appropriate selection of the preferences and more adapted funds allocation to the least favored groups, what in its turn leads indirectly to benefits for the whole community.

Stand of OPA in the school library of the Local Education Network – Monitors help the population with the register

Viña del Mar, Chile. The city [www.munivina.gov.cl], located on Chile's central coast (V Region), is 120 Kms from the capital, Santiago of Chile. It is a seaside resort, where cultural and tourist activities were developed and consolidated throughout its history, and which is nowadays nationally and internationally distinguished in these domains. The 2002 census revealed that Viña del Mar counted 286.931 inhabitants. Nowadays, it is also a modernized city which tries to diversify its activities in turning its attention to the service sector, particularly to university education.

Since the launch of e-AGORA, the local administration of Viña del Mar has shown a strong will to participate – on a par with the process of democratization characterizing the country in general –, but it was already foreseeing the limitations which would appear in case the experiment focused only on popular participation. The concern was that difficulties could appear given the concrete existing reality. In fact, Viña del Mar was longing to speed up the process of local democratization, since citizens were not used to participating in the public life – in the consultation and/or debate of public policies set up by the local administration. Although the democratic practices were not developed in Viña del Mar in the same way as in the other cities of the project, the former adopted a very positive perspective regarding ICTs, since these tools were used to improve public services and to encourage and strengthen citizen participation.

Even if the plan initially conceived was not completely implemented, it is important to underline that e-AGORA introduced into the local political agenda debate on the use of ICTs and the Internet as tools in strengthening the relation between government and society. It was an important step, since one of the requirements of the general plan was to make public the experiment. Although timid compared with the other experiments of the project, the diffusion provoked debate between the members of the local

team and encouraged them to contact the community associations, which often act as go-betweens between the municipality and society. These associations were very motivated about using ICTs, because these latter were seen as the means of facilitating and renewing the bureaucratic procedures and rendering the local government more transparent. The monitoring of this experiment showed that Viña del Mar was linked to various collaborative networks involving other actors of the city (e.g. the University of Santa Maria), and that it included the project e-AGORA in its local strategic plan.

Issy-les-Moulineaux, France. This town (www.issy.fr) of 60.000 inhabitants is located in the vicinity of Paris. It has a dynamic economy, being the seat of some of the main ICT companies in France. Since 70 % of its inhabitants are connected to the Internet – $\frac{3}{4}$ by high-speed access –, Issy-les-Moulineaux is a worldwide reference in the use of new technology and innovative practices of electronic democracy. This context is the result of a process initiated in 1996 with the Local Plan of Information, which introduced new technology into the political agenda of the Municipality. Among various initiatives, we can mention the Interactive Town Council, which allows citizens to interact with their political representatives during the sessions of the Council, and the Citizen Panel – a tool of online consultation which uses a representative sample of the citizens – which can be consulted by the municipality as regards different subjects. After the elaboration of the French regarding “close democracy”, the municipality launched in 2002 the system of Neighborhood Councils – 4 of these councilors were chosen by direct election. These councils have a budget for the neighborhoods and for the functioning of the council itself. Since the first election of the four councilors in 2002, the voting has been completely carried out through the use of Internet. Although Issy-les-Moulineaux is a city with a high degree of Internet access, as previously mentioned, public centers designed for this process were set up and supervised by monitors who helped in the use of the voting system.

In December 2005, this experiment was repeated, but this time in a more audacious way, with the intention of increasing even more citizen participation and the communication between candidates and citizens. 70 % of the costs associated with this process were financed by e-AGORA. Whereas the online elections was accomplished in a single day in 2002, it took a week in 2005. The number of public centers was doubled compared with the previous elections. Another novelty in 2005 was the inclusion of touch-screen computers, what allowed citizens to vote without using the keyboard or

mouse. At the same time, a website was especially conceived for elections, with a didactic and playful content, and a three-dimensional virtual figure who interacted with the user.

Finally, one of the main innovations was the launch of a blog for the candidates, which made them more visible and allowed an open dialogue with the citizens and between the candidates themselves. At this blog, which was deactivated once the process was started – to avoid influencing the electors –, the candidates could present their plan and their motivation and answer the citizens' questions. At the same time, this initiative allowed the creation of a space of virtual debate between the candidates and citizens. Furthermore, all the candidates were offered a training program on the use of blogs. The candidates who did not feel comfortable with the new interactive tool were able to get individual help. Unfortunately, for the period of comprehension of the site for voting by Internet, the contractor was not consulted about the possibility of presenting an online questionnaire, which could have been used as a model for this type of evaluation. As a result, it was not possible to quantitatively assess the impressions of the citizens, in a definite and dependable way, of the innovations, and particularly the impact of the use of blogs. However, if we analyze the contents of the blogs, and the impressions gathered on the spot as regards the electoral process in general, we can conclude that these innovations are, indeed, initiatives which point to the existence of good practices of electronic democracy.

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Different experiments in perspective

As already pointed out in the previous chapters, e-Agora is a collaboration program between the European Union and Latin America. Its objective is to promote the use of local democracy tools and to contribute to the increase of management transparency and effectiveness in governance contexts. In this sense, e-Agora tries to provide answers to a general set of problems which occupies all contemporary democratic governments, and which finds a privileged space of action at the local level. In recent years the criticism of political institutions has grown in academic institutions as well as in social organizations and various international bodies. Roughly, the main points can be gathered around three axes :

I. there is a certain general agreement to posit the existence of a democratic deficit, based on the increase of citizen indifference and (or) mistrust towards politicians and political institutions, and this should be changed in order to improve the quality of democracy (Clift 2003, Hague and Loader 1999);

II. it was considered that public administration is ineffective and expensive, and that it should therefore be reformed to give better results (Osborne and Gaebler 1994, Hughes 2001, Heeks 2001); and, finally,

III. changes derived from globalization have obliged the public sector to intervene in new domains, interacting with other governmental and (or) non-governmental actors– for instance, in subjects related to peace, safety, institutionality of international markets or preventative measures when faced with pandemics, which cannot be approached by governments in isolation.(Pierre 2000, Castells 1997, 2001).

To this diagnosis was added the perception of the fact that technology could become an effective tool in renovating the functioning of political systems. ICT could change the functioning rules of public administration in order to improve management results, for instance, by increasing an authority's capacity to respond and by reducing administrative processes; by creating more of (and better) contact networks with citizenship, in new domains

of participation; or by diffusing information about government activities. It is in this context that e-Agora tries to promote a political transformation, by taking into account the fundamental role of local governments – due to their closeness to the citizens and to their involvement in the management of the everyday environment. One of the basic concepts regarding promotion of initiatives consists in the fact that it can generate a positive linkage between the increase in citizen participation and government activities, since politicians would think they were pressed by their electors to improve their results and processes, and this would lead to a renewal of their legitimacy.

