# DEMO-net

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## eParticipation Evaluation and Impact

**DEMO-net Consortium**

DEMO-net
The eParticipation Network

Information Society Technologies

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# eParticipation Evaluation and Impact

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**Abstract:** This booklet investigates how to evaluate eParticipation. Our main objective is to identify the relevant elements of existing approaches to evaluation and to develop them on the basis of a coherent and comprehensive eParticipation evaluation framework. The document describes the key issues and questions that evaluation research must address, and presents a layered model of eParticipation evaluation, which includes three important perspectives (project, socio-technical, and democratic perspectives), related evaluation criteria, and possible research indicators and methods. The main factors that influence evaluation will be outlined and three general types of evaluation design discussed. Moreover, common methods used in evaluation research are described and some salient quality issues are addressed. Selected items from three case examples of evaluation research in this area are used to illustrate how different parts of our framework might operate in practice.

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# Executive Summary

This booklet presents a detailed investigation of how to evaluate eParticipation. The evaluation of eParticipation is in its infancy and there is a need to develop a coherent evaluation framework, encompassing a range of perspectives and research methods. This report aims to make a start at defining such a framework. As a first step, it focuses mainly on eParticipation projects initiated by public institutions. Selected items from three case examples of evaluation research in this area are used to illustrate how different parts of our proposed framework may operate in practice.

Chapter 1 describes why rigorous evaluation research is needed. The domain of eParticipation currently lacks an adequate understanding of what practices work, and when and why certain practices are effective. Evaluation research is needed in order to identify quality eParticipation practices that can and should be transferred and developed further.

Drawing on scientific debates about the concepts, features and problems of eParticipation, Chapter 2 outlines some key issues that must be taken into account in evaluation research. The main aspects are:

- The concepts of democracy and participation
- The online and offline dimensions of participation
- Dimensions of political inclusion/exclusion
- The dynamic nature of eParticipation
- The opportunities and risks of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and participation

Chapter 2 also isolates three general purposes of evaluation research:

- *Audit* (to establish control over the extent of goal attainment and use of resources; to justify decisions made; to ensure internal control and external accountability)
- *Management* (to support decisions and improve performance; to find out what worked, what went wrong, and why; to enhance the legitimacy of decisions in order to build trust)
- *Learning* (to document experiences; to accumulate knowledge for better understanding and improvement; to allow for organisational learning; to discover unexpected or unintended effects)

There is, however, a variety of reasons why the evaluation of eParticipation is important, including practical, organisational, political, ethical, economic, social as well as scientific reasons. Against this background, Chapter 2 concludes by enumerating exemplary questions that evaluation research might address.

eParticipation initiatives can be viewed and evaluated from different perspectives. In Chapter 3, we present a layered model of eParticipation evaluation, which has been adapted from one of the few existing,

advanced evaluation approaches in this area (Macintosh & Whyte, 2008). This model integrates three overlapping perspectives on an eParticipation exercise:

- The *project perspective* looks in detail at the specific aims of an eParticipation exercise and to what extent the initiative meet its objectives. In addition to outcomes, this perspective looks at the quality of the process itself.
- The *socio-technical perspective* considers to what extent the tools that are used directly affect outcomes, i.e., help to achieve the objectives of the project. This involves studying the public take-up and usage, usefulness and acceptability of the tools with respect to users and processes.
- The *democratic perspective* considers the overarching principles and values of democracy and looks at the democratic criteria that the eParticipation initiative is addressing. Here one of the most difficult aspects is to understand to what extent eParticipation affects policy and helps to improve existing democratic processes and practices.

Systematic evaluations of eParticipation require clear evaluation frameworks with well-defined criteria, measures and methods of data gathering and analysis. In Chapter 4, we outline criteria for each of the perspectives presented in Chapter 3, and, for all criteria, we assign some possible indicators and measures as well as data sources and evaluation methods. Moreover, we provide a list of context attributes that help to define some basic characteristics of each participation project or evaluand under examination.

Chapter 5 discusses evaluation design options, common evaluation methods, and quality criteria. The main ideas presented in the preceding chapters are summarized by a simplified and recurrent scheme of the evaluation process. The key considerations involved in any systematic evaluation design are as follows:

- the contextual characteristics and goals of the evaluand,
- the means identified to reach these goals,
- the stakeholders involved,
- the aims of evaluation (main questions and purposes) which influence its scope and design (e.g., from a single method to a mixed method approach),
- measurable (quantitative and/or qualitative process and outcome) indicators about the functioning of the tools/resources and the achievement of the identified goals,
- the instruments/methods for the evaluation (adequate to reach the evaluation goals and to collect the data needed for analysis) and the related resources (e.g., time, staff).

In practice there are some additional factors that will influence how evaluation is designed and conducted, including, in particular, the funding context, the actors who conduct the evaluation, and their specific research interests.

Chapter 5 also discusses three distinct (but not exclusive) types of evaluation design:

- *Single case evaluation*, usually in the form of a case study, is the most common type of evaluation. Single case evaluations are often carried out in the course of eParticipation projects when the sponsor organisation has an interest in assessing the outcomes of a single project or specific eParticipation tool.
- The e*valuation of combined usage of offline and online tools* focuses on projects that combine e-tools with more traditional means of participation like public meetings or paper-based interaction. One purpose of evaluating the "media mix" is to link the outcomes of a participation project to specific combinations of offline and online tools. In addition, within-case comparisons of offline and online means can provide evidence of the relative value of each within the process of participation as a whole.
- *Comparative evaluations* of a number of cases are most likely to contribute to an understanding of *what* eParticipation practices *work, when and why*. The *what* refers to eParticipation processes and tools*; works* refers to examples of success (i.e., desired outcomes of projects); and the *when* looks at the contextual conditions under which projects run. The *why* means that evaluation goes beyond mere description towards a more analytical approach that aims to explore and explain the relationships between processes, outcomes, and context variables.

To address specific evaluation questions, both quantitative and qualitative data and multiple sources of information are useful and need to be considered. The conceptions of eParticipation and evaluation adopted in this booklet suggest an approach that integrates standard and non-standard instruments. Thus, some common quantitative and qualitative techniques for information gathering and analysis, and the case study as a common research strategy for evaluating eParticipation, are described. Moreover, the value of evaluation exercises depends first and foremost on the quality of the evaluation design. Chapter 5 outlines some basic quality criteria, including the validity and reliability or credibility and usability of the measures that are employed in evaluation research.

Finally, Chapter 6 summarises our conclusions, and describes two key ways in which the framework of evaluation we have presented might be improved in future:

- Examine the applicability of the framework to other forms of participation, including those initiated from the 'bottom-up' and carried out by civil society actors or community-based groups.
- Expand the framework by investigating how to evaluate the long-term impacts of eParticipation projects, permitting a more critical approach to assessing the benefits and outcomes of eParticipation.

# 1 Introduction - The need for evaluation

The concept of participation is central to democracy since it stresses the capacity that citizens have to exert— directly or indirectly, and through a plurality of forms— an influence upon public decision-making processes. It is well known that there are different ideas and dimensions of democracy, expressed in the variety of its institutional forms and practices across time and different cultures. This means that the current need for new forms of citizen participation can be interpreted and translated in practice in different ways. The diffusion of new digital media offers the opportunity to implement varied forms of participation through an array of eParticipation tools and methods. Meanwhile, inasmuch as digital media become more prevalent features of social and political life, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish participation from eParticipation.

Government strategies, or in many cases the lack of strategies, for establishing citizen engagement means that countries are approaching eParticipation from many different directions and arriving at different results by focusing on one, some, or all of the many facets of the democratic process. For example, during 2004 and 2005 the UK government funded the national project on local eDemocracy as part of a £80 million National Project Programme aiming to help drive the modernization of local government services. This aimed to encourage all local authorities to consider the ways in which they could use eParticipation tools to enhance local democracy. Also, during the same period the Italian government funded an investigation on how best to support local government develop eParticipation. This has now resulted in a national programme funding over 50 eParticipation projects across Italy. In 2007 the Swedish government announced a new national initiative to (re-)investigate the potential of eDemocracy in Sweden.

Given this ever expanding use of information and communication technologies by governments in their efforts to re-invigorate representative democracy and engage with citizens, there is a need to better understand current eParticipation applications and learn from these experiences. Although there appears to be considerable enthusiasm for eParticipation initiatives at national, regional and local government levels, the objectives of different systems are quite diverse, as stakeholders tend to view them differently and have varying expectations.

eParticipation in practice can still be characterised as ‘experimental’ or ‘pilot’. Sustainable eParticipation is rarely achieved. There is little appreciation of the resources, participatory processes and effectiveness of eParticipation (Demo-net 2008). The domain lacks understanding of what works, when and why, so as to develop an understanding of quality practice that can be transferred and developed further. Different public agencies develop their own public engagement initiatives whereas in practice, policy issues under consideration invariably overlap with issues being considered by other agencies. There is a lack of commitment from elected representatives, who remain unconvinced of the relevance and added value of eParticipation initiatives. In addition, there is the fear that

opening up issues for public discussion will transfer ownership and power to other parties without an understanding of the consequences.

There are very few well-documented eParticipation initiatives. Typically, where there are descriptions, these tend to describe the technology in a one-off project setting and give user feedback. These descriptions of isolated experiments with systems raise more issues and challenges than they currently address. Critically, for evaluation purposes, governments are still relying on questionnaires that deal with user satisfaction levels to assess whether local democracy is being enhanced by eParticipation. Understanding how stakeholders perceive eParticipation and how the technology is used in practice is critical if we are to establish how ICT may be *affecting* democracy by changing existing practice, and *effecting* it as they become new instruments for achieving democracy.

To move towards more sustainable eParticipation which exhibits transparent and explicit participatory decision-making processes implies an appreciation of when it is appropriate to engage with others, an appreciation of who these others should be, and an understanding of which issues need public discussion, e.g. everything, only local issues or only issues of national importance. Sustainable eParticipation also requires commitment from all stakeholders and here the elected representatives need a better understanding of what can and cannot be achieved.

This reflects a need for a better understanding of the meaning of quality as applied to eParticipation which, in turn, should allow sustainable public engagement strategies to be investigated. Research is required into the impact and evaluation of eParticipation which integrates criteria and methods for assessing eParticipation initiatives in terms of their impact on democracy, their planning of public engagement and quality of the tools provided for public engagement.

But how to undertake evaluation which is novel even in the context of off-line participation? As noted by the OECD:

> "There is a striking imbalance between the amount of time, money and energy that governments in OECD countries invest in engaging citizens and civil society in public decision-making and the amount of attention they pay to evaluating the effectiveness of such efforts." (OECD 2005, p 10).

