# BACKGROUND NOTE ON E-PARTICIPATION

## 1. Key definitions

We define *e-governance* as a new way of carrying out good governance, which consists in government and public administration reform through the use of the Internet and ICTs. On the other hand, *e-participation* is citizens' participation in administration, service delivery, decision making and policy making.

While e-governance consists of top-down government initiatives, e-participation is a wider concept including all stakeholders in the democratic decision-making processes.

The ICT solutions that governments use to provide public services or that are used by different stakeholders to offer citizens opportunities to engage in the policy making process and contribute to it are known as *e-participation tools*. These can be voting and polling online, campaigning through web surveys, online petitions and consultations or discussing in chat forums, among others.

## 2. How do EU institutions see e-participation?

Frequently, *e-participation* is considered equal to *e-government* as the practical implementation of e-governance. This is the case of the European Union institutions, especially the European Commission. In other words, the EC considers that e-participation tools are aimed at improving quality, transparency and efficiency of public services as well as access to public figures and institutions. Thus, its efforts are directed toward providing e-government services, namely a range of government functions offered in digital format.

The way EU understands e-participation does not cover all its aspects, since its perspective is mainly top-down and forgets bottom-up initiatives as well as the fact that citizens need to have skills to use the e-government services.

## 3. Different dimensions of e-participation:

Telecentre Europe goes beyond solely e-government approach on e-participation. We consider that e-participation consists of three differentiated dimensions:

*1. E-government services*: this dimension is the most institutionally used. As described above, these kind of e-participation tools aim to offer in a digital format a wide range of public services that are also physically available, in order to improve their efficiency and quality while reducing costs.

At national level we can find some examples such as the increasingly widespread practice of online voting in different elections and referendums

(Belgium, France, Germany, UK, etc.) or online administrative procedures and social services, such as electronic ID (e.g. http://eid.belgium.be/en/ in Belgium).

Other e-participation tools are meant for providing more understandable and accessible information. Almost all public institutions have their own website where all their activities and resolutions are accessible and comments box is available, as the Catalan regional Parliament (http://www.elteuparlament.cat/). Some national parliaments also offer their debates in streaming.

*2. Structured e-participation:* online and digital structures provided by governments and institutions to involve a broad audience and to formally process citizens' inputs and engage them in policy making in a structured way. The most common ones are online consultations and online petitions. E-consultations are a form of public consultations where an institution or agency consults citizens on an specific issue when a project or a policy is being developed or implemented. For example, in the UK Department for Education (https://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/)

*3. ICT tools enabling grass-root citizens' initiatives:* open platforms for citizens' discussions and debate or using ICT and the internet to start citizens' movements online. For example, some civic movements use social media platforms to collect massive support and coordinate large amounts of people.

In Spain, the anti-austerity 15-M movement started in 2011 throughout massive calls via Facebook groups and events and Twitter hashtags (#spanishrevolution, #democraciarealya, etc.) and led to social networks and civic digital platforms 'Real Democracy Now' (http://www.democraciarealya.es/) or 'Youth Without Future' (http://juventudsinfuturo.net/).

The Latvian Mana Balss platform (https://manabalss.lv/) allows citizens to post their own initiative and collect signatures for submission to the Parliament, granting much more visibility to the topics processed, large opportunities to compare opinions and get an overall picture of each of the initiatives.


4. **What are the EU institutions doing on e-participation? What are they lacking?**

Examples of EU e-participation tools:

European Citizens Initiative: this website allows citizens to participate directly in the development of EU policies, by calling on the European Commission to make a legislative proposal.

Petition to the European Parliament: A portal where citizens can submit a petition to the EP on a subject which within the European Union's fields of activity and which affects them directly.

Your Voice in Europe: portal for citizens to participate in European Commission Public Consultations.

Puzzled by Policy: online platform that helps users understand a topic in more detail and to participate in on-going discussion with EU policy-makers and other stakeholders.

Solvit: website for submitting a complaint by an EU citizen having experienced problems in another EU country. SOLVIT reminds the authorities in question what the EU rights are and works with them to solve the problem.

SINAPSE: web communication platform that allows the creation of 'e-Communities' enabling members with a common interest to exchange information in a dedicated environment.

CONECCS: database for consultation, especially for civil society organisations.

EU institutions are mostly concerned with the design of e-government services, but not whether citizens know about them (awareness) and know how to access and use them (digital skills). Besides, they do not promote bottom up e-participation. E-participation tools at EU level are citizen centric, but not citizen-driven.

[What is participants' opinion on this? How can the EC ensure awareness, access and skills?]


**Questions for discussion for the participants: Role of the telecentres and civil society to promote of e-participation**

In your view, do people actually use any of the described e-participation tools through telecentres? If not, do you think it is because they are unpopular/little known or because people don't use them in telecentres?

If yes, which of the three dimensions is most developed in your telecentre/organization (e-government services; structured e-participation; ICT for grass-root initiatives)?

How can telecentres get involved and have an active role in facilitating the different processes of e-participation?


SOURCES:

European Commission, *European eParticipation Summary Report* (2009). https://joinup.ec.europa.eu/community/epractice/document/eu-european-eparticipation-summary-report

Telecentre Europe, *Guideline for e-Participation in European Union Policy-Making* (2015) http://euparticipation.org/guidelines/

EC Digital Agenda website: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/

e-UROPa project website: http://euparticipation.org/

Recommended readings on ICT-enabled civic participation:

Youth, ICTs, and Democracy in Egypt http://tascha.uw.edu/projects/youth-ict-democracy-egypt/

Under the Radar: The Contribution of Civil Society and Third Sector Organisations to eInclusion, http://ipts.jrc.ec.europa.eu/publications/pub.cfm?id=4339