Issy-les-Moulineaux (France), Frameries (Belgium), Viña del Mar (Chile), and Ipatinga and Juiz de Fora (Brazil) were the cities which participated in the whole or in some stages of the project (Juiz de Fora did not complete its experimentation). In accordance with the philosophy of e-Agora, the management of experimentations was organized by general agreement and with flexible criteria, from a shared idea of e-democracy. The various possibilities of Internet and mobile telephony were conjugated with traditional techniques to stimulate participative processes. With its decentralized and multilingual structure – French, Spanish, Portuguese and English, and supported by each of the participating cities, e-Agora's Website (www.e-agera.org) became the space of exchange of experiences between the cities, in the form of chat rooms and forums.

Thus, e-Agora is a program of electronic democracy, which in turn consists in the use of electronic means of communication to give the citizens the power to control legislators and politicians responsibility on their actions in the public sphere, by strengthening the transparence of political processes, as well as by improving the quality of training and opinion institutions, or by increasing citizen participation in the process of decision-making (Trechsel et al. 2003). This definition allows us to analytically differentiate between different behavior spheres put in contact in practice, as we can notice in table 1.

Table 1: e-democracys domains of action

Domain	Description	Behaviors
Citizens as receptors of information	We try to improve the quality of received information; this should have positive consequences with regard to the increase of citizen trust in political and administrative systems. The transparency of government activity has an effect of control on government and a didactic function for citizens, who would become more prepared for decision-making.	The creation of Web pages with information about the government, or the monitoring of legislative activities through TIC are placed in this sphere. By different means, all analyzed experiments developed activities in this line.
Orientation to the citizen user – receptor of public services	The quality of performance, which can be attained by the control of one's requests, is highlighted; for instance, through the possibility of monitoring the different phases	Programs as the Ventanilla Unica in Viña del Mar could be understood in this perspective.
Citizen Participation faced with the right granted by sovereignty	In this point, the processes of democratic participation are supported by the use of TIC. Depending on the characteristics of the project, the results can promote the proper execution of representative democracy or introduce and make mechanisms of direct democracy easier.	Online consultations, electronic vote or participation in the comprehension of public policies. The participative budget in Ipatinga and the Interactive Municipal Council in Issy-les-Moulineaux are interesting examples.

The herein analyzed programs include all these objectives. In Frameries, the purposes were to approach the digital gap – with public Internet-access places and prepared training staff - in order to encourage virtual participation by means of a web space created to this effect and whose experimentation was aimed at promoting citizen participation in the decision-making regarding the implementation of a health centre with public funds. In Viña del Mar, the objective was to accomplish a popular consultation by physical and virtual media and to define a public policy of promotion of ICT. All in all, although finally it does not occur, the results of consul-

tation were materialized in the form of digitized public services. Issy-les-Moulineaux continued its activities of promotion of virtual tools of participation: chats, blogs and electronic vote. Specifically, the project financed the continuation of a citizen participation program which had started with the creation of neighbourhood councillors in 2002. In 2005, they were chosen by citizens through electronic vote, and, besides, blogs were created so that the candidates could interact with citizens. In Ipatinga (where the participative plan has been in place since 1990, and citizens have been sending their priorities by Internet since 2001), there was an effort to the effect of strengthening citizen involvement in the participative budget, by means of a free telephone number through which one could indicate ones priorities with regard to the use of public funds; of sending sms; and of mayors serial calls inciting citizens to participate. It is to be noticed that the array of possibilities is as large as the combination of strategies and ways of using these technologies.

Next, experiments are compared with the intention of learning from their weaknesses and their strengths, successes and failures. The organization of the text is three-fold; first, we shall analyze the institutional and organizational variables which intervened in the development of each case. Secondly, we undertake the analysis of the technologies used, by considering questions such as the digital gap, technical requirements, and the relation between participative experience, actors characteristics and the use of CIT. Finally, we shall turn to the processes of communication by means of which we tried to encourage citizen participation. These analyses will, at the end, allow us to draw some conclusions about the forces and weaknesses of the experiment.

5.1 Institutional and organizational variables

In this section, we shall compare the different institutional and organizational elements which have an influence on the implementation of initiatives and on its success or failure. Firstly, we can underline that all cities, independently of the power structure existing in their respective countries (Chile and France are centralized countries, while Belgium and Brazil have a federal territorial organization), developed – without institutional constraints – their competences with the object of generating areas of citizen participation. Thus, the projects configuration differences as regards objectives and techniques could not be explained by institutional variables, since all the

cities' level of self-governance was sufficient to permit them to manage their participative programs.

On the other hand, if we focus on the governments involved, their actions and their logic of functioning, which in certain cases was opposed to the basic parameters of e-Agora, we can draw some interesting conclusions. The experiments show that policy and actors' involvement are the most appropriate variables in the understanding of continuity and success of participation processes. This was very clear in the responsibility regarding the experiment itself. Due to the fact that the project starts from "the top" – in the sense that it is the governments that decide to take part in e-Agora, and that gather the basic conditions to do so the involvement of political actors is fundamental to the process of communication. Once the project is launched, its success depends on the support and active collaboration of citizens "from the bottom up" – in the process of participation.

Ipatinga is a nice example of positive functioning, as the diffusion of the mayors' telephone messages did succeed in increasing the levels of participation in this already traditional experiment in the city. Frameries proved the advantages of counting on government and political authorities' involvement. On the other hand, in Juiz de Fora and Viña del Mar it was clear that there were problems caused by the politicization of the experiments. Both cities had changes in government after the project had been set up. Juiz de Fora is a proof that it is not technology which is the main factor in the success of an experiment, but rather organizational variables. In the case of Viña del Mar, although the project survived a change in government, a series of problems was also revealed. Among the most serious, we could mention the change in strategy and objectives: in short, what was conceived at the beginning as a plan of participation, became a political strategy of increase of municipal involvement in international networks of collaboration, and of introduction of the technological subject – in its administrative sense – in the political agenda, which had not been involved in the digitalisation of processes until then. It had, in spite of the positive aspects for the municipal government, negative consequences as regards its development, and not enough advantages as to the strengthening of democratization (a particularly relevant subject in a society with a strong authoritarian tradition and in the middle of a process of democratic strengthening). Obviously, there was no real participation (as we shall see in detail in the section dedicated to communication), nor clear policies which would com-

pensate for the digital gap, and citizen participation did not have any impact on political decision-making.

What these experiments show is a risk, already mentioned in the literature, concerning the realization of traditional mechanisms of direct democracy, such as referendum and popular consultations. That is to say, a possible self-promotion use by governments to reassert or to consolidate their power. In this sense, the more we extend the domain of intervening actors – councilors from the various parties, civil servants, voluntary organizations – the bigger will be the chances that the participative processes themselves, and not the electoral agendas of the leaders, take over the process.