Evaluation is vital to providing a well-rounded and holistic view of any eParticipation initiative or project. Yet the evaluation task is often hindered by lack of clarity in objectives, lack of definitions and indicators of success, the complexity of the relationships between stakeholders, and barriers to reporting both failure and success (OECD, 2003). Therefore, in order to make eParticipation more tangible for institutions, eParticipation researchers need to develop an evaluation framework, which includes measurable indicators in the form of quantitative and qualitative success factors that put eParticipation results in context.

Evaluation needs to be independent of the project, yet planned at the beginning as part of the project. It should be critically honest about what things have gone well, as well as about its difficulties and shortcomings. To achieve this, a range of quantitative and qualitative methods are needed that do not simply relate to user satisfaction but rather establish

how the eParticipation project is affecting democracy by changing existing practice. One of the aims of evaluation has to be to increase understanding of eParticipation and, consequently, how to measure impact and potential opportunity. As such there is a strong case for using field study methods to observe and analyse eParticipation tools being used in community group settings and public places. A focus on behaviour in context, as well as views expressed in individual discussions and group workshops, is required for a fuller understanding of the appropriateness of the technology.

There is a need to develop an appropriate eParticipation evaluation framework, as described later in this booklet, which recognises the complexity of the domain and clearly defines the relevant perspectives, stakeholders and research methods to meet the needs of all those with an interest in the outcome. With such a rigorous framework we could begin to answer the question "Is eParticipation transforming democracy?"

There is a need to assess whether and how eParticipation activities effectively increase the opportunities of citizens to participate. Evaluating the quality of eParticipation in the policy process is crucial for understanding effects on democracy and the benefits of participation. The evaluation process also needs to consider the impacts of eParticipation in order to assess the possibilities of allowing citizens to influence decision making processes. However, there are no standard definitions of effectiveness in eParticipation, nor should we expect any to emerge. As we have stated, the evaluation must accommodate a variety of subjective assessments of the many actors involved, and of the many constituent elements of the eParticipation application. eParticipation is a hybrid of various technologies, social and political measures and there is a need to improve understanding of the relationships between these components and how their respective evaluation practices can be applied to eParticipation as a whole.

Mapping out the potential of eParticipation for improving democratic decision making through more transparent and stronger involvement of citizens is crucial to form a convincing argument for presentation to eParticipation practitioners. Furthermore, evaluation results can be used for improving eParticipation. This learning experience could be documented to provide a ground for a reflexive review of eParticipation methodologies and applications in the future.

As stated earlier, rigorous evaluations of eParticipation applications are hard to find. eParticipation evaluation is in its infancy and there is a need to develop a coherent evaluation framework encompassing a range of methods and perspectives. This report aims to make a start at defining such a framework, focusing, as a first step, mainly on eParticipation projects initiated by public institutions. Three examples of evaluation research will be referred to in boxes throughout the report in order to illustrate how specific parts of the framework operate in practice. The three cases are: the Local e-Democracy National Project evaluation in the UK, the evaluation of eParticipation pilots carried out in different European countries within the EVOICE project, and the evaluation of the Tuscan Electronic Town Meeting in Italy (for short descriptions of the projects see appendix A).

# 2 Key issues and questions in evaluation of eParticipation

## 2.1 Key issues for consideration in evaluation of eParticipation

The evaluation of eParticipation initiatives does not happen in isolation from broader scientific debates about the concepts, features and problems of (e)Participation and (e)Democracy. The following issues are most relevant to evaluating eParticipation: the concepts of democracy and participation; the online and offline dimensions of participation; dimensions of political inclusion/exclusion; the dynamic nature of eParticipation; and the opportunities and risks of ICTs and participation.

### 2.1.1 The concepts of 'democracy' and 'participation'

Participation and eParticipation is informed by different conceptions of democracy, which relate in turn to different political cultures and institutional settings. The current debate about how to *enlarge* and/or *deepen* participation is characterised by many open questions about the nature and form of participation and democracy. According to one classification, there are three basic levels of public involvement: information, consultation and participation (OECD 2001). Whereas most conceptions of democracy would emphasise the importance of public access to information in democratic life, there is no agreement about the second and third level of citizen involvement. In practice, this disagreement is reflected in a variety of approaches to the design of consultation and participation processes. For example, in participatory experiments, there are several approaches and methods that stress differently the relevance of discursive processes (inspired by the model of deliberative democracy) or aggregation mechanisms (such as polling or voting) for decision-making (Lukensmeyer & Hasselblad Torres, 2006).

Most of the democratic criteria applied in evaluation studies are normative and driven by theories and models of democracy. An important preliminary task for any evaluation study, therefore, is to identify the conceptions of democracy and participation that inform specific eParticipation initiatives, and, more specifically, how these conceptions are reflected in the roles and rules of participation, and the specific goals that are pursued.

### 2.1.2 The online and offline dimensions of participation

Inasmuch as digital media become more prevalent features of social and political life, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish participation from eParticipation or democracy from eDemocracy.

Online and offline participation influence one other, and the integration between the two communicational and relational dimensions is a crucial precondition for the development of effective participative processes (Freschi, 2007; Kubicek et al., 2007; see also Demo-net, 2008). Evaluation of eParticipation cannot be limited to the assessment of the

online tools that are offered by public institutions. It is clear that offering online tools for participation by itself does not add anything to participation processes, if citizens themselves do not use those tools. Two general questions that the evaluation of eParticipation must address are:

- What is the added-value of eParticipation in comparison with more traditional instruments and methods of participation?
- What are the effects of eParticipation on patterns of political inclusion/exclusion?

### 2.1.3 Dimensions of political inclusion / exclusion

One critical feature of participative practices is the need to involve disengaged or disadvantaged citizens or groups. Our understanding of political inclusion and exclusion in eParticipation processes could be improved by focusing on the social actors involved, not only in terms of access to ICTs, but also in terms of some other salient factors:

- Social conditions (gender issue[1], participation across different age groups, involvement of immigrants and disadvantaged people);
- Kind of usage (the competences, skills, habits of participants);
- Asymmetries (individual vs. collective participation, single vs. organised interests, unequal distribution of power and manipulation).

### 2.1.4 The dynamic nature of eParticipation

eParticipation initiatives continually evolve as technologies, social practices, institutional settings and political opportunities change. Given the dynamic nature of the phenomenon — socially and politically as well as technologically — it is important to monitor eParticipation processes diachronically, comparing progresses or failures in terms of citizens involvement and policy effects, and with reference to other context variables. Each specific eParticipation initiative is a part of a wider political process. Therefore, it is also necessary to distinguish short-term effects of eParticipation from mid- and long-term effects. Of course, each specific eParticipation project can also be considered as a process itself, with its own life cycle (Balocchi et al., 2007).

### 2.1.5 The opportunities and risks of ICTs and participation

ICTs have a significant potential to facilitate new forms of political engagement, and yet eParticipation initiatives might not always have positive democratic effects in practice. Hence the critical evaluation of eParticipation needs to distinguish participative processes which really promote broad and deep participation from processes that, because of poor organization and planning, and a lack of clear objectives, could restrict participation, atomize citizenship and reinforce control over grass-root participation, creating new 'spirals of silence' around conflicting positions (Schlosberg & Dryzek, 2002). In the mid term, these problems

[1] Gender issue is particularly relevant because of its cross-dimensional nature. With reference to gender issue and ICTs see GEM 2007.

could result in public distrust in political institutions, resulting in a reduced ability to address and manage conflicts in a democratic manner.

## 2.2 Main purposes of evaluation

Evaluation has been defined as "the structured process of establishing the success or otherwise of an exercise against preset criteria" (Frewer and Rowe 2005, p.94).[2] There are various reasons why evaluation might be needed. In general terms, three main purposes of evaluation research can be distinguished (Forss 2005, p.44):

- *Audit* (to establish control over the extent of goal attainment and use of resources; to justify decisions made; to ensure internal control and external accountability);
- *Management* (to support decisions and improve performance; to find out what worked, what went wrong, and why; to enhance the legitimacy of decisions in order to build trust);
- *Learning* (to document experiences; to accumulate knowledge for better understanding and improvement; to allow for organisational learning; to discover unexpected or unintended effects).

A number of additional factors may complement the purposes for evaluating eParticipation, such as:

- Measuring the impact and potential opportunities of eParticipation;
- Increasing the process quality, effectiveness and efficiency;
- Identifying and avoiding shortfalls in democratic processes;
- Increasing the acceptance of policies;
- Helping to identify priorities for reform.

This list reflects the variety of reasons why evaluation of eParticipation is important: it includes practical, organisational, political, ethical, economic, social as well as scientific reasons. At the same time it shows that evaluation is important for all stakeholders involved in eParticipation: the sponsors of an eParticipation project, the managers, the participants, the wider public and the scientific community. An overarching purpose is the demand of governments for information and tools "to evaluate their performance in providing information, conducting consultation and engaging citizens, in order to adapt to new requirements and changing conditions for policy-making" (OECD 2001, p. 88).

As is common in INTERREG projects, the EVOICE bid listed a set of indicators to monitor the project's success and steps forward. The objectives of the whole project are laid down as indicators and the values represent its results (cumulated from separate pilot projects) which are reported to the funding authority on an annual base. The indicators are

[2] This is to differentiate evaluation from assessment defined as "relatively unstructured analysis of an exercise without preset effectiveness criteria, as occurs in the conducting of descriptive case studies" (Frewer and Rowe 2005, p.94).

grouped into four categories:

- activity indicators (such as 'number of publications', 'evoice-website', 'community websites', 'project group meetings'),
- output indicators (such as 'shared online tool library', 'digital newsletters'; 'end-of-project evaluation'),
- result indicators (such as 'number of visitors to community website', 'number of visitors of E-VOICE website'), and
- one impact indicator ('change in participation culture').

Many of the project activities and the related indicators concern communication, the number of meetings and multi-media presentations that will be held and are quantitatively assessed. Only the impact indicator is described qualitatively. The figures of the first three categories can be taken as a proof that announced activities have taken place: X newsletters have been produced and circulated to Y subscribers; a tool library was developed with Z tools, etc. On the other hand, they only provide partial information about quality. The data collected under the fourth indicator helps to fill this gap (see also box 7 in chapter 5.2).

**Box 1:** Example of the audit-purpose of evaluation

Attention must be focused on the concrete objectives of evaluation research. As stated above, evaluation generally serves the purposes of auditing, management, and learning. As public participation is an emerging and still developing field, "there is much to learn from the experiments currently under way in different countries", and, in the near future, we can expect that evaluations will be undertaken mostly in order to support learning (Forss: 2005, p. 45). However, even if there "is not always a clear dividing line between different evaluation purposes" (op. cit., p. 46), the defined objectives will determine how the evaluation framework is designed in terms of the criteria that are prioritised, the methods that are selected and the team that is chosen to conduct the evaluation.

