FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY BASED PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING THROUGH EPARTICIPATION

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Abstract: We present a strategy to attain a community based restructuring of the administration by creating a framework for public involvement through e-participation and virtual communities. It capitalizes on the potential of the younger generation's enthusiasm for internet enabled social contacts and interaction. The use as incentive of a percentage of the city's funds for citizen promoted projects to improve the quality of life in their communities is only viable method of attracting interest and trust in the sustainable communities concept and governance process.

1. INTRODUCTION

Romania passes through a period of administrative reorganization as it has to decentralize and align itself to the regulations of the European Union. New administrative levels are introduced and despite their purpose of increasing efficiency, as they have no governing status or power per se, the main outcome is increased bureaucracy and confusion. The problem lays in their artificial imposed nature and large incomprehensive size. (Regions and Euro regions)

The next stage of this reorganization will be that of the local administrations. Top down decentralization and reorganization into regions and euro-regions must be coupled with a bottom up restructuring based on communities in order to near as much as possible the decision making process to the real problems.

As governments worldwide have increasingly become "closed bureaucratic institutions that have only sporadic contacts with their constituencies, on average three yearly interactions. [1] they have lost track of their objectives, fulfilling the needs of the people, and have developed a view on public service provision centred on administrative fulfilment, [2] This has resulted in an decrease in interest in political issues, democratic deficit, [3] as a consequence of the opaqueness of the decision making process. [4]

At this stage public participation comes into discussion as a means of mending not only local problems through sustainable communities but also attempt to solve the widespread problem of the political deficit. In the context of the European Union's emphasis on participation its adoption as a natural state or a new top down imposed regulation comes into view.

2. CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION

As stated by Smith and Dalakiouridou [5] in the context of an increasing blurring of the of the boundaries between and within public, private and non-governmental/noon-profit sectors arises the need for coalitions and partnerships for an efficient government instead of a centralized authority. Thus participation could be part of the solution to the states limitations mobilizing the self-governing capacities of individuals, groups and communities, normalizing "active citizenship" as both right and responsibility. Participation has become a moralizing and normative discourse on the need to bridge the gap between governors and governed by empowering people to be responsible citizens. [6] At the same time a it is a functional requirement as increasingly service users rather than the administration take up identifying needs by using local knowledge. Even though as argued by Moravcsik so far there is no empirical evidence that an increase in participation translates in grater institutional trust and political legitimacy [7] it seems the logical starting point towards an open, transparent and collaborative environment for government-citizens-stakeholders interactions, defined as Connected or Networked Governance by the UN in 2008.

The local level has become an excellent laboratory for democratic innovations [8] as it is here that the state is most clearly seen as a "negotiating state" [9] and there is a considerable ease of implementation and lower risk in case of failure.

According to Alonso governance at the local level requires the substitution of the hierarchy, as an instrument of coordination with a variety of networks comprised of individual and collective actors with different degrees of institutionalization (i.e. governance as an alternative to hierarchies) [8] characterized by a continuous consensus and group decision-making. The traditional hierarchies (top down governance) are substituted by Habermasian communicative rationality, which is grounded in negotiation with and among responsible citizens [10].

Traditionally local administrations make decisions in the name of the public interest, but often relying exclusively on "expert" knowledge for the structures of hierarchical coordination and administrative rationality proves to have little in common with the true or perceived necessities of the citizens and results in dissatisfaction and distrust. [8] Thus the need to adopt criteria of social relevance arises that must include communication between citizens and administration within the framework of governance of complex societies. [10]

The use of ICT for facilitating citizen participation, or e-Participation initiatives, refers to governments' efforts in employing ICT for disseminating policy planning information and soliciting citizens' inputs in planning. [11] Also referred to as e-Consultation [12], web-based citizen input [13] and online public engagement e-participation can serve to encourage two-way communication between government and citizens, educate citizens about the rationale and complexity of policy-making, legitimize government decisions, and provide opportunities for mutual learning [14]

The four major objectives eParticipation can facilitate are informing citizens, generating support among citizens, utilizing citizens' input in decision making, and probing for citizens' needs. [15] even though from the administration's point of view it seems that cooperation between citizens and the government in interactive policymaking is valuable as long as politicians can continue to do their work and make the final decisions. [16]