5.2 Technology, participation and digital gap

Our main interest in this section consists in the analysis of the correlation between the technologies used, participation and the digital gap. We pointed out that the promotion of political participation by ICT could ignore the least privileged and/or prepared sectors of the population and, in that case, facilitate the creation of more visible and powerful groups, which could benefit from certain advantages during the definition of public policies. In the European cities participating in the project – which are part of ancient industrial and peripheral regions, and present problems of unemployment and social cohesion – as well as in those of Latin America, we identify large sectors without an access to ICT – particularly Internet. However, experiments show that an active policy of creation of public Internet-access centers monitored by prepared instructors, and stimulation of participation, could have positive results and give a voice to groups which are generally excluded from the process. Thus, we can underline, looking at the results of several experiments, that the citizen groups most implicated in the use of mechanisms of direct democracy through the use of new technologies, were groups traditionally excluded.

The public Internet-access centers had a big success in Frameries. It can be verified by the increase in the number of visits, which tripled in the first months of the program, and by the users' profile. Among the principal users are the underprivileged groups (unemployed, retired, disabled persons, participants in social reintegration programs, etc.) and students. Several among them had a very basic knowledge of Internet tools, which was not an obstacle to their initial participation. Another positive element is the increase in traditional public places. Far from supplanting them, Internet access in

libraries created new customers, who also used other services offered by these institutions. This experiment also promoted intergenerational exchange.

Issy-les-Moulineaux has become a reference by its use of new technology since 1996, with the Local Plan of Information. With the advertising led by the government and the public access to computers, the Interactive Council and the Citizen Panel have applied interesting methods to incite some sectors of the population to participate. Due to problems coming from the online setting up of a virtual questionnaire, we have no relevant data to assess to what extent these mechanisms have proved to be effective in approaching the problem of the digital gap.

On the other hand, we can note that the lack of a political strategy compensating this problem could increase the digital gap between social sectors, their marginalization and demagoguery in the process of decision-making. This is perhaps the case in Viña del Mar, where the use of public access places was discarded since the beginning, preventing a clear initiative of promotion of ICT in public management. But even in relatively successful participation processes, several difficulties were evidenced. In Ipatinga, the existence of the participative budget during the nineties and even the possibilities of participation via Internet had rendered explicit in citizen agenda the advantages of this process. e-Agora contributed then to the improvement of these means, with the promotion of incremental technologies and a higher involvement of the mayor as to the increase in citizen participation. However, although the number of calls to indicate preferences considerably increased, it did not have significant repercussions on the attendance at meetings.

These observations prove a starting point. While thinking that technology can contribute to solving the problems posed in the introduction to the present chapter, e-Agora was persuaded since its beginnings that technology does not have any impact on social processes. That is to say, far from having a linear effect on organizations and processes, the results of the incorporation of technology depend on their social context (Bijker et. al 1989). Thus, the use of the same technology generally has different effects in different social and cultural structures. As the experiments showed, i) the context of use and the actors who intervene have an influence on the results regarding incorporation of technology, and ii) citizen participation is a complex and multidimensional process with regard to which we still have a lot

to do, and from which we must continue to learn .

5.3 Communication as tool

As we have already noted, the experimentations we analyze show the central role of political actors in achieving a significant citizen participation. This is noticeable in the case of Ipatinga, where the mayors messages had a high repercussion on the budget indication calls. Frameries and Ipatinga are examples of awareness and involvement of the local politicians in the project, which enhances the possibilities of development of efficient communication processes. In the case of Frameries, communication was achieved by electronic mails and a large coverage in the mass media (radios, local newspapers, television); posters were also put up at the entrance to public places to encourage political participation in the virtual sphere. This effort seems to have produced good results regarding the strengthening of citizen involvement.

In Viña del Mar, the mentioned changes in strategy also led to a change in communication strategy. In spite of the intention to solve the problem of the digital gap and to include the marginalized sectors in the process, the program was not diffused to the whole population of the city. It had been considered that “physical” consultation might be linked to the program Municipality in your Neighborhood – consisting in the decentralization of local services through the launch of public assistance offices in various regions of the city, but finally it was not successful. The consultation process was held as part of social programs (the results would mainly represent the groups linked up to the municipality by social programs). Another difficulty lies in the programs diffusion in the mass media: some communications were broadcast by cable television, and events upon invitation by the mayors were organized (for the minority groups of the population belonging to the political and economic elite). Since no strategy of promotion by radio, press or open television channels was developed, only these specific groups were impacted as a result. The positive element to be pointed out, at least potentially, was the involvement of the associations’ representatives, who we interested in the subject and in participating in the project.

5.4 Conclusions

The comparison of results allows us to draw some conclusions. The first one is the necessity to generate a structure of alliances during the launch of programs allows a continuity over time, independently of electoral periods and of possible changes in government. Political involvement seems to be the

key to a good strategy of diffusion, which works depending on the encouragement to participation.

Secondly, we stress that the policies of compensation of the digital gap are not necessarily expensive and that, in communities in which the human aspect still remains – in relatively small groups of correlation promoters –, we can develop effective policies to stimulate the strengthening of political participation, social cohesion and digital training of the targeted groups (Framerías is a remarkable example).

A third element to be analyzed in detail, but which we do not want to ignore here, is the problem of temporality. As is shown by the experience in Ipatinga, years of participation generate an additional knowledge of public subjects and control on governments, which fade away, in the other sense, with the development of isolated experiments, or with convocations to participation that later prove to be without consequences on the implementation of public policies based on these decisions.

Finally, we note that the experiments showed that citizen participation and the use of ICT to encourage it, are ways leading to an improvement in the quality of democratic systems: they allow an increase in trust in political systems, transparency of government action and effectiveness of administrative techniques. But a paradox appears: the success or failure of these processes depends to a great extent on the political actors, who would find themselves encouraged to render their way of governing more transparent and democratic.

Yanina Welp

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The pole of training : opening ways to the implementation of practices in local democracy

The present paper presents a fruitful experience of university extension: a distance education program, offered by the Federal University of Minas Gerais – UFMG and the project e-AGORA. This project intended to implement an Academy of Electronic Democracy, in order to test and promote the use of new electronic technologies – ICTs – in the service of local democracy. We started from the principal that the new electronic technologies constitute an efficient tool to the search for solutions to several dilemmas faced by governments, municipalities and citizens, not only in Brazil but also in Latin America and in the rest of the world.

The project integrated actions developed in the context of the NET URB-AL – a cooperation program between the European Union and Latin America, whose objective was the elaboration of thematic nets of horizontal partnerships. The projects coordination was based in Issy-les-Moulineaux, France. As to the electronic supply, it was provided by the Project Participative Democracy (Prodep), of the Department of Political Sciences of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), which was e-AGORA's central office of creation, implementation and maintenance. The program was launched with the support of the structure of "e-ProInfo: Colaborative Educational Environment", maintained by the Ministry of Education of Brazil (MEC). This program was offered in three languages: Portuguese, Spanish and French, with teachers from Brazil, Argentina, France and Switzerland. Altogether, citizens and municipal actors from 11 countries participated in it.

At the end of this experimentation, we are able to develop an analysis of the organizational structure as well as of the results of this program. In the first section, we will present the participants' profile, and will roughly indicate some elements about the creation, implementation and functioning of the program. In the second section, we will present some results and finally, in the third section, we will draw some conclusions.

