Participatory Democracy and the Governance of Smart Cities

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Extended Abstract

This paper will present results from the urbanAPI pan-European research project, funded by EU FP7 (DG Information Society Smart Cities Programme). urbanAPI directly addresses the prime challenges arising from demands for more democratic and more responsive community planning, and for the greater involvement of citizens in policy-making and the governance of the city regions of Europe today.

ICT enabled urban governance offers a huge potential to simultaneously achieve effective management of the complexity of the city, and engage citizens in defining their urban futures. ICT enabled innovations can enhance public engagement and allow a wider audience to simultaneously contribute to the political debate. In particular, the convergence of broadband with ICT-enabled innovations (e.g. especially user driven applications based on social computing and mobile technologies) is transforming the way people use the Internet to communicate and interact. Most European citizens embrace the "collaborative Internet" and expect to be able to interact with city governments using ICTs. ICTs are seen as enablers of more and better participation (e-Participation), and democracy (e-Democracy) and more inclusive societies (inclusive e-Governance and e-Inclusion), extending beyond enhanced service delivery, to facilitate and enhance interactions between actors, thus requiring change in regulatory and governance processes.

Especially at the city level there is as yet only limited evidence of the direct effects of ICT-enabled innovations on city governance systems. urbanAPI provides ICT enabled innovations for city governance and adapted governance models to support new stakeholder engagement and citizen participation, in order to enhance sustainable urban policy development and delivery. The conceptual frame for the project is based upon the understanding that urban managers throughout Europe face common challenges in responding to the desire for a more participatory democracy, in order to define the basis for securing urban economic vitality, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. The commonality of the drivers of urban change including global economic instability, demographic and migratory change, as well as climate change offers a major opportunity for the development of common solutions grounded in effective citizen and wider stakeholder engagement in the planning process.

urbanAPI directly addresses these potentials for the development of common models of policy formulation and implementation in respect of both information generation and management, as well as stakeholder engagement, thereby supporting the potential for widespread application in the cities and regions of Europe.

The enhanced ICT tools developed by urbanAPI offer new opportunities for the development of both intelligence sources as well as tools for decision-making support at three levels of urban governance from neighbourhood to city region level, thereby addressing the key dimensions of the management of urban complexity. At the same time by providing a simplified language of communication between different stakeholder groups (virtual reality and simulation-based communication) developed on a common platform of communication between the different levels of governance including local (virtual reality), citywide (GSM) and city region (simulation) urbanAPI also advances the state of the art in relation to the necessary collectivity of city governance.

Keywords: urban democracy, urban governance, smart cities, stakeholder engagement and public participation.