Chapter 8

Local Government as a Democracy Actor or a Service Delivery Actor: The Supporting Roles for E-Governance Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

Local governance occurs where a local government gives citizens a say in things that really matter to them, and e-governance initiatives provide electronic means to enable citizens to participate in this shared governing of the community. The clearer a local government is about the nature and degree to which it needs to act as a democracy actor (better citizens and better government) and/or a service delivery actor (better decision making), the greater the prospect that it can choose appropriate electronic means through an e-governance approach to meet those ends. In order to guide an e-governance practice and inform further research, this chapter: provides models that articulate the elements that constitute better decision making, better citizens, and better government, and presents examples from five local governments of how electronic means can satisfy particular ends.

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INTRODUCTION

Governance concerns the arrangements that determine decisions and action (OECD, 2005). In the public sector, the shape of these arrangements changes and the imperatives and opportunities for social inclusion expand, as governments adopt structures and processes to give citizens a say in the things that really matter to them (Bayside Council, 2009; Department of Communities and Local Government, 2006).

Indeed, it is widely contended that a modern democratic society will only reach its potential when such engagement with the community is applied to combine the knowledge and strengths of citizens, political representatives and civil servants (Box, 1998; Fung, 2006; Thomas, 1995; Wang, 2001; Yang, 2005). From the recent evocation by U.S. President Obama (2009, p. 1) about the importance of community engagement in the world’s most powerful democracy, to the bold participatory budgeting projects by relatively small and impoverished municipalities (Hall, 2005), there is a global trend of governments becoming interested and active in better connecting with their citizens.

The quest for improved economic, social or political ends through citizen participation is especially relevant to local government, since that is the level of public administration closest to the community (Bingham, Nabachi, & O’Leary, 2005). Participatory initiatives by municipalities move the focus from ‘local government’ to ‘local governance’ (Pratchett, 1999) which is “… the process of engaging social and political actors in the governing of their community” (O’Toole, 2003, p. 3).

The information technology revolution can facilitate the involvement of citizens in the decision making processes of governments (Macintosh, 2007; Streib & Willoughby, 1995). The application of electronic means to enable the interaction between government and citizens, and to improve the democratic and business aspects of government, gives rise to the notion of ‘e-governance’ (Backus, 2001).

So, as many decisions that were once made out of sight of the public now become subject to the involvement of individual citizens, businesses or groups, thus governments and their public officials (politicians and managers) need to find the right ends (objectives) and means (structures and processes) to enable this local governance. The application of information technology through e-governance initiatives can provide an important part of the structures and processes required for effective local governance – as long as the electronic means adopted align with the ends desired for that local governance (Demediuk & Burgess, 2010).

This chapter interrogates the range of possible ends desired from local governance, and argues that the electronic means provided by e-governance initiatives need to be aligned with particular objectives. Initially, a review and synthesis of the literature is used to outline an original model for establishing the ends (objectives or outcomes) of the community engagement initiatives that are at the core of local governance. Then the three main categories of ends are discussed in relation to findings from case studies conducted by the authors of community engagement initiatives designed to increase local governance at four councils (kommuns) in Sweden, and one council (municipality) in Australia. These extracts from case studies provide concrete examples of the possibilities and challenges for aligning appropriate and effective e-governance technology responses to particular ends. Providing such case studies as examples of context and practice is not an attempt to obtain neat statistical and generalizable findings, but to see the gritty reality that some stakeholders can face (Silverman, 2000). In these anonymous studies, a senior manager and a senior politician were interviewed together for their perceptions on the nature and effects of their community engagement initiatives, and these semi-structured interviews