1. Structure and participants

a) The participants' profile

The program " local e-democracy and new forms of Government " developed in connection with the project " e-AGORA: The Academy of Electronic Democracy " may be analyzed under different aspects. Due to the limits of this paper we will focus only on the participants' profile and the dynamics of the program.

As to the participants' profile, we may emphasize some points. First of all, we intended to carry out a program which could link municipal agents and citizens from several European and Latin-American cities. The goal was to supply participation promoting tools to these social and public actors in the local life. The starting point was that if local government actors and citizens were enrolled in the program, they could contribute to the collective construction of solutions.

A second point regarding the participants' profile refers to the fact that the program reached different countries and cultures. The courses were implemented simultaneously in three languages, which enabled the contact between the protagonists of the social life in their respective cities, and between different economical, social, political and cultural contexts. This intercultural aspect facilitated the diffusion of concrete experimentations carried out in several places distant of each reality.

b) The creation, implementation and functioning of the program

Next, we will present the programs framework. The challenge to the pole of training was to create an educational environment which could offer students theoretical background on several subjects, giving them systematization tools and linking them to their particular reality. At the same time, we tried to stimulate them to interact with the teachers and colleagues. This was achieved by means of specific tools – which will be presented next –, in a favorable environment in which the students presented the subjects, experiences, expressing their own points of view – not always identical, but for this very reason productive from a perspective of theory-practice conjunction.

With the intention of enabling, but also of discovering new experiences on electronic democracy, the program was focused on the development and promotion of the use of new technologies in public management and citizen participation practices.

We will proceed, next, to the description of some points regarding the program's creation, and some of the tools which made interaction between the participants possible. Because it was a distance education program constituted by people from several nationalities, we were careful to ensure that all participants had a similar understanding of the program and its supporting structure, since this was available only in Portuguese. To this effect, a glossary was conceived in three languages to explain some of the tools used in each part of the program, as well as a tutorial in which some of these tools were detailed step by step.

All this information was available at www.democraciaparticipativa.org/eagora, which was a sort of reference point for students. The team used this website to supply basic information, such as the system requirements (hardware and softwares) which might be met. It was also a means for the students to get more information about this experimentation, such as the program's goals, the subjects, the teachers who would participate. It was through this website that they could enroll in the program in a simplified way – specially as regards international students, who could do it in their own language.

e-AGORAs program used e-ProInfo's structure, which is available for consultation at www.eproinfo.mec.gov.br. Each student had a user login identifier and a password which gave them access to the courses.

One of the main supporting tools was the video. Each teacher, together with the Prodep team, prepared 3 to 5 videos in which they exposed the contents of their courses. It turned out to be a good option, given that it was a distance education program. In this way, the teachers expressed their arguments and analyses on the subject under discussion. The students could, in turn, get to know, see and hear their teachers.

In addition to the videos, the teachers used texts – which were obligatory readings – straightly connected to the subjects. For each module, all the texts were to be posted in the three languages.

The structure of e-ProInfo enabled us to provide students with other complementary training materials, and to recommend – through the link "References" – texts, articles, websites, books, chapters of books and so many other materials.

Moreover, the teachers were provided with other tools, such as: agenda, surveys, news, notices and the library, in which the students' work was available for consultation. Thus, it can be said that these were the "non interactive" moments of the course, those in which the students had to make an extra effort, since they had to build an individual study time-table

and their questions were not answered immediately.

However, there were also interactive moments between the participants, in which they could talk to the teacher, to other students and to the technical team. The chat "Conceiving a participative dialogue South-North", which took place in the last days of the program, was left to the teachers' criteria. This chat was a rather profitable moment, because it enabled the exchange of information and experiences between different cultures, nationalities and languages.

Besides the chats, another interactive moment was the forum of discussion, in which there was no minimum number of contributions, each student being allowed to participate many times, formulating new questions or commenting on the points on which the teacher wanted to focus. The forums were divided into two categories: oriented study and debate. In the first, the teacher formulated questions in connection with the obligatory readings, so that the students could express and solve their doubts. The second forum, as suggested by its name, was meant to be a discussion of a given subject. The students could express their opinions more openly, but they were always led by questions and contributions from the teacher.

As we mentioned, we cannot expose here all the issues related to the creation, maintenance and available tools. However, considering the elements spelled out above, it is legitimate to say that the structure of e-ProInfo constitutes an important tool in enabling the use of new technologies in university extension.

In this way, the program gathered technical qualities – because it was provided with a large online infrastructure of experimental and theoretical exchange – and elements favoring interaction between a broad public with the aim of improving and setting up new technologies and of encouraging new experiences.

2. Results

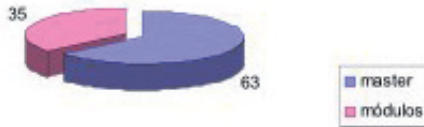
At the end of e-AGORAs training pole experience, we dispose of data which allow us to affirm that we are dealing with an undoubtedly fruitful experimentation. Due to the limits of the present paper, we have to content ourselves with the analysis of these results under two perspectives. The first one, statistically based, aims to present some data which illustrate the amplitude and diversity of this experimentation. The second one refers to the students' own perception of the program.

First of all, it is necessary to emphasize that the results are quite encourag-

ing, mainly because it deals with a project with such ambitious goals. Originally, we had 110 students enrolled in the program and an average of 87 in modules 1 and 2. However, from the 3rd module on, we had a reduction in the total number of enrolled students to 98. The graph below shows us in which module they were – master refers to those who were enrolled in all the modules of the program, the remainder referring to those who were enrolled in some of these modules.

Graph 1

Registrations by module
Total of 98 students

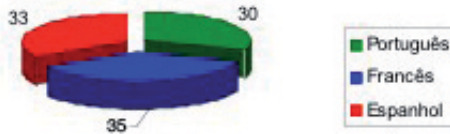


Source: PRODEP, Program " e-AGORA: Academy of Electronic Democracy ", 2005.

When analyzing the students' registrations by group – by language –, we notice that, in spite of there being more French students than Spanish and Portuguese, the numbers indicate that they balanced out.

Graph 2

Students enrolled by language

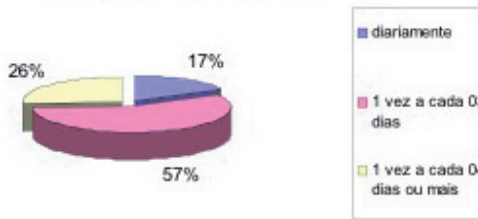


Source: PRODEP, Program " e-AGORA: Academy of Electronic Democracy ", 2005.

An interesting fact of the program regards the access to the courses, since it shows that the students followed the activities and became informed of the material available online. On average, 17 % accessed the courses daily and 57 % did it at least once every three days.

Graph 3

Average of access to the courses

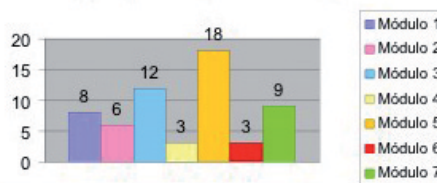


Source: PRODEP, Course " e-AGORA: Academy of Electronic Democracy ", 2005.