2.1. PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITIES IN TIMISOARA

Some forms of participation, be it in person or through some use of ICT, are made available to the citizens of Timisoara but not facilitated and in some cases even hampered. Access to data is one of the main complaints of would be participants. Even public enquires required by law before approving an urban development plan have no guidelines for organizing, namely no minimum number of participants, feedback, metrics of a project's exposure to the public or causes any questions to be raised if no objections were made. Thus it is possible to organize such enquiries for show, with public announcements of their due date in reader less newspapers and posters placed in areas that have no interest in the project.
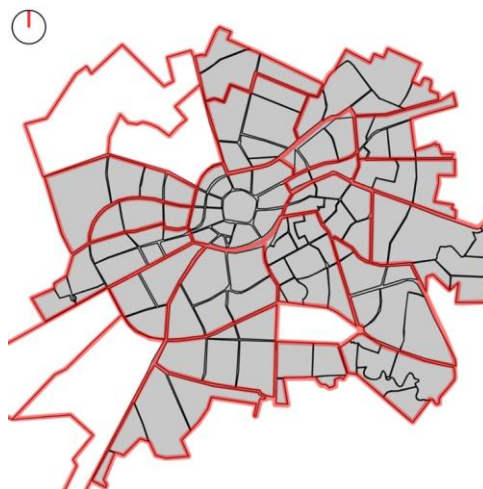

Figure 1. Timisoara' neighbourhoods

In 2003 neighbourhood consulting councils were formed with the purpose of increasing the level of communications between citizens and administration, the level of citizens' involvement in the decision making process and neighbourhood event organizing, finding clear solutions to neighbourhood problems and encouraging social cohesion.

All these are nice words and good intentions but have had a rather low rate of success. With no power in the decision making process these councils do no inspire citizens' confidence and as it has happened in many cases worldwide were taken over by political parties. [16] The main problem laid in their basic structure oriented more towards a false representation instead of a true citizens' participation. About half of these councils ceased their activity after a couple of years and most of the remaining ones have an average o three public announcements per year.

As the younger is willing and accustomed to being part of a community, participating and voicing one's opinions it could mean the salvation of citizens' participation in Romania if a successful transfer of the virtual habits can be accomplished to a local network and after that to the real world.
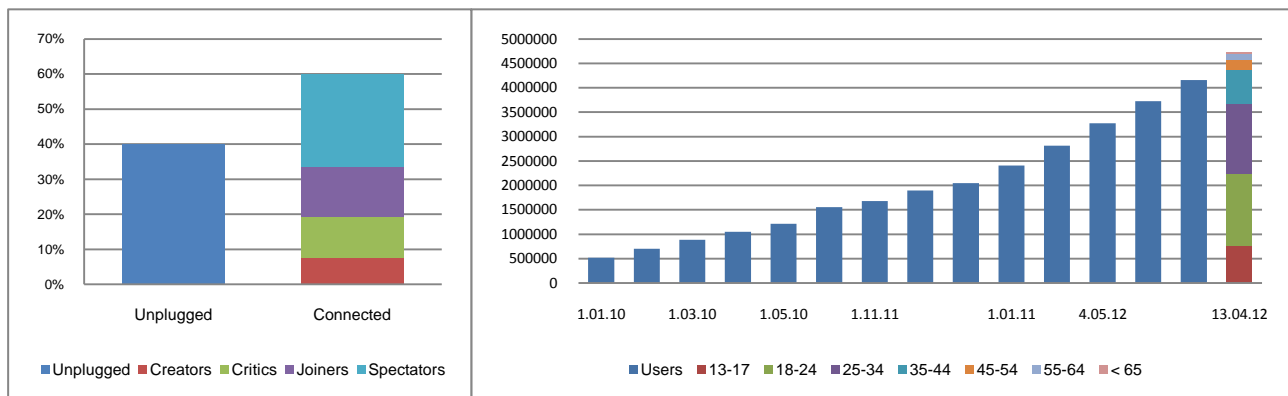

Figure 2. Types and of internet users and their use on social network sites

Even though according to Eurostat data almost 40% of Romanians do not have access to the internet through a computer, the "unplugged", the allure of social networking sites decreases that number daily through the use of mobile devices. In little over 2 years Facebook alone reached 4,719,000 users, over 21% of the entire Romanian population and 64,67% of its internet users. As the predominant users age are between 18 and 34 this provides an opportunity as it comprises the most active and pro-involvement groups. By classifying the types of internet users, creators/activists 13%, critics 19% joiners 24% and spectators 44%, the structure's similarity to physical participatory actions and the potential it holds can be easily noticed. Affinity spaces, forming virtual communities, have been recognized by the British Department of Constitutional Affairs as "opportunities for active citizenship" [17] should we overcome the risk that they disengage people from "shared responsibilities, obligations and duties toward fellow citizens and the state" and address their shared interests in a way that engages them.

To facilitate participation and transform neighbourhoods into communities and thereafter sustainable ones it is necessary to translate online communities to the local realm. The key to the online counterparts lays in their structure based on common interests, passion for photography, sports, or similarity in characteristics, young mothers, more defining than the physical location. Thus neighbourhood communities would be in fact a network of interlinked sub communities each belonging to o greater community from which it can derive support for common interests.