For example, if an audit aims at establishing control over the spending of public funds, it is likely to require quantitative data and an objective assessment of outcomes conducted by independent experts. If an evaluation is undertaken to support decisions, it will need to be conducted in cooperation with decision makers and may focus on processes rather than on outcomes. By comparison, the objective of documenting experiences for learning purposes again leads to different forms of evaluation design. In this case, Forss (op. cit., p. 48) proposes that those who are supposed to learn from the evaluation are involved in the process itself and that particular attention is given to the question of how research findings are managed and disseminated in order to preserve the knowledge gained from evaluation research.

## 2.3 Key questions for evaluation studies

Against this background, a number of key questions might be addressed in the evaluation of eParticipation, such as:

- Why are targets and outcomes achieved, and why not?
- How significantly does the eParticipation project contribute to meeting stakeholder expectations?
- What is the added value of eParticipation in comparison with traditional instruments and methods of participation?
- What are unexpected outcomes of the eParticipation process?
- How well are online and offline (traditional) channels of participation integrated?

Important questions focusing on the specific role of ICTs include the following (Macintosh 2003, p. 73):

- To what extent, and in what ways, can ICTs make policy information more accessible and understandable to citizens?
- Do ICTs contribute to more openness and accountability in policy-making?
- Will ICTs encourage and assist the public to participate and facilitate consultation?
- How can ICTs enhance participation of the socially excluded?

Other key questions addressing specific eParticipation projects have been pointed out by Macintosh (2003, p. 76), originally with reference to eConsultation processes:

- Was the eParticipation process conducted in line with best practice?
- Were the eParticipation objectives and what was expected of the citizens made clear?
- Did the eParticipation reach the target audience?
- Was the information provided appropriate and relevant?
- Were the contributions informed and appropriate?
- Was feedback provided both during and after the eParticipation?
- Was there an impact on policy content?

These are just examples of evaluation questions, most of which have played a role in past evaluation practice. Of course, the specific questions to be addressed in evaluation research depend upon the particular case of eParticipation under study. A key consideration here is the different perspectives (as presented in the next chapter) from which an eParticipation project or initiative can be viewed and evaluated.

# 3 A layered model of eParticipation evaluation

There are few existing, rigorous evaluation approaches that touch on the issues in question here. Some of the approaches refer to different participation methods or participation in general (Rowe & Frewer, 2000; Warburton et al., 2007), while others concentrate on the quality of democracy (Coppedge & Reinicke, 1990; Diamond & Morlino, 2005) or governance (Skelcher et al., 2005; Schmitter, 2005). Frameworks which provide for an assessment and evaluation of eParticipation specifically are rare, and moreover, embryonic (e.g., Henderson et al., 2005; Macintosh & Whyte, 2008).

In this booklet we adapt the approach suggested in Macintosh and Whyte (2008). It is one of the most elaborated in this field and is presented by the authors as a good starting point for further development.[3] As shown in figure 1, the layered model of evaluation integrates three different perspectives on an eParticipation exercise.

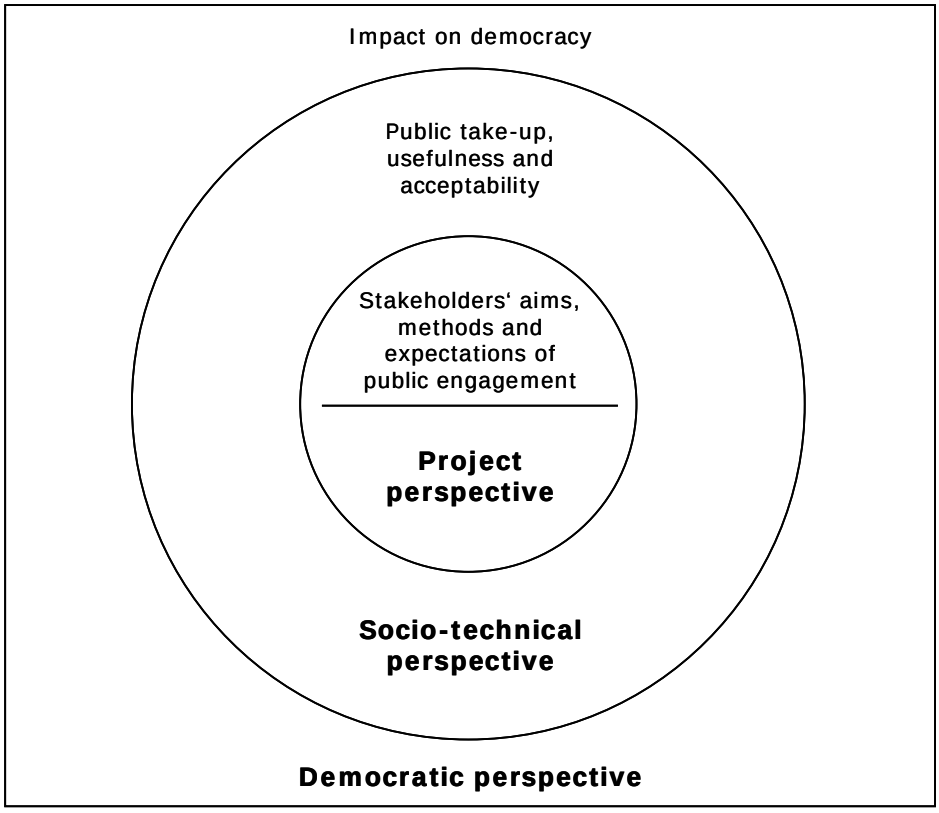



**Figure 1:** The layered model of eParticipation evaluation

[3] Moreover, this framework has been applied in several evaluations and has proven to produce reasonable results.

- The ***project perspective*** looks in detail at the specific aims of eParticipation projects and to what extent the initiatives meet their objectives. This perspective implies an assessment of the outcomes of projects against the articulated objectives. Here the priorities, interpretations and expectations of different stakeholders and the specific aims of different initiatives may vary. However, some general criteria are necessary in order to produce comparable results. Rowe and Frewer (2005) suggest that the specific aims of individual participation exercises may be clustered in terms of more general classes of criteria. In addition to outcomes, attention should also be paid to the process aspect of eParticipation projects.
- The ***socio-technical perspective*** considers to what extent the deployed tools directly affect the outcomes, i.e., help to achieve the objectives of the project. Hence the evaluation looks at the public take-up and usage, usefulness and acceptability of the tool with respect to users and processes. The more the initiative has a pilot test character, the more important it is to pay attention to the socio-technical perspective in terms of tool design, because the tools are still malleable. Here issues such as usability and accessibility are important, in order to gain information about how the tool is working in practice and what adjustments are necessary. Established frameworks from the software engineering and information systems fields and other good practice guidelines can be used to extract the evaluation criteria needed for the tool assessment.
- The ***democratic perspective*** considers the overarching principles and values of democracy and looks at the democratic criteria that the eParticipation initiative is addressing. Here one of the most difficult aspects is to understand to what extent eParticipation affects policy and helps to boost the flagging existing democracies.

The three perspectives overlap: the tools can be considered as "means to ends", contributing to the achievement of the specific goals of the eParticipation initiative at the micro level, and improving democratic practices at the macro level of societies.

Furthermore, the three perspectives suggest that evaluation may operate at different stages of an eParticipation project:

- *ex ante,* in the phase of designing and planning a project defining goals and adequate means (project and socio-technical perspective);
- *in itinere*, generally concerned with the implementation and mainly concentrated on the relationship between means and proximate results (project and socio-technical perspective);
- *ex post*, focusing on the final results and extending its aims to a general analysis about the appropriate relations among outcomes, tools and resources of the process observed and its socio-political context (all perspectives).

# 4 Evaluation criteria, indicators and methods

As mentioned in the introduction, systematic evaluations of eParticipation require well-developed evaluation frameworks, which define at least some criteria, measures and methods to evaluate eParticipation initiatives. In the following sections, criteria proposed by Macintosh and Whyte (2008) are revised and complemented by criteria found in or derived from Henderson et al. (2005), Carbo and Williams (2004), Damodoran et al. (2005), Komito (2005), and Dittrich et al. (2003). The criteria are defined with reference to the three perspectives discussed in the previous chapter: the project, socio-technical and democratic perspectives. For all criteria some possible indicators and measures as well as data sources and evaluation methods are assigned.

As Rowe and Frewer (2004, p. 548) state, participation projects "do not take place in a vacuum but within particular contexts." These contexts frame participation processes to some extent, and good participation processes are designed to fit the political, cultural and socio-economic environment in which the exercise takes place. Thus, every evaluation should start with a characterisation of the relevant context.[4]

We propose to focus on the following (table 1) context attributes which help to define basic characteristics of each of the participation projects under examination.

| ***Context attributes*** | ***Explanation*** |
|---|---|
| governmental levels | local, regional, national, supra-national |
| issues/types of decisions | spatial planning, budgeting, legislative procedures and other |
| issue characteristics | complexity, potential for controversy and disagreement etc. |
| tools and methods used | offline and online tools and methods used in the process |
| scope of the exercise | large-scale, small-scale |
| level of engagement | information, consultation, involvement, cooperation, empowerment |
| stage in decision-making | stage(s) in the policy cycle |
| actors | initiators of the project, decision makers involved, stakeholders involved, addressees of the project (public in general, specific target groups etc.) |

[4] This is supposed to be helpful to analyse in which way different contextual "settings" or "arrangements" influence the evaluated processes and outcomes. The resulting question is thus: To what extent does context matter?

| | |
|---|---|
| degree of institutionalisation /formalisation of the procedure | formal / informal procedures |
| project's history | pilot, periodical, permanent etc. |
| political culture | democratic tradition, participation rates (if known from other processes), voter turnouts etc. |

**Table 1:** Context attributes of eParticipation projects

## 4.1 Project perspective

The project perspective looks at the specific aims and objectives of the eParticipation project as set by the project organisers or the management team. Macintosh and Whyte (2008) as well as Whyte et al. (2005) identified five major criteria that are relevant for the evaluation of an eParticipation project since they cover basic principles of political participation:

- ***Engaging with a wider audience:*** Since eParticipation initiatives aim at (re)activating citizens' engagement in democratic processes and at including different stakeholder perspectives in decision-making, this criterion deals with information policies, with aspects of inclusiveness as well as with community building.
- ***Obtaining better-informed opinions:*** This criterion attempts to gauge the impact of "background information" on the eParticipation process respectively on the actual outcome. Hence, it assesses how far participants shift opinions and attitudes due to the provision of information.
- ***Scope of deliberation:*** The (qualitative) "depth" of the deliberative eParticipation process is the major focus of this criterion. It proposes indicators that allow learning more detailed about the qualitative aspects of the content (e.g., the extent of interactive and rational communication) and the structure of the eParticipation process.
- ***Effectiveness:*** Since eParticipation is expected to facilitate cost and time savings in the realm of political engagement, this criterion asks about adequate mechanism to investigate such "savings assumptions" (e.g., comparisons between "offline" and online participation processes).
- ***Feedback:*** This criterion aims at assessing the response and feedback participants receive on their contributions and their impact on decisions.