A more precise evaluation of the progress and interactive dynamics of the course is attained when highlighting some data on the use of the tools. The Content Tools are quite illustrative. The program provided access to a large set of texts, made available by several authors in several languages. We had altogether 214 texts, including obligatory readings and references such as articles, books, chapters of books, websites and others.

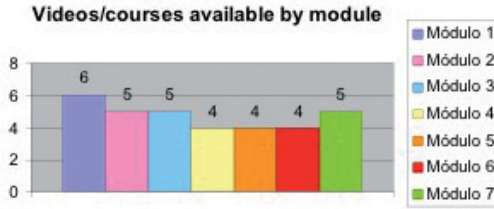
Graph 4

Obligatory readings available by module



Source: PRODEP, Program " e-AGORA: Academy of Electronic Democracy ", 2005. Furthermore, 33 videos / courses produced by the teachers were also available.

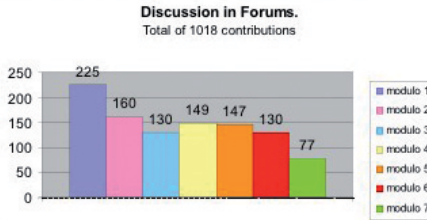
Graph 5



Source: PRODEP, Program " e-AGORA: Academy of Electronic Democracy ", 2005.

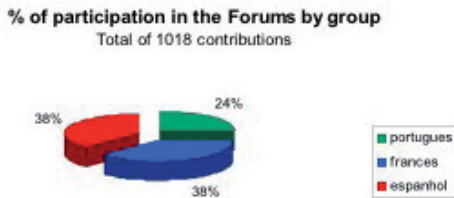
As to the interactive dynamics, data in connection to the forums and chats are quite telling. Throughout the 7 modules, 35 topics of discussion were proposed, totalizing 1018 contributions, which resulted in a rich discussion in terms of ideas and comparing experiences.

Graph 6



Source: PRODEP, Program " e-AGORA: Academy of Electronic Democracy ", 2005.

Graph 7



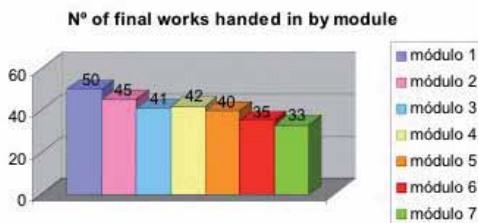
In the forums, we always asked provocative question, focusing on questions that encouraged the students to include concrete cases in their argumentations. The result was a very rich discussion, in which the students sometimes agreed, sometimes disagreed, but the point was not the consensus, but rather the diversity of opinions, the clear and natural presentation of the specificities and the plurality of thought.

Allied to the forums, we also had chats. The first of these took place at the

early stages of the program. It allowed an initial contact between the teacher and the groups, each language in a different time-table. In this first contact, teachers and students got to know each other and exchanged impressions of the program – what the expectations of each were, the materials, texts, videos. The second chat “Conceiving a participative dialogue South-North”, took place in the last days of the program and its organization was left up to the individual teacher. To sum up, 35 chat rooms were set up, totaling 42 hours of discussion, with the presence of 180 participants.

Another tool that helped assess students’ performance was the final work, an essay of about 10 pages handed in at the end of each module, which should link the contents and concepts dealt with in the courses to the students’ individual experiences.

Graph 8



Source: PRODEP, Program “ e-AGORA: Academy of Electronic Democracy ”, 2005.

When analyzing the subjects and contents of the essays, we can notice that the objective of linking content to experience was achieved. This is proved by the diversity of concrete cases reported in the essays and their analysis based on the concepts worked out by the teachers.

The articles reported participative experiences as well as electronic participation experiments such as the electronic vote, implemented in several countries. Others presented data on the impacts of the use of new electronic technologies in certain localities, in connection with the use of public places in order to facilitate digital inclusion. No less important were several essays which emphasized the use and the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in participative and electronic democracy.

The most important point as regards these final works was this conjunction between concepts and practices, which means a further step towards the unification of academic and everyday knowledge.

Finally, we can say that out of 98 students enrolled in the program, 57% completed the modules where they were registered. 64% of this 57% received the Professional Qualification – Upgrading Certificate (professional master), and 36 % received the Updating Certificate.

Table 2: Students having completed the program

Certificates / type	Groups			Total
	Portugues	French	Spanish	
Professional Upgrading – Master	10	12	13	35
Updating	5	6	9	20
Total of students having completed the program	15	18	22	55

Another fact that finally demonstrates that the pole of training achieved its goals is the significant number of statements that present the course as an innovative and fruitful experience. Let us have a look at some of them:

“ The importance of the program, in both personal and professional levels, was very significant, since it provided us with knowledge and introduced us to other professionals from several countries, with complementary ideas and knowledge.

The participation in the forum allowed us such an exchange. The importance of net working is fundamental to the progress of participative democracy”. José Perez – Malaga - Spain

“ I think courses of this nature contribute to the better coordination of public policies, forwarding the technical responsible team to the necessity of introducing several social actors in the discussions and definitions of public policies, so that our work really contributes to the reduction of social inequalities and to a better interaction between citizens and government ”. (Andréa Lage – Ipatinga – Brazil)

" I believe that in my future activities this course and all its teachings will be potentialities to new forms of undertaking local politics along with a new vision of other realities.

In general, I believe this experimental realization was extraordinary. It was productive because it allowed the conjunction, despite everything, of routine and daily obligations, intellectual challenge and practical illustration of issues in public politics that did not exist in Portuguese; and the objective and rigorous conjunction of people and political thoughts beyond the traditional liberal and neoliberal thoughts which are sold in Portugal and in Europe ". Jorge Neves – Castelo Branco – Portugal)

" I think there were very productive teachings, different experimentations, different opinions, different contributions, along the program's discussions and forums, between students, representatives of different cities in the world.

In fact, it was important because we were allowed, from computerized a city like Parthenay, to put at once the question of the models that are going to dominate the forms of participation and of local government, mainly the contributions that are going to allow the popularization of democracy that, undoubtedly, is going to constitute the second challenge, the first one, which we only begin to face in the beginning of the 1990 years, having been the social diffusion of the Internet, with the inclusion of citizens in practices adjusted to the local questions ". Pierre Desons - Parthenay - France

" This is an opportunity that really encourages our practice in the Civil Service. The companions' reports provided me a wider vision of other realities and other contexts distinct to ours.

