

E-participation

3.1. Introduction

Governments have a duty to uphold the peoples' right to participate in public governance. At the national level, the right to political and civic participation is often guaranteed in the constitution. The United Nations Public Administration Country Studies, including a *Survey of the constitutions of all United Nations Member States*, found that more than 150 countries enshrine the right of citizens to participate in one form or another.¹

Governments also stand to benefit from engaging citizens and non-state actors in public policy decision-making and public service delivery. Given the increasingly interconnected systems of agricultural production and distribution, energy use, water and sanitation management, financial transactions, transportation infrastructure and communications networks, to mention a few, governments cannot afford—financially nor technically—to find solutions to complex problems on their own. As issues overlap across national and subnational jurisdictions, geopolitical and social boundaries and public and private institutions, governments are leveraging resources in the private sector and civil society to share responsibilities and accountabilities.

Governments are aided by modern ICTs that are transforming their interface and relations with citizens. ICTs are enabling governments to increase their outreach to citizens and communities for determining their needs and preferences in public policies and services. Conversely, ICTs are empowering citizens to access public institutions and have their voices heard. E-participation, then, is the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy and decision-making in order to make public administration participatory, inclusive, collaborative and deliberative for intrinsic and instrumental ends.

E-participation expands a government's toolbox for reaching out to and engaging with its people. It does not replace traditional forms of public participation, whether



In this chapter:

| | | |
|--------|--|----|
| 3.1. | Introduction | 61 |
| 3.1.1. | International development agenda and the World Information Society | 62 |
| 3.2. | Assessing e-participation: what is included in the 2014 Survey? | 63 |
| 3.3. | Global and regional ranking | 64 |
| 3.4. | Trends by levels and sectors of e-participation | 66 |
| 3.4.1. | E-information | 67 |
| 3.4.2. | E-consultation | 68 |
| 3.4.3. | E-decision-making | 72 |
| 3.5. | The potential of e-participation for sustainable development: opportunities and challenges | 72 |
| 3.5.1. | Enabling environment for e-participation | 72 |
| 3.5.2. | Readiness for e-participation | 73 |
| 3.6. | Conclusion | 73 |

through face-to-face meetings, paper-based communications, telephone calls, physical bulletin boards, among other offline modalities. Rather, governments should consider how best to reach the various social groups among its population by deploying the optimal mix of online and offline modalities within their jurisdictions. This outreach should be differentiated from efforts by people to participate in civic life, often through grassroots movements. Governments ought to recognize and encourage peaceful and constructive social engagement without attempting to take it over. In a similar vein, governments can learn to use social media as a tool to collect and take into account people's views and feedback.

3.1.1. International development agenda and the World Information Society

Recently, the international community has reaffirmed the value of wider public participation through various expressions of consensus on development. For instance, in the *United Nations Millennium Declaration* (2000), paragraph V(25), the General Assembly resolved to "work collectively for more inclusive political processes, allowing genuine participation by all citizens in all our countries," among other measures. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development or Rio +20, Member States declared in General Assembly Resolution 288 of 2012 entitled *The Future We Want*, paragraph 13: "We recognize that opportunities for people to influence their lives and future, participate in decision-making and voice their concerns are fundamental for sustainable development." Participation and citizen engagement are very much seen as a vital part of sustainable development.

At the same time, the international community also considered the potential of the digital revolution for bettering lives and societies at the World Summit on Information Society, held in 2003 and 2005. In the ensuing *Tunis Agenda for the Information Society*, United Nations Member States acknowledged in paragraph 83 that: "Building an inclusive development-oriented Information Society will require unremitting multi-stakeholder effort. ..." Moreover, in paragraph 30, they "acknowledge(d) that the Internet, a central element of the infrastructure of the Information Society, has evolved from a research and academic facility into a global facility available to the public."

Thus the purpose and means of e-participation were defined. At the core of the vision of the international community, both for the Future We Want and the World Information Society, lies empowerment of people. The United Nations Commission on Social Development at its 51st Session (2013) concluded, that: "The empowerment and participation of all members of society in social, economic and political life is critical to achieving sustainable development." (paragraph 19, E/CN.5/2013/3). The challenge of e-participation, then, is how best to employ ICTs to create an enabling environment for individuals and groups to be empowered to participate meaningfully and effectively in governance, policy, service development and delivery processes.

3.2. Assessing e-participation: what is included in the 2014 Survey?

Although civic participation is often equated with voting in elections, public participation and citizen engagement extends to shaping public policies and determining public service delivery. Governments' efforts to promote participation can benefit from considering the various models of public participation that have been developed.² These models can also serve as the basis of e-participation models.