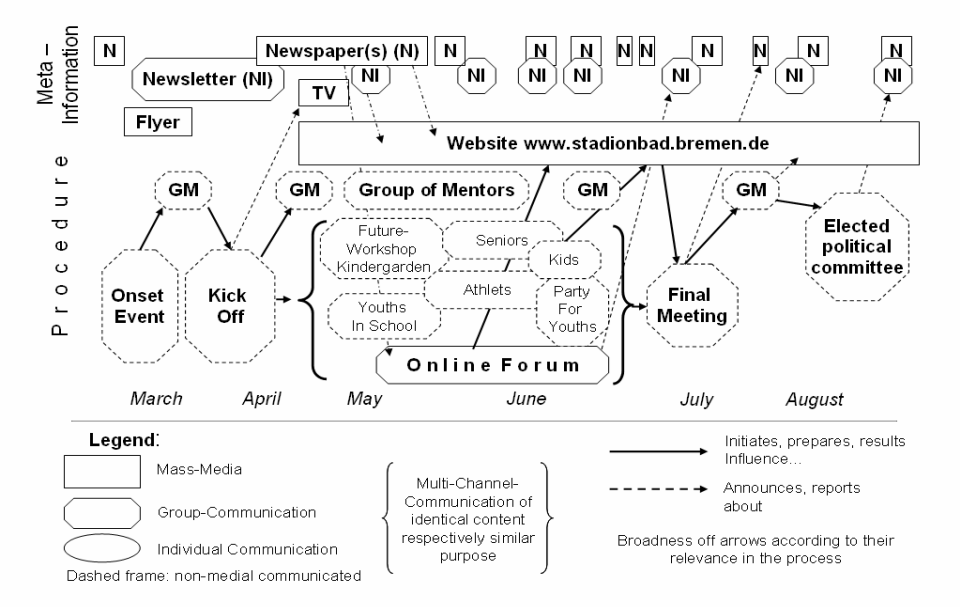
In addition, Henderson et al. (2005) introduce criteria that emphasise the interrelations between technological development processes, organisational work practices and policy processes. Therefore, in reference to Henderson, the criteria of "sustainability" and "process quality" will be added here:

- ***Process quality:*** Overall process quality of eParticipation projects is a criterion that identifies and assesses good practice features,

such as the early inclusion of relevant stakeholders in project planning.

- ***Sustainability:*** The criterion of sustainability detects operational and/or policy barriers to the continuity of the project.

In the evaluation of the EVOICE-Project, a *process diagram* has been used to describe a complex participation procedure along a time scale. Different modes of communication - both to conduct the participation procedure (e.g. meetings, stakeholder groups, online discussion forum, website) and to get the attention of addressees by reporting 'meta-information' and (interim) results – may also be distinguished. This concerns project-perspective indicators such as 'media coverage', 'inclusiveness', 'time effectiveness' but also socio-technical perspective indicators such as 'usage', and 'responsiveness'.




(Source: Westholm, 2007)

The arrows in the diagram describe whether one method or process initiates or prepares a following process, e.g., if the results of a subsequent workshop are discussed in a discussion forum. Dashed arrows represent the combinations of meta-information and elements of the participation procedure, e.g., if a flyer announces a public meeting or if a newspaper reports about interim results of an online forum. If possible, the relevance of combinations within the process is depicted by the breadth of arrows. As well as these consecutive media combinations, parallel media combinations may also be represented, e.g., if a questionnaire is delivered through a website, by post and personally by a street worker targeted to different user groups (multi channel communication of identical content).

**Box 2:** Process diagram of a complex participation procedure

The following table integrates sub-criteria for evaluation related to the key criteria. Importantly, the information provided in the table is not meant to be exhaustive and the criteria will vary according to project goals.

| ***Criteria/Sub-criteria*** | ***Indicators / Measures*** | ***Sources / Methods*** |
|---|---|---|
| **Engaging with a wider audience** | | |
| Outreach and promotion | Media coverage informing on the participation offering | media review; media content analysis |
| Inclusiveness | Number and social profile of involved people (compared to overall sample referring to the target group) | User survey; interviews; expert interviews |
| | Identification of participation barriers | |
| | Incorporation of multiple perspectives in service design, technology production and use (e.g., by using participatory design methods, design of tailorable tools)[5] | |
| Community development | Individual participation and networking | User survey; interviews; network analysis |
| | Connection patterns among different networks of interest | |
| **Obtaining better-informed opinions** | | |
| Information | Relevance and quality of information provided | user surveys; interviews ("Control groups" to identify differences concerning the relevance of provided information) |
| Learning | Scope of expertise (before and after the participation process, incl. institutional users) | |
| **Scope of deliberation** | | |
| | Extent of interaction amongst participants; level of public involvement | Content analysis (quantitative, qualitative), observations |

[5] See Dittrich et al., 2003, p. 9.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Extent of rationality involved in the participation process | |
| **Effectiveness** | | |
| Cost effectiveness | Cost savings in providing, aggregating and evaluating input | Specialist or stakeholder assessment; analysis of expenditures and expenses; user survey (comparison "offline" and "online" participation) |
| Time effectiveness | Time savings in providing, aggregating and evaluating input | |
| **Feedback** | | |
| | Feedback content and quality | Survey, interviews, content analysis |
| | Response rates and timeliness of response | Operations statistics; survey |
| | Participants' satisfaction with feedback | Survey, interviews |
| | Public availability of contributions of other participants; proportion of submissions posted for public viewing | Operations statistics; interviews |
| **Process quality**[6] | | |
| | User and stakeholder identified areas for enhancement[7] | Surveys, interviews; review of research and practice literature |
| | Gap analysis against good practice features of processes in practice elsewhere[8] | |
| | Harmonization of work-practices of authority and eParticipation processes[9] | Field studies; interviews |
| **Sustainability**[10] | | |
| | Level of key stakeholder support[11] | Surveys, interviews, document reviews |

[6] See Henderson et al., 2005, p. 3.
[7] Ibid., p. 9.
[8] Ibid.
[9] See Damodoran et al., 2005, p. 8.
[10] See Henderson et al., 2005, p. 3.
[11] Ibid.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Stakeholder perception of continuity barriers[12] | |
| | Level of institutionalization of education and training for government officials[13] | |

**Table 2:** Evaluation criteria for project perspective

## 4.2 Socio-technical perspective

Macintosh and Whyte (2008) also provide a list of socio-technical evaluation criteria, which mainly derive from good practice standards set for governmental and public websites. These criteria are framed from the perspective of users and are grouped under three key criteria:

- ***Social acceptability:*** This criterion deals with the security the tool provides, e.g., for data handling and the confidence people show while using the tool, as well as the relevance of the tool for the purposes of involving individual citizens or community groups.
- ***Usefulness:*** Usefulness refers to users' needs and expectations towards the tool and the degree to which the tool meets these needs and expectations as well as to the requirements of the participation process.
- ***Usability:*** This criterion asks whether the design of the tool allows the users to perform a specific task in an easy and satisfactory manner.

The evaluation of the Local e-Democracy National Project used field tests of the deployed tools (including usability testing and semi-structured discussions) to gather evidence of what people do, as well as what they say they do (or intend to do) with the available tools. A field test was conducted with both individual users and groups of users and was composed of two parts: 1) a brief usability test and 2) semi-structured discussions with the users. During the usability test the citizens were provided with three basic tasks that they should perform, and were observed by the researchers. In the ePetitioning projects, for example, the three tasks were:

- Finding out how to set up an ePetition;
- Signing an ePetition;
- Commenting on a petition in a discussion forum.

The participants were asked to comment on any aspect they found important and on difficulties that occurred while performing the tasks. The comments were noted and the sessions video recorded in order to analyse any problems mentioned by the users. In subsequent interviews the users were asked about their experiences as well as their expectations towards

[12] Ibid.
[13] See Carbo & Williams, 2004, p. 97.

the tool and its impact on decision-making. The discussions were also recorded and analysed using the same set of criteria and dimensions as for the interviews.

The socio-technical criteria were used to identify issues citizens found relevant from the field tests of the ePetition tool. For example, the main usability issue arising from the field tests (for the criterion 'navigation and organisation', see table below) was the Discuss Petition function, which was not readily recognisable. This was the only serious issue within the ePetition tool (i.e. the only one where the participants could not complete a task without assistance). Minor issues were found with the List Petition and Progress pages. However finding ePetitioner was also a serious problem on the Bristol City Council site.

**Box 3:** Field tests of the tools

This perspective has been amended with respect to the usefulness of the tools, as regards the levels of interactivity required by the process, and the compliance with good practice standards. The following table illustrates how the aforementioned criteria can be operationalized in research and which sources and methods can be used to generate the relevant data.

| ***Criteria / Sub-criteria*** | ***Indicators / Measures*** | ***Sources / Methods*** |
|---|---|---|
| **Social acceptability** | | |
| Trust and security | the information is presented accurate, complete and reliable | specialist or stakeholder assessment of data handling; participant survey |
| | the information users have provided is handled in a secure manner | |
| | users are confident in the steps taken | |
| | data handling procedures are in compliance with relevant legislation or guidelines | |
| Relevance and legitimacy | tool meets a purpose relevant to individual users' and community's needs | user survey, interviews |
| | the content and surrounding processes are relevant to that purpose | |
| **Usefulness** | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Accessibility | level of compliance with Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) content guidelines is sufficient to meet the needs of users with disabilities | specialist or stakeholder assessment; user survey; interviews |
| | alternative access over public access points, mobile devices is possible | |
| | identification of access barriers | |
| Appeal and usage | the take-up is inline with expectations | web metrics, satisfaction ratings, user survey, interviews |
| | intended users are satisfied with the tool and want to use it; willingness to return to the site | |
| | identification of usage barriers | |
| | number of users, extent of their use of the tool | |
| Content clarity | users understand what the content means in the context of the task or situation | user survey, usability testing, observations, interviews |
| Responsiveness | the tool allows to answer the user's questions quickly and effectively | user survey, usability testing, website analysis |
| | site provides contact information, FAQs, search functions | |
| Interaction | the tool supports the level of interaction required by the process | specialist or stakeholder assessment based on website analysis, web analytics, content analysis |
| Good practice | level of consistency with current developments, good practice guidelines and standards in the field (e.g., interoperability standards) | evaluator assessment informed by document and literature review |
| **Usability** | | |
| Navigation and organisation | sufficient and consistent information about users' current position on the site, | usability testing |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | path taken, and available options | |
| Efficiency and flexibility | time needed to perform a task | usability testing, user survey |
| | appropriate short-cuts for doing repetitive or familiar tasks | |
| Error recovery | users can undo previous actions | usability testing |
| | users are guided effectively on the correct procedure and can continue the task without distraction or hesitation | |

**Table 3:** Evaluation criteria for socio-technical perspective

## 4.3 Democratic perspective

The conceptualisation of eParticipation includes the expectation that ICT can have a positive influence on democracy at large. In order to assess how and how far such changes in democratic practice help improve the quality of democratic systems or deepen democracy, empirical research is required that goes far beyond the more pragmatic project and socio-technical perspectives. However, this is perhaps the most demanding task in evaluation: even if democracy itself were not a contested concept, it is difficult to isolate and assess the various impacts of eParticipation independently from other influence factors.