In order to measure Timisoara's citizens knowledge of the participation means available and their willingness to use them a questionnaire research was carried out. Even though 96% of the respondents were interested in the problems facing their neighbourhood approximately 50% only knew of participation and e-participation tools available to them but could say little else and only 4% actually used them. 94% expressed a willingness to participate, of which most aged between 18 and 45 favoured ICT means while respondents over 45 generally preferred traditional methods, physical presence at the debate.
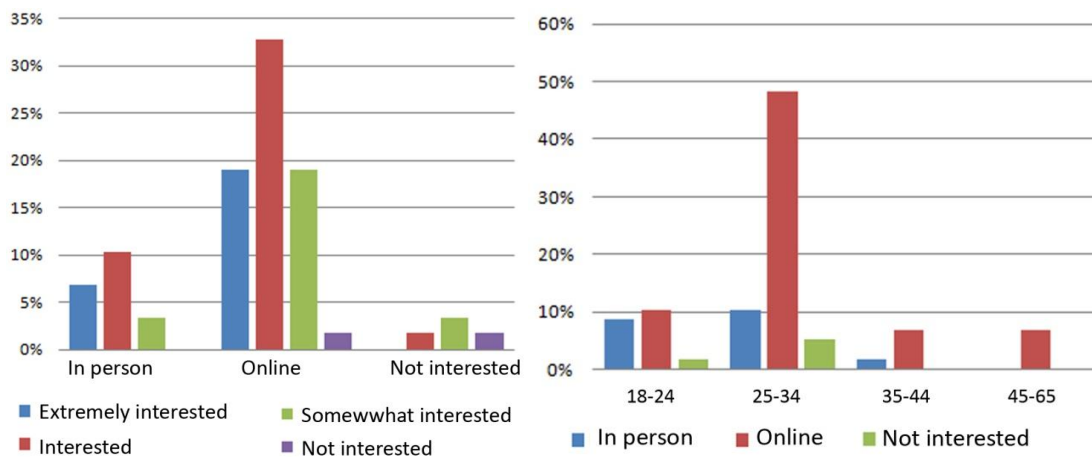
Figure 3. Timisoara's citizens' interest in participation

Based on a cross analysis of the participants interest in their neighbourhoods' problems and their willingness to participate in the decision making process it can be noted that the majority of the "somewhat interested" and over half of the "not interested" would participate through ICT tools should they be encouraged. Divided by age groups the most willing to participate are fortunately the most abundant internet users, aged 18-34. However when asked about their knowledge of the means available to them and to which they would turn in case of a problem the proffered choice was the neighbourhood councils (NC), proving the feasibility of the decentralization concept. Unfortunately the vast majority of the ones turning to NCs were those who either knew of their existence but little else or who had never heard of them previously, a proof of their malfunction and consequent citizens' mistrust.
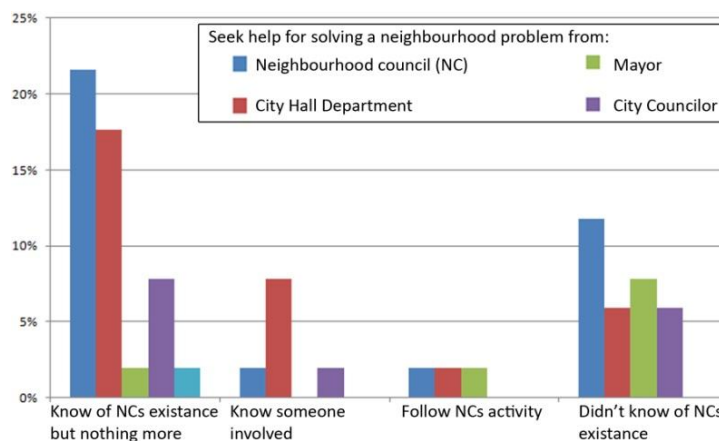

Figure 4. Timisoara's citizens' preferred help for a neighbourhood problem

The general conclusion of the questionnaire research was a high interest and willingness to participate mostly through the use of ICT but low initiative and an even lower knowledge of their rights and potions. In order to achieve an effective civic participation a three stage process is needed, each stage deriving from the completion of the previous one: information – citizens' education on the local government's policies, strategies, projects and the means to participate; control – accountability of local government resulted from increased transparency of actions and public interest and involvement; participation – participative and deliberative democracy through citizens' empowerment.

The key, however, is earning the citizens' trust in the process and it can only be achieved through competition. The use as incentive of a percentage of the city's funds for citizen promoted projects to improve the quality of life in their communities, accessed through a competition on feasibility and public support is the only method of attracting interest and trust in the process.

3. PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING PROCESS FRAMEWORK

Based on a comparison of three well known participatory budgeting initiatives, which according to Sintomer are a paradigm for participation, [18], especially at the local level, allowing citizens to have a say in the way the city budget is spent, we devised the framework of an eParticipation process based on Romania's needs and characteristics. In the first case study Brazil's Porto Alegre, the citizens are able to state their preferences for the city's future projects, forming thematic investment categories, and vote on their individual region's priorities, creating the basics of a budgeting matrix. This in turn divides the available funds of each thematic category to the 17 city regions based on their population, dysfunctions and selected priorities. [19]

In the case of Solford, UK, the final decision over the city's budget is taken by the City Council using a resource matrix based on the needs expressed by the citizens, by post or online, and the areas' needs. In the third case study, Getafo Spain, citizens are able to both create proposals and vote for their favourite. The top five are afterwards examined by the local authorities' technical staff to determine their technical, economical and legal feasibility and through a public debate are approved for implementation.

In Timisoara's case the citizens are not prepared for the responsibilities endowed by the Brazilian model while the other two are limited, the Salford model using citizens as a database for perceived needs and problems and the Spanish one limiting their power to a restricted number of projects.

A compilation of these initiatives represents the base of our process with a particularity of limiting the level of participation based on a project's scale, to ensure that the correct know how and expert knowledge is applied and limit potential backfires.

Therefore for priority one city projects, such as large infrastructure projects, the citizens' participations limited to drafting the city's hierarchy of priorities and taking part in public debates, while the final decision, arbitration, is left in the hands of the local authorities. However for smaller scale, community level problems, the solution can be mainly citizen generated, validated by the local authorities and voted in a city wide competition for funds, backed by a negotiations stage security fail safe.
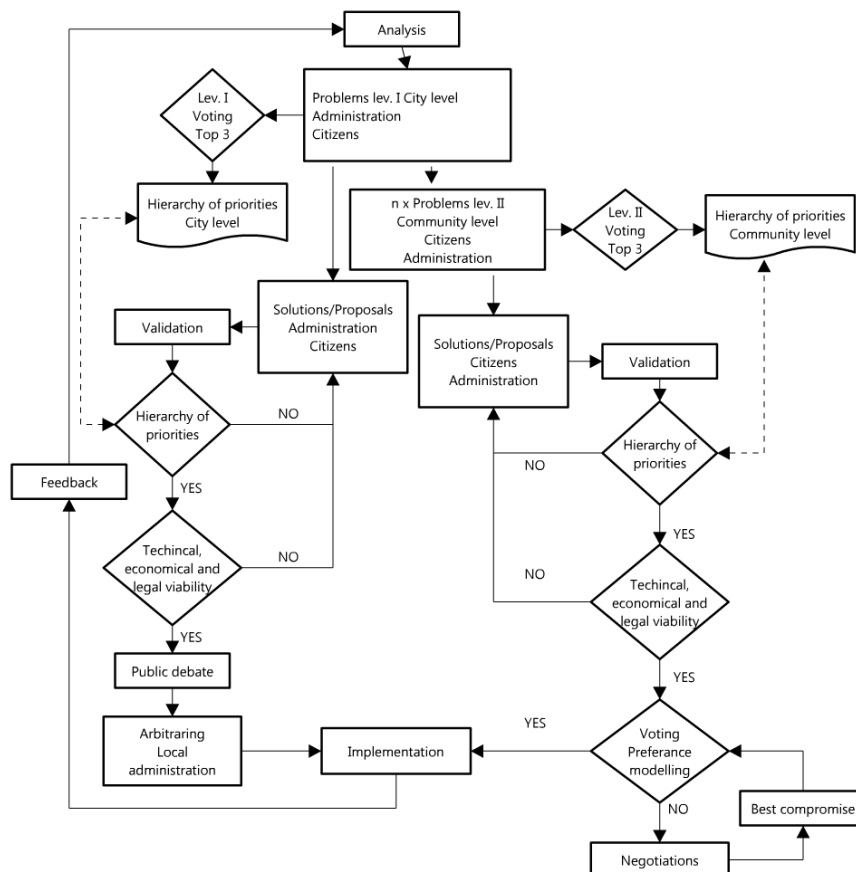

Figure 5. Participatory budgeting process framework

4. CONCLUSIONS

The creation of sustainable communities, even more of a network of such communities is long term process that can only be achieved through a step by step strategy. Through participation and more feasibly e-participation government accountability and project subsidiarity can be accomplished together with a balance between economic competitiveness, social cohesion and environmental quality.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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