

Chapter 12

Addressing Social Inclusion via eDemocracy Applications: Which Role for Human Rights?

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ABSTRACT

Public participation is considered to be the remedy for the democratization of political processes. As technological progress advances, more trust is put in Information and Communication Technologies as tools to democratize the political processes by enhancing and assisting citizens' involvement in political processes. Such examples are initiatives like eDemocracy and eParticipation, among others. However, experts emphasize that technology as any kind of "tool" is not unbiased, and it does involve serious considerations of social import. The emergence of the digital divide is a proof that these tools, if not handled appropriately, could cause even greater impact to the already existing social exclusion. At this point, social inclusion has re-emerged not only as a strategy for confronting social exclusion in general but also the digital divide, which keeps citizens from participating in political processes. This chapter indicates and concludes on how social inclusion functions not only as a prerequisite for public participation via ICT but also, through appropriate regulatory mechanisms, represents a solution for combating the problems of exclusion that eDemocracy faces.

INTRODUCTION

One of globalization's most important challenges, identified both by the academia and political actors, is the well-know democratic deficit. The discussion on democracy and how to enhance democratic values is today's timeliest thematic in

political and academic agenda. Political discussion has been identified by experts as the most valuable democratic tool placing citizens at the centre as the most vital actors for the model of participatory democracy; which is identified as the model which could contribute more to confront the democratic deficit and consequently to lead to good governance.

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Additionally, new useful tools have emerged with the advancement of new technologies and more specifically tools provided from the Information and Communication Technology (ICT). ICT tools, when used appropriately have considerable potential in creating transparency in governmental activities and leading to new gateways for citizens' involvement. "Political participation is arguably the main area where the impact of ICT tools such as web 2.0 is now visible" (Kohut, 2008). ICT has for some time been considered a "strategic tool for reinforcing citizens' participation through initiatives such as eDemocracy and eParticipation," though it has had mixed success so far (Bryant & Wilcox, 2007). As Castells (2001) mentions Internet and at length ICT tools in general are expected to function as an instrument for furthering democracy in terms of "information politics."

However, technology is considered to be not neutral and despite the progress made there are still potential risks involving such tools as the Internet, web 2.0 tools, etc. in such sensitive areas as politics, governance and democracy. Technology as any human-originated "creation" does entail risks, it does have limitations and of course implications that there should all be accounted for and addressed properly. It merely acts as a magnifier and multiplier of the inherent tendencies and characteristics of the spaces where it is implemented. Despite its main benefits and potentialities, ICT usage entails pertinent risks and can create barriers increasing social exclusion, which is one of democracy's most debatable challenges.

Social exclusion is defined as being "multidimensional, since it is something that can happen in the economic, cultural, social, and political sphere" and people may be excluded for different things at the same time (de Haan, 2001). Social exclusion is a social process, built on social inequalities and leading to the marginalization of individuals and groups as regards societal goals. Social inequalities are related to a vast series of factors like gender, ethnicity, age, education, em-

ployment, income, professional status, disability, geographical location etc. and are the basic roots of social exclusion. Social inclusion on the other hand is the attempt of trying to include those who are at risk of exclusion.

The term "digital divide" is used to characterize an emerging polarization phenomenon in society, "creating a gap between those who have access to and use the potentialities of the ICTs and those who are not in a position to access or use these potentialities." Digital exclusion may result from a lack of digital literacy, from economic or technical barriers to Internet access, or from a lack of capabilities to use efficiently the new services and facilities linked to ICTs. "Literacy, access, and use are three key words in policies preventing e-exclusion" (European Commission, 2001).

Digital inclusion on the other end as defined by the European Commission (EC) is the prevention of disadvantaged people and groups being excluded from the development of the information society (European Commission, 2001) or differently as "the use of technology either directly or indirectly to improve the lives and life chances of disadvantaged people and the places in which they live" (Digital Inclusion Team, 2005). ICTs' digital opportunities refer to the distribution and circulation of knowledge resources, the potential of information and communication services, new job opportunities and better access to employment, and more traditionally as regards to ICT, overcoming barriers of distance and mobility; namely the exploitation of ICT tools for a better inclusion of socially disadvantaged people or groups, of less-favoured areas.

Digital inclusion is in reality a new dimension of social inclusion, and in the same manner, the digital divide has been described as a new form of social exclusion. Digital divide can be seen both as a result of social exclusion (those who suffer from a lack of financial resources, skills, or capabilities will also have trouble accessing ICTs and handling information that is provided via ICTs) and a factor

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