An evaluation framework should start from the recognition that democracy is defined in the first instance by its basic principles or values. There are various – always normative – concepts of democracy which can be used in order to develop measurement and evaluation criteria.[14] Diamond and Morlino (2005) point to the need to reflect on the tensions among different dimensions of democratic quality and the danger of reducing this complexity and reasonable contestability in establishing measurable indicators. Arguing that any framework for assessing democratic quality is normative, they try to capture the interrelations and dependencies within democracy with eight dimensions of democratic quality: a group of procedural dimensions comprising the rule of law, participation, competition, vertical and horizontal accountability; a group of substantive dimensions including freedom and equality; and a results dimension constituted by responsiveness. In sum these dimensions mainly aim at

[14] Robert A. Dahl's concept of a modern polyarchy is based on overall ideas of freedom and equality, but intends to be as ideology neutral as possible. Based on this concept and as a further example, The Polyarchy Scale developed by Coppedge and Reinicke (1990) offers a tool for measuring the degree to which national political systems meet the minimum requirements for political democracy. The scale is based on five sets of detailed indicators of freedom of expression, freedom of organization, media pluralism, and the holding of fair elections.

strengthening the influence of citizens or constituencies in policy and decision-making.

Schmitter (2005, 18pp) concentrates on the concept of accountability - "as the key to the broadest and most widely applicable definition of modern representative democracy" - for measuring the quality of democratic governance. Accountability "implies an exchange of responsibilities and political sanctions between rulers, representatives and citizens." Measuring accountability, as he proposes, should refer to a set of criteria generated by a matrix combining a temporal and an actor dimension: key stages of the decision-making process and key actors. This leads to nine categories of criteria for evaluating an accountability sequence:

| | ***Before*** | ***During*** | ***After*** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Citizens | Participation/ Absention | Attention/ Indifference | Obligation/ Resentment |
| Representatives | Mobilisation (for and against)/ (against) | Competition/ Obstruction | Compliance/ Resistance |
| Rulers | Accessibility/ Exclusion | Deliberation/ Collusion | Responsiveness/ Imposition |

**Table 4:** Accountability criteria – properties of successful vs. failed accountability (adapted from Schmitter 2005, p. 25)

These approaches provide basic reference frames and criteria for grasping the impact of eParticipation on democracy. They recognize that the quality of democracy is a multidimensional concept. It is characterised by trade-offs and optimisation problems, as it is not possible to maximise on all dimensions at the same time. For example, it is difficult to have perfect deliberation and perfect inclusion, or impossible to have ideal deliberation among representatives and perfect mandate representation. Democratic quality is not just a matter of more or less, but of the mix between various (agreed) ideals of democracy. As we have also suggested, the "right mix" of criteria will vary according to specific normative paths of democracy, and different institutional and cultural contexts.

To capture the effects of eParticipation on democracy at large and to evaluate its impact on democratic quality, the following criteria are suggested to start with:

- ***Representation:*** the extent to which an eParticipation exercise supports, complements or enhances the activities and understanding of representative democracy.
- ***Engagement:*** whether the citizens' understanding of and active involvement in democratic processes and political decision-making is enhanced.
- ***Transparency:*** to what extent political processes and political decision-making are made transparent and intelligible.
- ***Conflict and consensus:*** whether an eParticipation exercise not only allows for divergence of opinion but also incorporates opportunities for negotiation, mediation and consensus building.

The Local e-Democracy National Project evaluation of the criteria 'political equality' and 'community control' revealed the following results:

- ***Political equality:*** The projects each showed strong potential for greater inclusiveness. There was evidence that the tools were already being actively used by hundreds of citizens in each of the local authority areas. There were also signs that these were mostly not previously "engaged" in local authority decision making. Demographically there were disabled and minority ethnic users almost in proportion to local populations, but male and middle-aged users predominated. The personalised survey project had strong potential given its integration of online and offline channels, although its take-up could not be assessed during the evaluation period.
- ***Community control:*** Citizens had modest expectations that their views would have some impact on decision-making and strong expectations that the councils should in any case publish a response to their input. The evidence that citizens were satisfied with the arrangements was limited but mostly positive for the ePetitioner and e-panel projects. The Wolverhampton Partnership showed strong potential to liaise effectively with existing community groups, although we could not directly assess the latter's involvement in the time available. The personalised Survey project placed much emphasis on responsiveness, though again citizens' views on that were unavailable.

**Box 4:** Example of results for democratic criteria

- ***Political equality:*** to improve the inclusiveness of policy-making or, at least, not to further disadvantage those who already are in some way excluded or less powerful in the political process.
- ***Community control:*** how closely citizen engagement is linked to decision-making processes, reflecting that those who take decisions are responsive to the communities which they serve.

| ***Criteria/Sub-criteria*** | ***Indicators / Measures*** | ***Sources / Methods*** |
|---|---|---|
| **Representation** | | |
| Fit with legal framework | Legal stipulation for participation procedure | Legal framework analysis |
| Integration with "offline" participation processes | Matrix on where eParticipation project or tool can interlink with "offline" policy processes | Expert interviews |
| **Engagement** | | |
| Information | Availability of information on democratic processes and rules (of | Website analysis |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | e-)Participation | |
| Knowledge | Knowledge about existing initiatives | Survey, interviews |
| | Increase in knowledge about democratic processes and rules (of e-)Participation | |
| Participation | Extent of participation: access numbers, time, number of initiatives | Operation statistics interviews, network analysis |
| | Active membership in networks or interest groups | |
| | Level of involvement of citizens in identifying thematic issues to be dealt with via eParticipation tools (top-down, bottom-up) | |
| | Social capital building[15] | |
| **Transparency** | | |
| | Publication of interim and/or final results of participation process | Focus group interviews with involved actors |
| | Transparency on how decisions were negotiated | |
| | Public discussion on final results with involved actors | |
| **Conflict and consensus** | | |
| | Identification of “pros and cons” (to avoid a “consensus manufactory”); level of agreement amongst participants | Focus group interviews with participants on diverging opinions |
| | Participation policies (e.g., moderation, etc.) | Website analysis |
| **Political equality** | | |
| Pluralism, openness of participation process | Number of relevant target group(s) in relation to actual number of participants | Descriptive analysis of target groups concerning the demographic, political, ethical, cultural, social etc. variety |

[15] See Komito, 2005, p. 41.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Identification of barriers to participation or barriers to active citizenship | Survey, interviews |
| **Community control** | | |
| Participant satisfaction | Satisfaction index | Survey, interviews |
| Impact on decision-making process | Level of departmental and jurisdictional integration[16], accountability | Policy analysis: document analysis, expert interviews |
| | Level of documentation of generated results | |
| | Identification of differing interests and policy frames | |
| | Policy outcomes in relation to different interests articulated by stakeholders | |
| | Impact in different stages of decision-making; identification of relevant "points of cooperation" (e.g., according to policy-life cycle) | |

**Table 5: Evaluation criteria for democratic perspective**

[16] See Damodoran et al., 2005.

# 5 Evaluation design, methods and quality criteria

## 5.1 Designing the evaluation

Evaluation, being a process itself, must consider its own recursive and reflexive nature. At the very least, this involves making clear what expectations are connected to the evaluation and what should be evaluated (outcomes, processes or context). The main ideas presented in the preceding chapters can be summarized by a simplified and recurrent scheme of this process. The following points can be understood as steps to be taken or decisions to be made in designing evaluation research. These considerations may lead to different research designs. Generally, evaluation requires the identification of:

- The contextual characteristics and goals of a project;
- The means identified to reach these goals;
- The stakeholders involved;
- The aims of evaluation (main questions and purposes) which influence its scope and design (e.g., from a single method to a mixed method approach);
- Measurable (quantitative and/or qualitative process and outcome) indicators about the functioning of the tools/resources and the achievement of the identified goals;
- The instruments/methods of the evaluation (adequate to reach the evaluation goals and to collect the data needed for analysis) and the related resources (e.g., time, staff).

However, in practice there are some additional factors that will influence how evaluation is designed and conducted:

- *Actors conducting the evaluation:* Evaluation can be made by the same organization that leads the process (governmental unit), or by a third party (usually academic and non-governmental organisation researchers). The interests and skills of both can diverge considerably.
- *Funding:* Evaluations can be conducted within different funding contexts (EU, national, local). Such contexts may influence the scope and design of evaluations (from single project evaluations to multiple cases or cross-national designs). In addition, systematic evaluations can become expensive. Evaluation is not always or often undertaken in projects and the resources available to the governmental organisation leading the project are limited.
- *Research interests:* Evaluation designs are often not only shaped by precise evaluation questions concerning the effectiveness of a given project, but also by the more general research interests of the evaluators. This is most likely the case when academic researchers, with their own scientific backgrounds or who are in the course of specific research programmes, carry out evaluations.

In the following we distinguish three possible (but not exclusive) types of evaluation research design.

### 5.1.1 Single Case Evaluation

A single case study is the most common type of evaluation, as it is often carried out in the course of eParticipation projects when the sponsor organisation has an interest in assessing the outcomes of a single project, or a specific eParticipation tool.

