INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In this article, I would like to reflect on a potential contribution of the theory of communities of practice to the evaluation of e-government services. Up to date, the adoption of e-government in local, regional, and national institutions could be characterized as a process guided by a need to improve efficiency and speed in the delivery of services to citizens. However, this might have implications to different groups of citizens who might like to use services, in other words, to become users. The theory of communities of practice could provide a framework by which e-government services (and, more particularly, e-government Web sites) could be assessed with a view of facilitating participation and inclusion.

E-GOVERNMENT

Broadly speaking, e-government can be defined as a set of activities supported by information systems with the aim to improve relationships between government institutions and citizens (Heichlinger, 2004). E-government implies the use of technology to enhance access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners, and employees. Worldwide, technological advances combined with an emerging interest in citizen participation have led institutions to embark in implementing information services for citizens online. Services include general information on the use of services, facilities for online payment, specialist advice, and news.

The aim of e-government is to enhance public participation in decision making. Worldwide varieties of e-government Web sites have been set up, providing services and information at different levels (local, regional, or national). One example of a national e-government Web site can be seen at directgov (http://www.directgov.org.uk). On this Web site, there are different sources of information, which aim at providing support for different groups, including disabled, unemployed, and the elderly. The information is also organized around common themes (i.e., caring for someone, living abroad, etc.). An example of a local e-government Web site is that of Hull City Council (http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/). On this Web site, individuals can get up to date about new services, find job opportunities, make payments on existing services, and gain an overview of what the city council can do for them.

It is difficult to assess how distinct e-government Web sites are from commercial Web sites. Both types offer information and transactions to potential customers. In fact, one emerging issue of concern is how e-government services can contribute to develop integral approaches to e-government, by which the goals of inclusion and participation can be assessed and developed.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE TO ASSESS E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

A perspective on how to achieve the above goals can be developed by using the theory of communities of practice. The theory states that communities are groups of individuals which interact to pursue shared enterprises (Wenger, 1998). Embedded in this notion is a process of learning by which individuals gain competence through participating, continuously exchanging experiences and negotiating the meanings of what they see as their practice.

According to Wenger (1998), learning is not only about knowing but living meaningfully, developing a satisfying identity, and altogether being human. Learn-