Chapter 9
The Potential of E-Participation in Urban Planning: A European Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Because urban planning affects the living conditions of its inhabitants, most countries, at least western democracies, require some kind of citizen participation by law. The rise of the World Wide Web has led to recommendations to offer participation via the Internet (eParticipation) in various forms. However, many eParticipation applications are not well accepted and fall short of the expectations associated with them. This chapter argues that the electronic mode of participation per se does not change much. Rather, electronic forms of participation have to be embedded in the context of the respective planning processes and participation procedures. If citizens are not interested in participating in an urban planning process, they will not do so just because they could do it via the Internet. Therefore, an analysis of the barriers and deficits of eParticipation has to start with a critical review of traditional offers of participation. Against this background, the forms and methods of electronic participation are described and assessed in regard to expectations and barriers associated with them. It becomes apparent that eParticipation research has still not provided solid knowledge about the reasons for low acceptance of eParticipation tools. This research is largely based on case studies dealing with quite different subject areas. There is also high agreement that electronic tools will not substitute traditional devices for a long time. Instead, they will only complement them. Therefore, online and traditional forms of participation have to be designed as a multi-channel communication system and need to be analyzed against each context together. Accordingly, this chapter starts with summarizing both the institutional context of urban planning and traditional modes of citizen participation and the development and use of technical tools as two backgrounds. Recognizing a certain degree of disappointment with the low use of eParticipation, future eParticipation research should focus on fitting electronic tools better into their context and apply more comprehensive and rigorous evaluation.

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INTRODUCTION

The outcome of urban planning affects the living conditions and wellbeing of individual inhabitants in many ways as well as the social, economic and ecological welfare of the population concerned. In most cases, different parts of the population are affected in different ways and prefer different outcomes of a planning process because of different interests. Formal legitimization of urban planning by elected bodies was criticized as insufficient by environmental groups and initiatives in the 1970s, supported by democracy movements in Europe and the United States. In order to overcome resistance and to improve the quality of the outcome of urban and regional planning, the respective laws were revised, requiring planning bodies to publish plans for public consultation and to provide for appellation procedures. However, quite often these kinds of formal citizen participation did not achieve their objectives. Many observers argued that the procedures did not provide for real participation, and were more conducive to manufacturing dissent instead of consent.

As a consequence, experiments with different forms of group-related participation were conducted, such as round tables, focus groups, and consensus conferences. In some cases, these informal methods of participation reached their objectives. But they did not succeed on a broader scale. In the 1990s, citizens’ engagement in public affairs, voter turnout and trust in political decision-makers declined even more. At the same time, the Internet made electronic information and communication services such as the World Wide Web, e-Mail and electronic forums available to local governments, business and citizens. The new technological possibilities gave rise to far-reaching expectations of entering a new stage of democracy with more direct participation of citizens (see Hagen 2000). Under the heading of eDemocracy or Digital Democracy or eParticipation, experiments were started in many western countries offering some kind of participation via the Internet, often supported by national funding programs.

However, although a lot of money has been spent for these projects, not much has changed in general. Mirroring the fate of expectations for new economic growth by a New Economy, some kind of disillusion has replaced optimism in regard to the potential of electronic tools for improving democracy and the quality of decision-making, including urban planning. Today there is high agreement in the research community that citizens’ attitudes and behavior, such as trust in political institutions and the readiness to engage in public affairs, cannot be changed simply by introducing new technical tools in existing procedures and cultures. In a report for the Council of Europe, Lawrence Pratchett summarizes this position quite well:

“New technologies, in whatever form, are socially and politically neutral devices and have no inevitable consequences for democracy, participation or political engagement. However, the way in which such technologies are used and the purposes to which they are put can have radical consequences for the practice of democracy. The design of particular tools and their association with existing democratic practices (and other aspects of governance) shapes their value and impact, as does the way in which citizens and intermediary bodies (such as the news media, political parties and so on) adopt and use the technologies.” (Pratchett 2006, p. 3)

Pratchett proposes to look at new electronic devices in their relationship to institutions, actors, procedures and outcomes of democratic processes.

This has seldom been done so far. And despite the many projects applying some kind of technology to provide for participation in some kind of urban planning, there is a lack of rigorous assessment of outcome and impact as well as a lack of