An evaluation in the form of a single case study is often used when the lead authority conducts the evaluation internally. Here, the main challenge is to strike a balance between telling a success story and honestly reporting on the shortcomings of projects in order that others can learn from past failings and mistakes. External evaluation avoids this problem and so helps to ensure that research findings are more objective, balanced and useful for achieving real improvements. Evaluations by external experts tend to be used when research evidence is needed to support a more fundamental decision, such as a decision over the long-term direction of eParticipation.

The design of the Tuscan Electronic Town Meeting evaluation was devoted to analysing the *process* leading to the *central phase* of participation (the electronic town meeting) and its specific and extended *outcomes*. The whole (policy and research) process covered a period of about eighteen months and employed a team of fourteen researchers with expertise and experience in qualitative research techniques. The policy process had been studied *in itinere*, by a third party.

A first research challenge was to determine *who the participants engaged in the process were* and to assess the inclusiveness, representativeness, and diversity of the user group. Moreover, it was important to understand the selection process and the self-selection of the participants to the policy arena.

A second element of interest was more inherent to the concrete functioning of the electronic town meeting as a deliberative 'dispositive'. The main questions addressed:

- the role played by the participants in the specific policy process and in the specific situation
- the traits of the related discursive process
- the functions assigned to the technological tools and the impacts of the wider deliberative setting

A third level of analysis was focused on the outcome of the deliberative process. The main questions were about:

- how much the applied instrument had differed from the institutional original design;
- how much the outcomes of the electronic town meeting had affected the final policy design;
- the degree of distance between the process predefined by the

institutional promoters and its representation on the one side and, on the other side, its implementation

- the role assigned by the promoters to the new digital media in the whole process;
- the evaluation about the process and its outcomes *by the actors* included and excluded from the experimentation and highly active on the issue at stake within civil society in Tuscany.

To adequately address the questions, qualitative research instruments have been intertwined with more standard techniques (see Box 6, chapter 5.2).

**Box 5:** Example of a single case evaluation design

### 5.1.2 Evaluation of combined usage of offline and online tools

The diffusion of new digital media increases opportunities to implement and integrate different forms of participation, and yet eParticipation should not be understood as replacing traditional participation practices or occurring in isolation from these. A great number of projects combine e-tools with more traditional means of participation like public meetings or paper-based interaction. Evaluation research must pay attention to these combinations.

Evaluations of a mixed media type of eParticipation look specifically at the relevance of the tools within the process with reference to:

- Different stakeholders;
- Different phases/requirements in the process;
- Different issues and their characteristics.

One purpose of evaluating the "media mix" is to link the outcomes of a participation project to specific combinations of offline and online tools. Here, the focus is on determining what combinations are helpful in engaging different target audiences (which may vary in access, usage habits, skills, and so on) and in understanding how the different tools are integrated within the overall process.

In addition, evaluations of this type may use within-case comparisons of offline and online means in order to assess the relative contribution and value of each within the process as a whole.

### 5.1.3 Comparative Evaluations

As we stated in the introduction, the domain of eParticipation would benefit from a better understanding of *what works, when and why*. The *what* refers to eParticipation processes and tools*; works* refers to examples of success (i.e., desired outcomes of projects); and the *when* looks at the contextual conditions under which projects operate. The *why* means that evaluation should go beyond mere description towards more analytical approaches that aim to explore and explain the relationships between processes, outcomes and context variables.

In evaluating eParticipation projects, different concerns arise from the basic question about what works, when and why. For example:

- What eParticipation tools work better than others in similar situations (e.g., targeting the same groups of participants and addressing similar issues)?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of online tools in comparison with traditional offline means (e.g., ePetitions versus traditional paper based forms)?
- Does the same tool work differently under different circumstances (e.g., in other countries, at different governmental levels or for other types of decisions)?

To satisfactorily answer these types of questions, research must move from descriptions of isolated projects towards comparative evaluation. Comparative evaluations are much more demanding than one-shot case studies of particular projects, in terms of resources, evaluator's skills, methodological designs and the analysis of results.

The main challenge in comparative evaluations is the selection of cases/ units of analysis on the basis of the main research questions to be addressed in evaluation. Cross-case comparisons are mainly concerned with the analysis of differences and similarities in order to understand and explain different phenomena. Isolating similarities and common tendencies across cases, as well as the specificities of particular cases, improves understanding of the processes under investigation and how they operate in different contexts.

Basically, there are two ideal-type strategies[17] to choose cases for comparison: the first is to choose cases that are as similar as possible (in terms of their contextual characteristics) and to analyse the differences in outcomes and isolate the factors that cause (explain) these differences; the second is to chose cases as different as possible and analyse their commonalities, i.e., what are the common explanatory variables of otherwise diverse cases that explains similar outcomes.[18] Usually, as the differences between cases increase, it becomes increasingly difficult to find common criteria that apply across all cases. Hence analyses where the cases are very different tend necessarily to become more descriptive.

In general, comparative analyses of eParticipation strongly call for a standardized methodological design and consistent measures. However, especially in cross-national comparisons, the evaluators face challenges such as language, legal and cultural differences, and different types of institutions and democratic procedures. It is therefore extremely important that the underlying concepts used for the evaluation (e.g., criteria and indicators as well as contextual variables) are appropriately

[17] These basic strategies refer to John Stuart Mill's *method of difference* and *method of agreement* which are largely conform to the *most similar system design* and *most different system design* in comparative politics elaborated by Przeworski and Teune (1970).
[18] In either case the evaluators have to be aware that the classification of the cases as similar or different is mostly made a priori on the basis of apparent characteristics of the projects and that this can change as the analysis of the cases becomes more detailed.

defined so that they can be applied to all cases equally and are not biased by different local interpretations of the concepts.

In sum, researchers should compare units that share common traits and must be aware of the weight of institutional variables (e.g. level of government) in explaining different outcomes across cases. For example, a comparison of the application of the same eParticipation tools/methods at local level and at the national level needs to take account of the fact that political processes can greatly differ at these two institutional levels and may account for eventual differences more than other elements.

## 5.2 Methods used in evaluation

To address specific evaluation questions, both quantitative and qualitative data and multiple sources of information are useful and need to be considered. Generally speaking, the choice between quantitative or qualitative methods (or a mix of both) presents us with a trade-off between breadth (generalizability) and depth (deeper understanding of the issues in question) in the results of research.

Quantitative data is often believed to be more objective and accurate than qualitative data: this is not least because it is collected using standardized methods, can be easily replicated, and already exist as or can easily be reduced to numerical data, and so can be analyzed using sophisticated statistical techniques. However, quantitative data miss contextual details which are vitally important in achieving a deeper understanding of the object of study. A common weakness of current evaluation practice is the tendency to reduce the complexity of the phenomenon in an attempt to quantify some of its features and to measure progress according to a unified scheme of benchmarks generally linked to public policy goals. In addition, many of the concepts and criteria related to eParticipation (e.g., deliberation) cannot be fully operationalized using quantitative measures. Qualititative research is particularly important in new areas of research, where the aim is to build a inductively and interpretatively adequate understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, rather than test pre-existing theories and hypotheses in a deductive manner. In addition, the more open and exploratory nature of qualitative research means that researchers are more likely to be able to capture the unexpected outcomes of projects.

In the Tuscan Electronic Town Meeting evaluation multiple sources of information and methods have been used:

- along the whole duration of the policy process: *direct ethnographic observation of the preparatory events* (semi-public and public, like meetings, seminar, conferences), before and after the electronic town meeting; *content and document analysis* applied to press release, newspapers, institutional dedicated websites, mailing list, blog, etc.;
- along the day of the electronic town meeting: *direct ethnographic observation*, conducted by a large group of researchers (fourteen, authorized by the Regional Government); a *structured*

*questionnaire* addressed the participants to the electronic town meeting, filled in by around the 55% of the them (205 respondents on 408 participants), and aimed to identify the political profile and expertise of the participants;

- after the electronic town meeting: two *focus group among the researchers* about the group observation undertaken along the town meeting day; *semi-structured interviews* with a small number of selected institutional and non institutional actors with a very relevant role on the process, as included and promoters, or as external and sceptical ones;
- after the conclusion of the policy process (with the approval of the new regional law): *two focus groups* with the institutional and included actors, and with the non-institutional and external actors.

**Box 6:** Example of the usage of multiple research methods

Methodological choices are guided by the characteristics of the specific evaluation case. For example, if cost effectiveness is important, then quantitative measurement is indispensable. The conceptualization of eParticipation and the related evaluation adopted here suggest an approach that integrates standard and non-standard instruments, in order to integrate knowledge on the quantitative and qualitative aspects of eParticipation, and enable researchers to move across different analytical levels. There is a set of common methods for information gathering and analysis that can be employed in the evaluation of eParticipation:

- ***Quantitative surveys*** refer to a range of highly standardized data gathering procedures that involve asking (closed-ended) questions to respondents. These include standardized questionnaires and personal interviews, which are probably the most employed instruments in evaluation, but also simple feedback forms.
- ***Web analytics*** refer to the tracking of different metrics such as total website usage, which pages are viewed, how many users contribute actively (posts and comments), trends in usage over time, type of users (age, sex, location) and so on. Where internet-based tools are in use, some kind of quantitative data about users and their activities on the website can be collected during registration procedures or through web server logfiles. Also the results of usage, such as comments sent, messages posted, questionnaires completed can easily be counted as they are well documented by the tools themselves.
- ***Usability testing*** describes a range of methods that can be used to gather data about how (easily) users interact with a tool and to what extent the tool meets user expectations and needs. Which method applies when depends on the stage in the tool development cycle and can include more standardized instruments such as questionnaires or more in-depth approaches.[19] A usability test of

[19] See for example: http://www.usabilitynet.org/tools/methods.htm

eParticipation tools normally is carried out after the tool has been implemented, as a field test rather than a laboratory experiment. For example one method that is appropriate for usability evaluation is a post release test of the tool being used by real participants (e.g., using a set of test scenarios and requiring the users to think-aloud).

- ***Semi structured interview*** (also called 'focused' interview) is based on a set of open questions, without pre-identified answers. The interviewed is invited to answer discursively and to express her/his interpretations, opinions, evaluations, expectations, feelings, and values. A good focused interview should both elicit specific feedback from interviewees on pre-determined issues of interest and also evince new idea, concepts, and interpretations.
- ***In-depth interviews*** are characterized by a more extensive narrative form (following the model of story-telling or oral self-biography). The tool used by the researcher to facilitate the narration is a sort of map of possible concepts. The researcher introduces the general topic of conversation, but avoids imposing their own strong hypotheses, understandings or specific questions. In-depth interviews emphasise the meanings and categories produced or reorganized by the interviewee (rather than the interviewer).
- ***Collective semi-structured interview*** is a technique that allows researchers to generate answers to open questions (as in semi-structured interviews) from a number of respondents (usually fewer than 10) at the same time. The main difference between individual and collective semi-structured interviews is a result of the semi-public context of interviewing. The more public nature of the collective technique may encourage strategic and conformist responses from interviewees. On the other hand, it can encourage respondents to reflect upon their relations with one another.

