Chapter 3
Public Participation, Social Equity, and Technology in Urban Governance

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ABSTRACT

Social equity commonly refers to fairness or impartiality, usually in terms of inputs or outcomes related to social and economic opportunity. In the case of urban planning, social equity can take the form of participation in decision-making activities, especially those that involve allocating public resources. An assumption (and hope) is that through participation, stakeholders have greater influence on outcomes that are in their collective interest. Opportunities to participate are rapidly expanding along with rapid technological innovation. Therefore, the authors argue that there is a connection among participation, equity, and technology in creating more equitable governance structures. In particular, the authors discuss how information and communications technologies can serve to reduce barriers to information exchange and thereby generate stronger bonds and quicker formation of partnerships and connections within the public realm. This chapter explores these issues through the lens of e-government, e-democracy, and the digital divide in a U.S. context.

INTRODUCTION

Urban planners have long recognized that planning processes not only improves communications but also redistributes authority and responsibility (Hoch, Dalton, & So, 2000). In addition, planners expect that effective outcomes are achieved when those participating are well informed and can in fact influence the fairness of outcomes (Kaiser, Godschalk, & Chapin, 1995). The public is best served when its desires and
preferences are known and incorporated into plans. Therefore, a democratized planning process that gathers input from nonprofessionals should also demystify the decision-making process and make the consequences and alternatives of proposed policies as transparent as possible. Transparency is linked to accountability, with both being part of a foundation on which democratic planning processes can be built. New information and communication technologies (ICTs) have and will continue to facilitate how the public can make meaningful contributions to local and regional governance.

For organizations and individuals, the rapid rate of technological innovation makes planning and adapting to change an ongoing challenge. Democratic systems rely on representative modes because full and individual-level participation of all members of the society would be unwieldy and inefficient. Direct democracy approaches are an alternative that has particular technology applications, as will be discussed. ICTs seek to reduce barriers to information exchange, thereby generating stronger bonds and a quicker formation of partnerships and connections. For the purposes of understanding different viewpoints, it is important to distinguish the activities of the public (i.e., citizens, although there are also many non-citizens) and governing institutions. While this is a simplified view, it serves to highlight differences in how technology is used by those governed and by those governing, and their intermediaries. Social equity can be expressed by reducing the distances between the public and institutions as well as among members of the public across race, ethnicity, class, gender, disabilities, religion, and other dividing factors. In this case, distance refers to levels of transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness that connect (or separate) the public from governmental institutions. The application of technology occurs among citizens and within institutions in an attempt to narrow existing gaps, more commonly referred to as e-democracy (e-dem) and e-government (e-gov), respectively.

**E-DEMOCRACY AND E-GOVERNMENT**

The terms e-gov and e-dem have a variety of analogs. E-gov, which is also referred to as digital government, online government, or connected government, is the effort to digitally provide better and quicker access to government services, information, and communications; to provide information to constituents; and to provide better accountability (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010). The objective is to substitute ICTs for manual, in-person, hard copy, or previously unavailable public services. The application of ICTs to government operations is intended to provide a virtual presence of government. For example, the functionality of a government Web site should be comparable to or more useful than an actual visit to the agency in terms of the services and information available. Not only can more information be made available, but also being electronically indexed allows for easier access and the targeting of specific information. Constituents can also sometimes manipulate information to provide new connections that they had previously not been aware of, as well as spatial images through mapping and geographic information systems (GIS).

**E-Government**

In e-gov, the primary channels are those between the government as an organization and service provider, and the public as constituents and customers. Less attention is placed on how the constituents or customers communicate with one another, or how (or if) they organize themselves. Exceptions may be neighborhood- or community-level activities, where the services provided are based on geographic parameters that affect groups of residents or businesses. In these cases, communications can be more efficient if directed toward or coordinated with local councils or boards rather than individual residents. However, others have recognized the significant role that