The framework did not impoverish the relations between teachers and students. On the contrary, we could notice the diversity of styles. This gives us many possibilities. This course broke my resistances regarding distance education". Gisele Machado – Juiz de Fora - Brazil

" In fact, what was extremely interesting was the opportunity of reflecting on the possible use of the new technologies in the building of participative local democracy. But, for us, it was also possible to evaluate the necessary way to get there, specially in terms of training. Training, of course, for mayors and politicians, but also for citizens, so that they could be included in the domains of reflection, collaboration; so that they could value their power, in order to be able to think about the policies that are next implemented in their territory ". Philippe Montaigne Parthenay - France

3. Some conclusions

The triple partnership of university extension, distance learning and new electronic technologies indicates – as verified by analyzing the description and presentation of the results of the e-AGORA program – a large range of means of introducing practices of local democracy to the most distant municipalities. Though there remains many challenges that need to be overcome, mainly those regarding technical aspects, we believe that this “pilot experience” allows us to draw some partial conclusions about the importance of such a course to the future of electronic and inclusive democracy.

The first one is in connection with the wonderful possibility of interaction provided by this experience between several actors from different social, cultural, political and economical realities. The contact established between citizens, municipality officials – persons in charge of the creation, implementation and evaluation of public policies – and university teachers/researchers demonstrated, among other elements, the variety and complexity of the dilemmas, but also pointed to concrete alternatives for improving democracy.

Another point regards the possibility of providing this dialectical relation through a partnership that can reach an impressive territoriality. Take for instance the chat “Conceiving a participative dialogue South-North”. This activity, developed in each module, was a real-time interaction. In this way, both because Latin-American students talked to those from Europe, each in his own language, and because of the time zone difference between Latin America and France that was of five hours, this capacity to cross territorial borders and building a dialogue with actors from different places and cultures presented a great potential.

Though we may recognize some limits of this “pilot experience” and remark that another course of this nature would need a series of adjustments, we think this e-Agora centre of training was able to promote and implement a dialectical relation university / society, government / society, North / South and, more importantly, to incite discussions, analyses and changes in the public policies with effective potential to transform the picture of economic inequalities and social exclusion in the South as well as in the North.

**Leonardo Avritzer with the collaboration of
Lilian Gomes & Laura Jardim & Vanderson Carneiro**

Making local e-democracy work?

The idea that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have the capacity to greatly enhance democracy is hardly new. As long ago as 1970, researchers were examining the possibilities and problems of technology mediated democracy and arguing that democratic engagement could be enhanced through ICTs (Martin and Norman, 1970). The possibilities and risks of e-Democracy have been widely discussed and analysed: some, such as Kenneth Laudon (1977) saw great possibilities in the technologies to enhance representative processes; others saw the opportunity to radically shift the democratic emphasis to more direct or deliberative modes of engagement (cf. Toffler, 1980; Barber 1984).

It was only in the 1990s, however, with the commercial development of the internet and its associated technologies that the possibilities started to translate into reality. Initiatives from as far a field as Canada (Lyon, 1993) and the Netherlands (Schalken and Tops, 1995) experimented with different forms of citizen engagement in local government based primarily upon the innovative application of new technologies. For the first time, new technologies were being taken seriously as a potential solution for some of democracy's contemporary problems (cf. Arterton, 1987; Abrahamson, Arterton and Orren, 1988).¹

Despite these developments, it is nonetheless true to say that e-democracy is still in its infancy. Putative e-democracy projects across the world give insights into how the innovative use of various technologies (the internet, mobile telephones, digital media and so on) work in different contexts but there is no definitive understanding of the role of e-democracy. With only a few exceptions, experiments tend to be focused at the local level, where the political and social context is more controllable, where resources to achieve e-democracy are less demanding and where the consequences of failure are less critical. The e-Agora project that is the main focus of this publication

¹ For detailed reviews of the early literature on e-Democracy (sometimes referred to as digital or tele-Democracy) see van de Donk and Tops (1995), Horrocks and Web (1994), Horrocks and Pratchett (1995) *inter alia*.

is one such example of this focus. The UK Government's Local e-Democracy National Project is another one². However, it is useful to question this local focus before examining in more detail the strategies that might help localities develop e-democracy.

The approach adopted in this section is explicitly top-down. The concern is with how governments, whether local, regional or national, can shape the opportunities and prospects for local democracy through the use of new technologies. This approach does not deny that democracy can also be developed bottom-up, through the spontaneous but collective actions of citizens. However, in most functioning democracies, it is the institutions that states impose upon their citizens which creates the opportunities for political action (political opportunity structures) and which shapes the ways in which collective or individual political participation occurs. In developing e-democracy strategies, therefore, governments are implicitly or explicitly seeking to reinforce or change particular democratic institutions, or are seeking to create new ones.

e-Democracy in the locality

If e-democracy is the solution then what is the problem? Certainly, one argument is that local democracy is in a dire state of crisis. In emerging democracies attention has often been focused on developing democratic cultures through local government. At the same time, however, these same governments have been concerned that local democracy may militate against nation building, especially among Central and Eastern European countries where their sense of identity was undermined by the Soviet Union.

In developed democracies local democracy suffers from a number of problems, many of which are common to democracy at all levels of governance:

- Declining turnout at local elections, from an already low base, although recent voting experiments have halted or even reversed this decline in some areas.
- Dissatisfaction with local politics and mistrust of politicians, despite the exemplary behaviour of politicians in most municipalities.
- Growing recognition of the gap between those who are economically

² For details see: www.e-democracy.gov.uk

and politically involved in their communities and those who feel excluded, and the associated problems of community cohesion that follow from this gap.

- The recognition of a generational shift in political behaviour and the growing problem of engaging young people in traditional politics.
- The limited capacity for action facing local government in the context of increasing central control in key policy areas, global economic and social pressures and the complexities of local governance structures.

These and other problems facing local democracy are not necessarily new. Nor are they necessarily fatal to local government. Local authorities have, for a number of years, experimented with a range of initiatives to address or mitigate these problems. Furthermore, to the extent that they are problems at all, they reflect more deep-rooted problems in the wider practice of democracy at a national and, indeed, trans-national level – it is for this reason that trans-national organisations such as the Council of Europe are currently seeking ways to reinvigorate democracy, including the issuing of a Green Paper³ on the topic.

An alternative to seeing local democracy as being in a state of unparalleled and potentially fatal crisis is to accept that ongoing social and political change inevitably means that the institutions of democracy will also need to be adapted from time to time. In this alternative scenario the challenge for local government is not to fundamentally alter local democracy but, rather, to reflect upon current institutional practices and find new ways of making them more effective. Part of this reflection might involve an acceptance of low levels of participation but a development of mechanisms that ensure that a sense of political efficacy (the belief among citizens that their voice will be heard if they choose to use it) is more widely developed throughout the community.

In many respects the institutions of local democracy are highly effective in most developed democracies and, indeed, in many developing ones. The problem with modern local democracy, however, is that it is possibly too efficient and effective. Its mechanisms for resolving conflict and differences of opinion are streamlined and sophisticated, thereby removing the need for

³ See:

http://www.coe.int/t/e/integrated_projects/democracy/05_Key_texts/02_Green_Paper/default.asp

large scale participation. Consequently, there is little incentive for 'ordinary' citizens to become involved in local politics, especially where they feel that one voice is unlikely to have much effect.

