

Chapter 44

E-Participation in Developing Countries: The Case of the National Social Insurance Fund in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This chapter on e-participation in developing countries uses Cameroon as a case study to demonstrate the realities of practicing Web 2.0 and social media tools to drive collaborative initiatives between government agencies and citizens in developing countries. The case study was guided by the incentives for e-participation using social media technologies, the tools used by a government to drive such initiatives, the level of participation from citizens, and the challenges and risks faced in implementing these technologies. A study of Cameroon's National Social Insurance Fund (NSIF) confirmed the main incentives of e-participation initiatives in developing countries and the major challenges they face in implementing them.

BACKGROUND ON E-PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

In this age of social media, the relationship between governments, citizens, employees, and businesses have evolved to a more participatory level in decision-making and nation-building (Komito, 2005). These stakeholders now perform the role of a partner rather than a customer in the delivery of public services (Linders, 2012). However, this scenario of developed countries should not be generalized in the context of developing countries, where other realities like the digital divide are very much evident (Islam, 2008). Nevertheless, e-participation has become an integral part of e-government initiatives worldwide with the ultimate goal of supporting and stimulating good governance (Basu, 2004).

According to the United Nations e-government survey (United Nations, 2016), there has been a sharp rise in the number of countries using e-government to facilitate access to public services. Many governments are trying to ensure public institutions are more accountable and transparent by making their data more available to the public. Thanks to easy access to social media by everyone, more countries are moving towards participatory decision-making, with many developing countries making good progress in the same direction though still struggling with substantial regional disparities and a persistent digital divide. Thus, most developing countries have e-government development index (EGDI) levels below 0.5. This proves that, though e-participation is a global phenomenon, simply importing e-participation systems and related organizational concepts from developed to developing countries cannot deliver the expected results (Schuppan, 2009). Given the mismatch between the realities of developing countries and those of developed countries in which the systems were designed, transferred e-participation initiatives in developing countries are often bound to fail. The risk of failure increases as the economic, cultural and other contextual differences between these countries widen (Heeks, 2001, 2002). However, social media surpass those barriers because they naturally adapt to their context of use.

There is limited public information and research on e-participation through social media in developing countries as compared to that available on developed countries. That which is available is very dispersed making these contexts difficult to understand and making existing research harder to exploit. In an attempt to summarize what has been done so far on the state of social media research for e-participation in developing countries, previous research were categorized into 7 main groups which are: actors, social media technologies, contextual issues, objectives, research methods, theoretical approaches, and legal issues (Dini & Sæbø, 2016). The key actors of e-participation research in developing countries include citizens, governments, and politicians. Social media technologies are identified to be an attractive alternative to traditional media though both need to subtly coexist to achieve maximum impact. However, contextual issues such as cultural characteristics, ICT infrastructure, and type of governance may influence the use of social media for e-participation in these countries.

This chapter presents e-participation in developing countries using the case of the National Social Insurance Fund (NSIF) of Cameroon to exemplify the major characteristics, opportunities, and challenges faced by e-participation initiatives implemented in such countries. Cameroon is a country that has always perplexed the international community in terms of its level of development vis a vis its economic potential. Despite its telecommunication and information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, the country still performs very poorly in e-participation and e-government surveys. Its government agencies show typical characteristics of e-participation initiatives in developing countries identified in literature. Thus, this chapter places these characteristics in a real-life context to show clear boundaries between the e-participation phenomenon and the context in developing countries. Therefore,

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