As part of the project evaluation, all the six EVOICE-partners composed a local panel with approximately six to eight persons (50%/50% - male/female) including actors involved in the project such as civil servants for communication and planning, political representatives, an external representative of the media (local newspaper, television or radio station, etc.), and a civil society representative (e.g.: a representative from a neighbourhood group). The panels came together (at least) on an annual basis and discussed a set of questions, such as the following:[20]

- What are the target groups of each of your (pilot) projects?
- Which media are involved?
- What are good combinations of methods, tools and media in specific situations?

[20] If necessary, the questions were re-formulated to be appropriate for the different pilot sites. The answers to these questions were reported by each partner to the researchers.

Expressions reported of these meetings were such as the following: “Although equally divided between men and women, elderly people were predominating and immigrant groups underrepresented … Developing the neighbourhood meetings is a continuous work. Finding the right theme for each meeting has a direct influence on citizen participation. This is also the case for the similar Uddevalla pilot.”

**Box 7:** Panels to monitor results and impact of eParticipation exercises

- ***Focus groups*** are a further kind of collective semi-public discursive research interaction, where researchers open the floor to a discussion among invited participants. Researchers are interested in recording the process of building meanings and structuring relationships among the participants. The main goal of focus group research is to learn from the discussion among participants, what their agenda is (cognitive dimension) and how it is built up (relationship dimension). Strong attention should be paid to the composition of the focus groups, with specific reference to the asymmetry among the participants, their polarization on the conflict dimension and their pre-existing relationships.
- ***Quantitative and qualitative content analysis*** (more focused on explicit meanings) and ***document analysis*** (more concentrated on the way contents are packaged and on the suggested meanings) are important unobtrusive research techniques, based almost exclusively on the activity of the researcher. There is a great variety of sources (offline and online) that can be analysed. These sources are inherently qualitative, but can be analyzed either quantitatively (counting messages or words, rating responses on predetermined scales etc.) or qualitatively (develop themes, cluster issues etc.). In the case of a large corpus of texts to be analyzed, and of a small number of predefined variable and indicators to be recorded, it is useful to adopt a more structured grid of analysis. It is also possible to adopt a mixed strategy combining qualitative and quantitative instruments of content analysis; today this has reached a quite sophisticated status, making it possible to conduct queries selective enough (e.g., finding explicit terms, single or associated, recurrent structures, etc.) to answer highly circumscribed research questions.
- ***Direct observation*** can be conducted adopting a quantitative and passive approach (researcher enters a situation and records the status of a set of predefined variables). Nevertheless, this technique is generally used in qualitative research where the researcher immerses him or herself in a situation in order to comprehend the *situated interactions* within a specific spontaneous or artificial group in a *specific frame* and along a certain *period of time* (the principle here is that to understand human conduct and describe it in a valid way is in principle to be able to participate in the practices which constitute, and are chronically reproduced by, that conduct). Obviously, obtaining access to the site of research is a prerequisite of this technique: direct observation of public and open events,

therefore, is easier than the semi-private interactions of many specific target groups.[21]

[21] It might be argued, however, that access is relevant to all research techniques adopted in eParticipation evaluation, since it is good and ethical research practice to obtain (wherever possible) the 'informed consent' of those being studied.

| Method | Research Setting | Aims and advantages | Limits and Problems | Useful to inquire eParticipation with reference to… |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Survey methods** | Representative samples, closed-ended questions, data collection possible in different modes: online, in-person, by telephone or postal | Breadth of the data, higher generalizability | Selection and availability of respondents, low response rates | Participants opinions, behaviour, knowledge or feeling |
| **Web analytics** | data collected through registration forms; web server log file records analysed through special software | Easy collection of data | Imprecise measures, limited knowledge about users, limitations with respect to Web 2.0 applications | Usage rates, usage patterns of eParticipation tools |
| **Usability testing** | Mostly field work, individual or group testing (3-10 users) possible, Length: 30-60 minutes | Testing of the tools in real settings | Selection and availability of users, selection of tasks | Users' interaction with eParticipation tools, their expectations and needs |
| **Semi-structured interviews** | Field work or organized setting<br>1 to 1 relationship.<br>Open questions<br>Reduced asymmetry.<br>Length of time: 40minutes to 2 hours. | Obtaining a deeper view about the process investigated, closer to the point of view of the involved actors.<br>Getting unforeseen information through an interactive relationship.<br>Generating new concepts/interpretations | Selection and availability of the salient interviewee.<br>'Weak' generalizations, strong contextualization needed.<br>Building a background knowledge to control ongoing interview.<br>Appropriate communication between researcher and interviewee. | Actions, interpretations, expectations, roles of the different actors involved.<br>Perceptions on ICTs.<br>Relations between on/offline participation.<br>Evaluation of tools and methods by the different users.<br>Evaluation of the whole process by the different participants. |
| **In depth interviews** | Field work<br>1 to 1 relationship and reversed asymmetry (time of speaking controlled by interviewed)<br>Narrative form<br>Length of time: from 1 to | In depth knowledge.<br>Insights of subjectivities.<br>Getting unforeseen information through an interactive relationship.<br>Generating new concepts/interpretations. | Intensive preparatory work in order to control tendency to self-representation.<br>Decoding the meanings produced by interviewee.<br>Selection and availability of salient interviewee. | Actions, interpretations, expectations, roles of the different actors involved.<br>Perceptions on ICTs.<br>Relations between online/offline participation.<br>Evaluation of tools and methods by |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 4 hours or more (also more than one meeting). | | ‘Weak’ generalizations, strong contextualization needed.<br>Appropriate communication between researcher and interviewee. | the different users.<br>Evaluation of the whole process by the different participants. |
| **Collective interviews** | Organized setting<br>Semi-public context: (few interviewers and group of 5-10 respondents).<br>Open questions.<br>Length of time: 40minutes to 2 hours. | Collecting information from a group of respondents at the same place and time.<br>Focused interactions among interviewed can enhance public understanding and learning processes | Intensive preparatory work in order to control tendency to self-representation and to better de-code the meanings produced by interviewee.<br>Appropriate communication between researcher and interviewee. | Actions, interpretations, expectations, roles of the different actors involved.<br>Perceptions on ICTs.<br>The relations between on/offline participation.<br>Evaluation of tools and methods by the different users.<br>Evaluation of the whole process by the different participants. |
| **Focus Groups** | Organized setting<br>Semi-public context: 2-3 researchers, 5-10 participants.<br>Open discussion around defined issues/problems<br>Light moderation of the discussion by the researchers<br>Length of time: 40minutes to 2-3 hours (organized in sections). | Obtaining a wider view about the process investigated, closer to the point of view of the involved actors.<br>Getting unforeseen information.<br>Generating new concepts/interpretations.<br>Enhancing public understanding and learning processes.<br>Promote inter-subjectivity among participants. | Intensive preparatory work.<br>Quality of the moderation and decoding situation in real time.<br>Selection of salient participants.<br>Balance in the composition of the group (reduced asymmetry)<br>Risks of strategic behaviours and enhanced self-representation.<br>‘Weak’ generalizations, strong contextualization needed.<br>‘Weak’ generalizations, strong contextualization needed. | Actions, interpretations, expectations, roles of the different actors involved.<br>Perceptions on ICTs.<br>Relations between on/offline participation.<br>Evaluation of tools and methods by the different users.<br>Evaluation of the whole process by the different participants.<br>Problem framing or problem solving functions. |
| **Quantitative and qualitative content / document analysis** | Analysis on online/offline sources, done by 1 or more researchers.<br>Guidelines to the analysis, more or less structured (from conceptual maps to | Unobtrusive research technique.<br>Capturing explicit and suggested meanings and interpretations, along the course or at certain stages of | Access to the documents static or dynamic/interactive, public/semi-public, formal or informal, and from different sources (official, mediated, etc.). | Information about completed or ongoing processes.<br>Static and dynamic analysis of communication flows and different media.<br>Data about eParticipation offerings, |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **(online and offline)** | codebooks) | their elaboration.<br>Gathering information.<br>Analysis of media mix and communication strategies | Selection of contents and documents available. | their quality and levels of usage by citizens and political actors.<br>Analysis of the participation outcomes and impact on policy process.<br>Modalities/features of online interactions between participants with different roles<br>Representations of the process by the different actors. |
| **Direct observation and ethnography (online and offline)** | Field work<br>Individual or team work<br>Full immersion (covert or declared, participating or remaining external) in a situation to comprehend the interactions within a specific spontaneous or artificial group with reference to the specific frame of the situation.<br>Length of time: from hours to years. | Getting unforeseen information.<br>Generating new concepts.<br>Analyzing ongoing processes that involve individuals/groups for a variable length of time.<br>Catching meanings of the interactions, the structures of influence and conflicts among the social actors.<br>Catching transformations of attitudes, behaviours, strategies. | Intensive preparatory work.<br>Access to the field.<br>Ethical issues.<br>Balance between involvement and detachment.<br>Situation modified by the observer.<br>Decoding quickly situations in real time.<br>Taking notes in a dynamic situation.<br>High methodological awareness and self-reflexivity required to the observer/s and traceability of the research process. | Modalities/features of offline and online interactions between participants with different roles.<br>Reactions to ICTs.<br>Relations between on/offline behaviors.<br>Actual role and perception of the moderation.<br>Relations between rhetorics and practices.<br>Process dimension of participation (transformation of the ongoing experiences). |

**Table 6:** Methods in evaluation of eParticipation

## 5.3 Case studies in evaluation

The case study is a common research strategy particularly suited for investigating "how" and "why" questions. Case studies aim to deepen knowledge about a single case by integrating multiple methods, mainly but not exclusively qualitative ones, such as semi-structured and in-depth interviews, focus groups, content and document analysis, and direct observation. Each of these methods, if used alone, would not provide the same depth and breath of knowledge about the selected case.

Case studies usually offer a contextualized description and an interpretation of a specific process. This strategy is particularly useful in exploratory research, theory-building in planning more extensive research, or when it is very important to understand the interactions of different ongoing and interdependent complex processes, as frequently happens in policy analysis studies.

