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Enabling Multichannel Participation Through ICT Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Online deliberation invests significant sums in priorities co-decided by inhabitants, and is mostly relegated to small and non-influential experiments. There is a gap between ICT solutions and participatory initiatives. E-participation is a broad, undefined space of opportunities that needs to be operationalized to prove if the many theoretical exercises emphasizing on the potential of ICT in increasing deliberative quality of participatory processes and security, are realistic or not. The EMPATIA platform seeks to radically enhance inclusiveness and impact of participatory budgeting processes in increasing multichannel citizen participation by designing, evaluating and making publicly available an advanced ICT platform for participatory budgeting. EMPATIA takes advantage of the fact that it surrounds an established and widespread social practice with clear and adaptable principles recognized worldwide, alongside a community of practitioners and researchers, and ICT tools, which only need to be adapted, refined and integrated into an adequate PB platform.

KEYWORDS

EMPATIA, ICT Adaptation, Online Participation, Participatory Budgeting, Transparency

INTRODUCTION

Participatory budgeting (PB) represents one of the most successful civic innovations of the last quarter-century. At a time when voter turnout in Europe is low, and public institutions are struggling to maintain trust and legitimacy within a framework of growing budgetary cuts, PB has proved to be a powerful tool. It allows citizens to join in the essential tasks of governing, not only as voters, but also as decision makers (Norris, 2011). Currently, there is limited software designed for, or at least useful for, the implementation of PB. Existing solutions are usually developed for single PB initiatives (Sampaio et al., 2010) or are limited in scope. As a result, most PB initiatives disregard the potential of online participation, and limit themselves to Facebook, twitter, or other forums (Nitzsche et al., 2012). The state-of-the art on ICT applied to PB is thus limited and less advanced than the offline tools.

Many PB initiatives adopt improved and sometimes sophisticated forms of deliberative meetings, structured around consolidated methodologies, so that people with different ideas and opinions can meet, debate and collaborate towards common goals. It usually does not happen online, therefore redundancies and individualized participation tend to reduce the quality of deliberation, while new exclusions are created on the basis of different relationships of citizens with resources such as, free time or mobility capacity (OECD, 2003). If many people experiment and take advantage of these meetings and methodologies, they show severe limitations in growth to include the local communities (Bittle et al., 2009). This reduces the PB potential of completing the creation of that “virtuous circle”

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which is needed to restore trust and confidence of citizens in local institutions. This needs two central components of legitimation: the qualitative one (high level deliberation and in-depth debate of policies and projects advocated by participants), and the quantitative one (number and diversity of participants) (Fernández and Frances, 2012).

EMPATIA (**E**nabling **M**ultichannel **P**articipation **T**hrough **I**CT **A**daptation) is a European commission funded project under the horizon 2020 program that aims at improving this critical gap by studying, designing, implementing, and evaluating new and renewed software tools for PB initiatives, gathered into a common framework. The EMPATIA platform seeks to radically enhance the impact of PB processes and increase the participation of citizens by designing, evaluating and making publicly available an advanced ICT platform for participatory budgeting, which is adaptable to different social and institutional contexts. It will not only improve existing tools, but will also create new software modules to increase the potential of these tools whilst reducing their limitations. The EMPATIA platform will not only ameliorate on-going and already tested PB initiatives (often scattered and not compatible in terms of technological components), but will also integrate their online spaces by defining and implementing new tools, and integrating interfaces and best practices. It reflects the simplicity and capacity of being used by a differentiated range of actors with different cultural skills and degrees of ICT alphabetization, and allowing local communities to interact with each other to possibly become a broader European community of practices.

This paper discusses the development of the concept of EMPATIA, a digital platform, which can be useful for not only supporting PB as an isolated experiment of participatory decision-making, but also for larger and interconnected systems of complementary participatory devices. These devices will depend on PB principles as a pivotal pillar for their coordination. Currently, 1400 PB programs in Europe, and over 3000 programs, worldwide, have conventionally been rooted in a series of in-person participatory activities. This includes citizen assemblies and workshops to propose projects and deliberate technical reviews, alongside municipal staff and paper-ballot voting to choose winning projects. Organizers and participants in today's PB processes benefit from a range of ICT enhancements, including those offered by the public sector (including e-government tools and open-data policies). What has been missing so far is a comprehensive platform for PB that integrates the wide range of ICT interventions to support the full life cycle of budgeting processes of all sizes across different cultural and political contexts.

EMPATIA aims at producing the first ICT platform capable of fully encompassing, both the decision-making cycle and the implementation cycle of PB, whose integration is considered indispensable, and a main driver of the self-sustainability process (Dias, 2014). These two cycles are not covered in an integrated manner by the currently available ICT tools, which almost exclusively address only the first cycle. EMPATIA will thus act on both, the front-office side (producing outputs to facilitate and improve the relationship between the experimenting administrations and their citizens) and the back-office side (offering tools for increased efficiency of public administration offices). EMPATIA is structured around seven main objectives - (a) to explore the latent potential of PB, allowing empowerment of existing networks of citizens and communities whilst creating new ones, (b) to research and propose novel advanced voting algorithms capable of tackling the specificities of PB processes, (c) to research and introduce adequate solutions for capturing and improving the social dynamics of PB processes, (d) to develop a comprehensive open-source ICT platform – flexible, modular and easily extendable for supporting public administrators and local communities, (e) to design and implement three PB pilots in communities (Lisbon, Portugal; Říčany, Czech Republic; Bonn, Germany) representing a wide spectrum of administrative capacity and experience with PB, (f) to evaluate the impacts of using the EMPATIA platform on participatory processes, both in terms of

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