In this context, the role of e-democracy is questionable. If the 'local democracy in crisis' argument is accepted, then e-democracy tools are little more than tinkering when major root and branch surgery is needed. However, if the institutional modernisation argument is accepted, then e-democracy can play a fundamental role in changing democratic practice and building a sense of political efficacy within communities. In this second scenario, the argument is not that particular e-democracy tools will fundamentally change democratic practice – they will not, in most instances. However, e-democracy presents an important opportunity for municipalities to get people, both within the council and outside of it, to think about how they want democracy in their locality to work and what changes they want to bring about in current practices. It is for this reason that e-democracy provides a substantive opportunity for local government.

Four approaches to implementing e-democracy

Assume for a moment that a municipality wants to use e-democracy to make a difference. There are at least four different strategies or approaches that it can adopt:

1. As an add-on to the day to day activities

It is possible to implement e-democracy tools alongside the other initiatives that a municipality may already have. This approach sees e-democracy as a complement to existing activities rather than anything particularly new. The main reason for adopting this approach is that the authority is generally happy with its existing practices and simply wants to use new technologies to update them. There is some value in this approach. For example, e-consultation tools might be used to complement the other consultation processes that the municipality already uses, ensuring that the efficiency gains of new technologies can be harnessed. The problem with this approach is that it limits the municipality to what it already does. The tools of e-democracy can provide significant opportunities to change the way in which local governments interact with their communities and to renew aspects of democracy.

2. As an agent for changing democratic processes or activities

Implementing new e-democracy tools can provide unique opportunities for municipalities to change the way in which democratic practices work. These changes may vary from internal practices through to new forms of community engagement:

- At the narrow end of this spectrum, implementing councillor websites, supporting councillor weblogs and so on, may provide a catalyst for the representative role of councillors to be renewed and reinvigorated. As part of the implementation process, both councillors and their constituents may be encouraged to rethink their relationships and how they can benefit from innovative use of the technologies.
- At the wider end of the spectrum, implementing innovations that address aspects of the democratic deficit (for example, providing substantial on-line democratic resources for minority groups) may provide a new democratic focus for the municipality and introduce new ideas to the decision making process. When targeted at particular policy problems, this approach can be very effective.

As with all new technologies, the tools of e-democracy will have consequences, whether intended or unintended. Conscious attempts to effect particular changes are likely to be more successful than those that simply accept unintended consequences as a bi-product of the implementation process.

3. As a solution to perceived democratic deficits

It is also possible to direct e-democracy tools towards perceived democratic problems that a municipality may have. Traditional forms of community engagement fail to reach certain groups. The new tools of e-democracy offered in the UK National Project compendium (www.e-democracy.gov.uk), and other tools, may be used to plug the gaps and address these problems. For example, e-democracy games may be used to develop not only democratic interest among young people but also to improve the democratic knowledge and skills base of citizens – a vital prerequisite for participation in local democratic life. Using e-democracy in this way requires a sophisticated understanding of democratic problems facing the Council and its locality. Ill-thought through initiatives may have the converse effect of exacerbating the democratic deficit rather than resolving it.

4. As a process of surfacing and reinforcing the underlying democratic values of the municipality and its locality.

This approach to e-democracy is the most difficult but also the most important one for those municipalities that are serious about using e-democracy to make a difference. The assumption here is that everyone involved in local democracy – councillors, officers, community groups, partner organisations and citizens – have particular understandings about the way democracy works and how it should work. They give priority to certain decision making methods and particular democratic processes. For example, some municipalities may give particular emphasis to neighbourhood forums as a means of channelling democratic processes while others may depend more upon contacts with community groups or, indeed, consultation mechanisms as a way of developing democratic responsiveness. In this approach, the implementation of e-democracy can be an opportunity to surface, clarify and reinforce the democratic values of the Council and its locality:

- *Surfacing values* – developing an e-democracy programme provides an opportunity for the municipality and its partners to discuss the way in which democracy works in their locality and how they want to enhance it. The types of tools discussed and the way in which they are expected to contribute to the democratic mission of the municipality can be used to reveal and highlight the real democratic priorities of those involved.
- *Clarifying values* – detailed discussion of which tools to use and how to implement them provides the opportunity for individuals to reflect upon which democratic principles they hold to be most significant and how they want to realise them. By clarifying values it should be possible for stakeholders to arrive at a consensus over how local democracy should work.
- *Reinforcing values* – The tools selected and the process by which they are implemented not only develops the democratic environment selected but also sends out clear signals to partners and the wider community about how democracy should work in the locality. It reinforces the democratic consensus.

The e-democracy process, therefore, should be about both change, in so far as the tools provide the opportunity to alter practices and to extend engagement, and stability, in that the same tools can be used to reinforce the democratic values of the locality.

The limits to e-democracy

Local government is the primary home of local democracy. In most countries, no other institution at the local level has the combination of a wide range of competencies and the political legitimacy of direct elections through universal suffrage. While other bodies include quasi-democratic practices in their activities (compare parent governors in schools, citizen elections to various boards and so on) these do not amount to proper institutional structures for local democracy. A growing understanding of multi-level governance serves only to emphasise further the unique position of local government in relation to democracy. Local government, therefore, has a vital role to play in supporting and developing local democracy, as the main location for democratic practice in communities.

The limits to local governments role in shaping democracy are, in many respects, obvious. The democratic framework imposed by national or federal constitutions, the limits to local government powers and the wider socio-economic context of localities, all inhibit significant democratic reform for local government. However, there are still many opportunities to change democratic practices.

Besides these widely accepted constraints, however, there are four other factors that municipalities should take into account when developing e-democracy initiatives:

1. Democracy is not a tangible outcome that can be finally reached in any area but is, rather, an incomplete project which is continuously under development in all areas that strive for democracy. Within this context, it is not possible to define either an individual authority's progress towards democracy or, indeed, local governments progress more generally, although it is possible to recognise specific democratic achievements in terms of institution building. There exists, therefore, an element of incompleteness in which it is not possible to identify what stage any municipality has achieved in building democracy: there is no finishing line, chequered flag or gold medal to be gained. Instead, it is only possible to point to the institutions that support democracy and the ways in which they enhance democratic practise. e-Democracy must be understood in the context of this incompleteness. Municipalities cannot assume that by implementing an e-democ-

racy programme that the democratic problems identified in the area will be permanently resolved. At best, like all democratic interventions, e-democracy is a temporary measure that will need to be constantly revisited and revised if democracy is to be sustained.

2. Linked to the recognition of this notion of incompleteness, it is necessary to recognise that democracy is not a settled idea or set of institutions. In political theory, arguments persist over what the defining principles of democracy are and what the ideal model of democratic practice should be. In practice, the constitutional basis and political enactment of democracy continues to develop across the world. Rather than conceive of democracy as one form of best practice, or even as an ideal type to which imperfect political systems strive, therefore, it is necessary to see democracy as a complex set of values and principles which interact in different ways in various contexts. Equally, different democratic instruments will have contrasting impacts depending upon the socio-economic and political environments in which they are introduced. These differences do not necessarily make some institutions of democracy better or, indeed, some nations or localities more democratic than others. A focus upon e-democracy, therefore, must be sensitive to such differences and leave room for interpretation.