Generally, the great variety of variables considered, and their specific configuration, means that it is difficult to generalize the conclusions of an isolated case study. Even if generalisation is not possible on the basis of case studies, this research strategy can provide insightful results, especially when combined with a comparative approach (see chapter 5.1.3). In comparative politics, case studies are often effectively used. George and Bennett (2005) propose the method of structured, focused comparison, a method that can also be adopted to guide comparative evaluations of eParticipation exercises. The choice of cases requires a clear identification of classes or subclasses of a certain phenomenon under investigation, guided by the main research questions of the evaluation. The method is focused as it deals with certain aspects of the case, and structured as each case is examined under the guidance of a set of standardized questions.

## 5.4 Quality criteria in evaluation

The value of evaluation exercises depends first and foremost on the quality of the evaluation design and the application of appropriate methods. In most evaluation reports, the methods that are used to collect and analyse the data (e.g., the reasons for adopting quantitative or qualitative instruments) are not adequately discussed. To determine the value of evaluation designs and their results requires quality criteria such as the validity and reliability of measures (Frewer & Rowe, 2005). Another basic quality criterion is of course the appropriateness of information, i.e., the correctness, accuracy and completeness of data. The credibility and usability of findings are further criteria that determine the value of the information generated by evaluation.

There are commonly used strategies to test and maximise the quality of research designs in empirical social research. These strategies are useful, too, for the evaluation of eParticipation projects. Four tests are especially relevant (Yin, 2003, 33 pp.):

- ***Construct validity*:** A first requirement is to establish correct operational measures for the concepts used in the evaluation study.

For instance, assessing the "inclusiveness" of an eParticipation process may use indicators such as the social profile of the participants in relation to the target group. Recommended tactics to increase construct validity are using multiple sources of evidence, a chain of evidence, or having draft study reports reviewed by key informants from the relevant domain.

- ***Internal validity*:** This criterion is only relevant if the evaluation is concerned with causality or explanation. It does not apply to more descriptive or exploratory studies. Internal validity requires establishing a causal relationship or logical sequence that clearly shows how certain conditions lead to other conditions. The aim is test for and avoid spurious relationships among variables. The principal analytic tactics for achieving high internal validity are explanation building, addressing rival explanations, using logical models (see Yin, 2003, p.36) and inter-observer consistency.
- ***External validity*:** This third test is to determine whether an evaluation study's findings are generalizable beyond the immediate case. In a qualitative evaluation design, this criterion refers to the transferability of research findings. Case study results can be generalized under certain conditions, if they are corroborated or confirmed by subsequent studies. Whereas survey research relies on statistical generalization, case studies rely on analytical generalization, which means striving to generalize a particular set of results as part of some or other broader theory. To allow for generalization, a theory must be tested by replicating the findings in a second or further case of the same type of eParticipation.
- ***Reliability*:** This criterion is meant to minimize errors and biases in carrying out an evaluation study. It is usually defined as the extent to which the operations of an evaluation study would generate the same result if repeated by another investigator. The tactics suggested to achieve this mainly focus on documentation as if this was done for an imaginary auditor, including the use of study protocols and databases and on making as many steps as operational and transparent to outsiders as possible.

In addition to these quality criteria, a critical factor for the value of an evaluation study, as in its credibility and usability, in eParticipation as well as in any other field is who is conducting it. While independence from sponsors or external evaluations generally reduce biases and so increases credibility, internal (participatory) evaluation helps to support organisational learning. Moreover, the specific contextual knowledge held by internal or external evaluators can be crucial for developing a more adequate interpretative understanding of the participation process. The following table outlines some common arguments for external and internal evaluation and offers some guidelines for choosing intelligently between the two.

| | ***Evaluation by an outside expert*** | ***Participatory evaluation*** |
|---|---|---|
| Advantages | Usually solid competence<br>Creates legitimacy for many<br>Usually faster<br>Can be subject to competitive bidding (may be less costly)<br>Brings new perspectives | Maximises learning<br>Findings can be put to use immediately<br>Benefits stay in project<br>Can be adjusted according to new needs and new findings |
| Disadvantages | Can be irrelevant<br>Mostly evaluator who learns<br>Gap to decision makers<br>Difficult to change the process<br>Hard work to disseminate results | Can hide unpleasant findings<br>Often low competence with regard to methods<br>Takes longer<br>Requires commitment |

**Table 7:** Advantages and disadvantages of external versus internal evaluation (Forss, 2005, p. 72)

To sum up, quality criteria and strategies to maximise the value of evaluations in eParticipation are important but they must be tailored to the specific evaluation case. The use of multiple sources of evidence is recommended and allows different lines of inquiry to converge and reinforce (as well as cross-examine and check) one another. This process, known as 'triangulation', applies to four aspects of research: data, investigators, theories and methods. As described above, the decision over whether to conduct independent (external) or participatory (internal) evaluation is contingent on the objectives and priorities of the research.

# 6 Towards an evaluation framework: conclusions and next steps

This booklet contributes to improving evaluation practice in the field of eParticipation. It develops a more rigorous evaluation framework that builds on existing (theoretical) approaches and (practical) experiences in eParticipation evaluation. We recognise that in practice, given restraints on resources, it may only be possible to apply elements of our framework. Also, the framework does not explicitly distinguish between criteria and indicators related to the three basic purposes of evaluation, and, when applied in practice, we recognise that our framework would need to be tailored to the specific needs of a given case. Indeed, given the complex, multi-dimensional nature of eParticipation, it could not be otherwise. A degree of versatility is a necessary feature of any general framework of evaluation. Our framework does provide a useful reference point to help researchers make more balanced and intelligent decisions in evaluating eParticipation practice.

The booklet started by explaining why evaluation is needed (Chapter 1). We then outlined some key issues and important considerations from the broader field of eParticipation research, and specified the main purposes of evaluation and key questions to be answered by systematic evaluations (Chapter 2).

The main aims of the booklet were:

- to understand what different perspectives the evaluation of eParticipation initiatives should take into account (here we presented a layered model of evaluation adapted from Macintosh & Whyte 2008),
- to provide appropriate criteria for assessing the success of eParticipation in view of each perspective, and
- to define some possible indicators and methods that can be used in order to gather the data needed.

These objectives were addressed in Chapters 3 and 4. Then, in chapter 5, we summarised the main points of consideration in evaluation design and distinguished three basic types of evaluation: single case evaluations, evaluations of combined usage of online and offline tools and cross-case comparisons. Moreover, common methods for data gathering and analysis, as well as quality criteria for good evaluation design, were described. Finally, we provided three case examples of evaluations of eParticipation, which illustrate three different evaluation designs in practice.

The framework presented in this booklet is based on approaches that for the most part either address eParticipation in general or focus on top-down and consultation-oriented processes. eParticipation, though, can take many forms. We need to examine how well our framework applies to other forms of participation, especially those which are initiated from the ground-up and carried out by civil society actors or community groups.

Furthermore, there is a need to expand the framework by investigating how to evaluate the long-term impacts of eParticipation projects. This would permit a more critical approach to questioning the outcomes and benefits of eParticipation (see also DEMO-net 2008) in terms of its contribution to enhancing democracy.

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# Appendix A – Short descriptions of case examples

## The Local e-Democracy National Project

The Local e-Democracy National Project was set up by the UK Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in 2004. Funded to a level of £4million, its aim was to help local Authorities in England understand how to make best use of ICT to support democratic renewal. The two main eParticipation strands were based on top-down government led eParticipation initiatives and ground-up citizen-led eParticipation initiatives. Both these strands underwent in-depth evaluations. In this booklet we focus on the top-down evaluation. Four of the government-led eDemocracy initiatives were evaluated:

- An ePanel for citizen engagement on the Ask Bristol website;
- ePetitioning in Kingston upon Thames' (in conjunction with Bristol) to support citizens lobby their local authority; [22]
- a personalized survey tool to enable local authorities to make engagement more relevant to individuals and more specific to identified communities (the "Micro Democracy" project in Swindon);
- best practice to enable partnership consultation on cross-cutting issues through the Wolverhampton Partnership site.

These eParticipation projects were in various states of readiness at the time of the evaluation and the consequences of this on the evaluation are discussed in detail on the full report.[23]

## EVOICE

EVOICE[24] is an eParticipation project within the INTERREG IIIC programme running from 2004 to 2008. Six municipalities and regions from five European countries are partners: Dantumadeel (NL) as lead partner, Bremen (G), Groningen (NL), Intercommunale Leiedal (B), Co. Norfolk (UK), and Uddevalla (S). The rationale of the project resulted from the fear that proper functioning of the democratic system is endangered. The central idea of the project is to follow a "multi media dialogue approach" that combines different media and channels to involve citizens in local political affairs (including ICT as well as traditional means of participation such as "kitchen table talks" or public hearings). The multi media dialogue approach's assumption is that the media (channels) have to be tailored to the specific target groups to reach their behaviours. The aim of the research was to achieve trans-national learning and benefits, as well as to assess the multi media dialogue approach and the impact of particular projects.

[22] Here the evaluators were also the suppliers of the tool.
[23] See Whyte et al., 2005.
[24] www.evoice-eu.net

## The Tuscan Electronic Town Meeting

In January 2006 the Regional Government of Tuscany, Italy, launched a process of citizens consultation about the guidelines of a new regional law to support citizen participation in decision-making processes at local and regional levels.[25] The method adopted included a phase of offline meetings, seminars and conferences to prepare the citizen deliberation to be held through an Electronic Town Meeting, as a central step in the definition of the new Law main guidelines through the face-to-face involvement of 500 citizens and activating new channels for participation online.

The Regional Government involved different partners in the design of the experimentation and in the definition of the law. These partners included: an important national association of local authorities (ARNM), a leading company in Electronic town meeting organization (Avventura Urbana) and two Italian Universities (Turin-Faculty of Political Sciences and Florence-Faculty of Architecture).

This initiative of the Tuskan regional government is one of the most ambitious institutional participatory processes promoted in Italy in recent years, especially because of the issue at stake (a law on participation) and the tools adopted (electronic town meeting as a central instrument to promote deliberative democracy). From an analytical point of view, the initiative represented an institutional experiment in deliberative democracy, built around a tool of 'in presence' eParticipation and supported by a dedicated website.

[25] For more information see also Cellini et al., 2007.

## Appendix B – Suggested readings on research methods


Adler, P. A., & Adler P. (1987). *Membership Roles in Field Research.* Newbury Park: Sage.

Bloor, M., Frankland, J., Thomas, M., & Robson, K. (2001). *Focus Groups in Social Research.* London: Sage.

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Goffman, E. (1989). On Fieldwork. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 18 (2), 123-132.

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Lofland, J., Snow, D., Anderson, L., & Lofland, L. H. (2006). *Analysing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing.

Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. New York: Holt.

## *The Demo-Net Consortium consists of:*

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| University of Leeds | Coordinator | United Kingdom |
| Örebro University | Partner | Sweden |
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