

Chapter 5

A Comparative Analysis of Local Agenda 21 Websites in Turkey in Terms of E-Participation

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ABSTRACT

Local Agenda 21 (LA 21) is a democracy project aiming to enhance the public's participation in the processes of political and administrative decision-making. E-government, in its own right as a facilitator of participation, is a functional instrument for LA 21s in terms of ensuring the public participation and implementing governance model. In this context, this study aims to examine whether the LA 21s benefit from the e-participation opportunities over the websites in Turkey. According to the findings of empirical research, the LA 21s in Turkey do not offer a wide of number of e-participation services on their websites. LA 21s do not provide real e-participation practices allowing an interaction among the citizens, partners and the officials, elevating the citizens to the position of partners, enhancing their participation and improving the notion of democracy in Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

Local Agenda 21 (LA 21) is a democracy project aiming to enhance the public's participation in the processes of political and administrative decision-making. The method of operation of LA 21 that entails participation and partnership is all regarded as their basis of existence. In order for these kinds of programs to materialize participation and co-operation more efficiently and comprehensively,

e-government facilities offer golden opportunities. E-government, in its own right as a facilitator of participation, is a functional instrument for LA 21s in terms of ensuring the public participation and implementing governance model.

E-government should not only be perceived as a concept associated with the field of administration. Apart from the improvement of the way public services are offered, simplification and unification of administrative processes, e-government should also be considered as a tool that gets the public involved in the processes of administrative and

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political decision-making. In other words, the concept of e-government includes, in addition to e-service and e-administration, the dimension of e-democracy within itself. As far as the level reached today is concerned, the contributions to be made by e-government to the concepts of participation and democracy attract ever more attention and the literature on this field is growing day by day (Becker, 2007; Barrati Esteve et al., 2007; Chadwick, 2003; Gibson et al., 2004; Kampen & Snijkers, 2003; Kinder, 2002; Moynihan, 2007; O'Toole, 2009; Wei Phang & Kankanhalli, 2007; Taylor & Burt, 2002; Yao & Murphy, 2007).

The contributions to be made by e-government to the consensus-building and cooperation can be analyzed within the framework of LA 21. The significant part of the literature formed on LA 21 either analyzes the implementation of LA 21 practices in one or more than one municipality in a geographical area or explicates the general analysis of implementation level in a country (Adolfsson Jörby, 2000, 2002; Barrett & Usui, 2002; Etxebarria et al., 2004; Feichtinger & Pregernig, 2005; Gan, 1999; Grochowalska, 1998; Lindstrom & Gronholm, 2002; Wild & Marshall, 1999). Some studies even focus on determining the factors effective on the level of implementation of LA 21. However, it is not very easy to encounter a study that associates LA 21 with the information and communication technologies (ICTs). In other words, there does not exist a study in the relevant literature that has analyzed whether LA 21, which itself is a participatory platform has benefited from advantages offered by the concept of e-government.

The onset point by which LA 21 can commence to benefit from the advantages brought by e-government in facilitating and enhancing participation can be constituted by setting up a website. In this context, this study aims to examine the websites of LA 21 programs in terms of e-participation in Turkey.

In this context, first of all, the conceptual framework of public participation will be made and the

effects of the ICTs on the concept of participation (e-participation) will be explicated. Subsequently, the participatory and cooperative nature of LA 21 and the significance of e-participation from the perspective of this platform will be dealt with. Finally, within the context of a list of criterion genuinely established, whether the websites of LA 21 in Turkey, which itself is a participatory platform, benefits from opportunities offered by e-government will be examined.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The participation of the citizens to economical, political, social and cultural processes has not been a new fact. However, it has been one of the leading rising values especially in the literature of political theory and public administration. As far as the point reached today is concerned, the public participation to decision-making processes is expressed as an intrinsic right of citizenship and is encountered as one of the basic characteristics of contemporary democratic societies. While countries, on the one hand, seek for new methods and approaches that will move the concept of participation beyond the tradition of casting vote in elections and pave the way for more participation, they, on the other hand, exert some efforts to implement the participatory mechanisms in their political and administrative systems by means of administrative reforms.

Public participation is a process by which public concerns, needs and values are incorporated into governmental decision-making process. Public participation is a bilateral communication and interaction with the aim of better decisions supported by the public (Creighton, 2005). The motive behind public participation is the need for the public to take part in the decision-making processes that will have an impact on their own everyday lives. In fact, it is asserted that the citizens to be affected by the decisions of the

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