3. The tools of e-democracy are not always good for localities. One of the great advantages of the internet and other ICTs is that they are less constrained by temporal or geographic specificity. When online, it matters little which municipality or nation state you are in (attempts at censorship by some governments notwithstanding): instant communication across the world is now a reality. The absence of geographic and temporal constraint has meant greater opportunities for communities of interest to emerge that are no longer place dependent. The internet is full of highly specialised interest groups, many of which are only loosely related to a geographic identity and which attract like-minded individuals from all over the world. In such an environment, those involved in implementing e-democracy at the local level must be careful to provide good reasons for using e-tools. Why would neighbours want to communicate online when they can just as easily (and possibly more cheaply) communicate through more traditional methods? Ill-considered attempts to increase take-up of local e-democracy tools may, inadvertently, have perverse effects, encourag-

ing people to look outside of their communities. These concerns, of course, are not an argument against local e-democracy – the e-Agora project demonstrates effectively that these consequences are not inevitable: but these concerns raise issues that local e-democracy implementers should be conscious of.

4. Emerging repertoires of action may shape citizens perceptions of how technologies may be used. The way in which citizens conventionally use technologies (in the work place, at school, for personal or leisure use and so on) shapes their expectations of how they can use them in political activities. Moreover, these repertoires of action may vary both in different places and between socio-economic or demographic groups. This issue is more than just an interpretation of the digital divide, although peoples experience of technology will be shaped by differential access to it: it is also an issue of different social groups wanting to use technologies in different ways. These repertoires do not inhibit the use of technologies for different purposes but they do require those implementing e-democracy initiatives to think carefully about how citizens can be encouraged to change behaviour. It is not sufficient for policy makers to build an e-democracy application and wait for citizens to use it.

Engaging the public – CLEAR

One of the most challenging aspects of the local government modernisation agenda is the drive to engage citizens. There is often an assumption that by providing e-participation opportunities that citizen engagement is automatically enhanced. This assumption is false. There are a whole range of factors that affect peoples propensity and ability to participate in local politics, as summarised by the CLEAR model. The CLEAR model (Lowndes, Pratchett and Stoker 2006) draws upon a range of theories to understand the factors that affect participation. By setting out these various factors it is possible to understand both the strengths of different participation initiatives and their potential limitations. The significance of CLEAR is not that it provides new insights into participation. Rather, it reminds those implementing e-participation devices of the various factors that will affect involvement. CLEAR is an acronym for the five words that explain the factors shaping participation.

C an do : simply providing e-participation facilities is not sufficient. As part of a move towards e-democracy that is seeking to be more engaging with the community, it is also necessary to build skills and capacity. These skills will vary from creating a general understanding of how to engage (perhaps how to access reports or email a councillor) through to the development of technologically based skills in which those usually marginalised from the political system have more opportunity to engage.

L ike to : developing a sense of community is important, especially in relation to e-participation initiatives. One danger of e-participation is that it can encourage citizens to respond in an individualistic rather than collective attitude. e-Democracy devices that focus on developing community identity are fundamental to the success of e-democracy more generally.

E nabled to : e-democracy is particularly about creating the infrastructure for participation. However, new initiatives need to be careful to work with and enhance existing opportunities for participation rather than undermining them. It is important, therefore, that e-democracy is considered as one component of a wider process of democratic renewal and not an end in itself.

A sked to : participation is most likely to occur where there is an express invitation to individuals or groups to take part. New initiatives should not only be used to create new channels of participation but should also actively seek engagement. e-Democracy has great benefits over more traditional participation techniques because it can reach out to more people and encourage participation in that way. Implementing e-democracy should seek to make the most of this potential.

R esponded to : not surprisingly, people who give their time and engage with councils like to know what happened and how their efforts have contributed to the outcome. Again, new technologies have the potential to make this response process easier.

Box 2: The CLEAR model

Factor affecting participation	How it works	Associated Policy Target
Can do	Individual resources such as speaking, writing and technical skills (and the confidence to use them) make a difference to whether people can participate	Capacity building through local organisations and with individuals (e.g. mentoring), which aims to counter-balance socio-economic advantages
Like to	Participation requires a sense of involvement with the public entity that is the focus of engagement	Civic renewal programmes that nurture local social capital and a broad sense of community, alongside education in citizenship
Enabled to	Voluntary and community groups create an opportunity structure for participation	Developing the civic infrastructure, particularly networks and umbrella organisations that can channel and facilitate participation
Asked to	Mobilising people into participation by asking for their input can make a big difference	Public participation schemes that are diverse and reflexive
Responded to	When asked people say they will participate if they are listened to, not necessarily agreed with, but able to see a response	A public policy system that can show a capacity to respond

The CLEAR model gives both an indication of what councils should be addressing, when developing e-participation, and a framework for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of different engagement exercises. This model, therefore, should be at the heart of all e-participation exercises.

Conclusions

Implementing e-democracy is more than providing technical capacity or solutions. It is also about developing an understanding of the democratic problems and values of an area, and sequencing devices to achieve the types of democratic outcomes that are desired. There is no magic solution to the democratic challenges facing localities. However, by using e-democracy to surface values and address problems, localities may be able to enhance local democracy. Being sensitive to the issues raised by the CLEAR model is one important starting point in this process.

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Brief conclusions

I shall sketch some brief conclusions to this book by placing it in the context in which it was conceived, namely the European project "e-AGORA, the Academy of local e-democracy". The protagonists of this project were local governments, municipal administrations, citizens and each actor concerned with the quality of local democracy.

e-AGORA intended taking into account the concerns of the local governments involved in the project by searching for ways of revitalizing local democracy, mainly through the development of new experiments using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

The objective of this White Book of local e-democracy is to describe the experiments carried out in this area. We attempt to characterize its guiding methods through the description of these experiments which were carried out in very different political, economic, social and cultural contexts. It analyzes how citizen practices changed and the technologies which accompanied these changes.

Moreover, it defines the general context of local e-democracy by focusing on the creation of a participative democracy resulting from the transformation process which we may call "governance". It shows how democracy can play a fundamental role by changing local processes, identifying appropriate approaches, limits and constraints, and proposing at the same time a model for reflection and action.

Finally, e-AGORA emphasizes the relation between the implementation of e-democracy policies and the training of the different actors involved in the process. The encouraging results of the Professional Masters program set up by the project are quite illustrative in this regard.

The e-Agora approach to e-democracy is closely related to the initiatives developed across the world in the last ten years. They carry the idea that innovative applications of ICT tools are increasingly necessary in order to support and enhance citizen participation. That is why the consolidation of e-democracy and e-participation processes becomes essential to our better understanding of the requirements and challenges of local e-democracy and offers real opportunities for revitalizing our practices.

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