The *United Nations e-Government Survey* uses a three-level model of e-participation that moves from more “passive” to “active” engagement with people. The model includes: 1) *e-information* that enables participation by providing citizens with public information and access to information upon demand, 2) *e-consultation* by engaging people in deeper contributions to and deliberation on public policies and services and 3) *e-decision-making* by empowering people through co-design of policy options and co-production of service components and delivery modalities. This model of e-participation is based on the assumption that a shift from more “passive” to “active” engagement brings about true people empowerment, a necessary condition for sustainable development.

This model of e-participation also gives tacit acknowledgement to two trends. First, there is a shift in view of people from passive receivers of services to co-creators of public value and contributors to community resilience. Second, the daunting challenges of sustainable development—inclusive economic growth that promotes full and productive employment for all while safeguarding the fragile biosphere and mitigating the effects of climate change—require the concerted action of all governance partners to produce desired outcomes.

For the 2014 *Survey*, the United Nations expanded the assessment of e-participation by reviewing the quality and usefulness of e-government programs for the purpose of engaging people in public policy-making and implementation. In general, the *UN E-Government Survey* deals with the facilities for the three levels of e-participation (e-information/e-consultation/e-decision-making) rather than actually measuring usage.

The 2014 *Survey* introduced updates to the 2012 *Survey* questions on e-participation as well as introduced new questions. The updates ensured that information on whether up-to-date web tools were made available or not during e-consultation and e-decision-making activities by government agencies could be assessed. New questions addressed data publishing and sharing³ by government agencies. Other new features and updates included the availability of information on the citizens' rights to access government information, providing outcome on feedback received from citizens concerning the improvement of its online services, providing the tools in order to obtain public opinion for public policy deliberation through social media, online polls, petition tools, voting tools, online-bulletin boards and online discussion forums.

As in the past, the *Survey* started its assessment with the basic premise that governments should provide archived information (e.g. policies, budget, legal docu-

ments, etc.) on its activities. As mentioned, the *Survey* researchers also focused on the availability of government data at this stage. In later stages, the researchers focused on the presence of e-consultation and e-decision-making features regarding education, health, finance, social welfare, labour information and environment. Table 3.1 summarizes the main features assessed for e-participation.

Table 3.1. Summary of features assessed related to e-participation

| |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of archived information (policies, budget, legal documents etc.) related to education, health, finance, social welfare, labour information and environment |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existence of datasets on education, health, finance such as government spending, social welfare, labour information and environment |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to government website in more than one official national language |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of social networking features |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of e-consultation mechanisms for the six sectors: education, health, finance, social welfare, labour information and environment |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of tools in order to obtain raw (non-deliberative) public opinion for public policy deliberation such as online forums, media tools, polls, voting tools and petition tools |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of e-decision-making tools for the six sectors: education, health, finance, social welfare, labour information and environment |

3.3. Global and regional ranking

Based on an assessment of these e-participation features in national portals and social networking sites, a global ranking of government provisions was established. Table 3.2 presents the top 50 performers (see Annexes, Table 13).

As in 2012, the Netherlands and the Republic of Korea topped the list of performers in e-participation. Uruguay came in third place, followed by France, Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia, Chile, the United States of America and Singapore.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the regional representation of the top 50 countries on e-participation. There are 21 countries from Europe, 14 from Asia, 10 from Americas, 3 from Africa and 2 from Oceania. Morocco, Kenya and Tunisia are the African countries in the top 50. If comparing only the top 20 ranking (involving 21 countries in 2014 with some with the same ranking), the most represented regions are tied among the Americas, Asia and Europe with six countries each.

Figure 3.2 shows the distribution of the top 50 countries according to income level. As seen, 56 per cent (or 28 countries accordingly) of the top 50 countries are high income and 28 per cent (14 countries) are upper middle income. There are seven lower middle income countries in the top 50, which are Morocco, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, India, Republic of Moldova, El Salvador and Georgia and one low income country (Kenya).

Table 3.2. Top 50 performers on e-participation

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Netherlands | Colombia | Spain | Norway | Belgium |
| Republic of Korea | Israel | Estonia | Russian Federation | India |
| Uruguay | United Arab Emirates | Kazakhstan | China | Republic of Moldova |
| France | Bahrain | Brazil | Ireland | Slovakia |
| Japan | Canada | Finland | Kenya | El Salvador |
| United Kingdom | Costa Rica | Germany | Lithuania | Mexico |
| Australia | Greece | Latvia | Portugal | Qatar |
| Chile | Morocco | Oman | Sri Lanka | Sweden |
| United States of America | Italy | Peru | Tunisia | Georgia |
| Singapore | New Zealand | Mongolia | Austria | Montenegro |

Figure 3.1. Top 50 countries on e-participation, by region

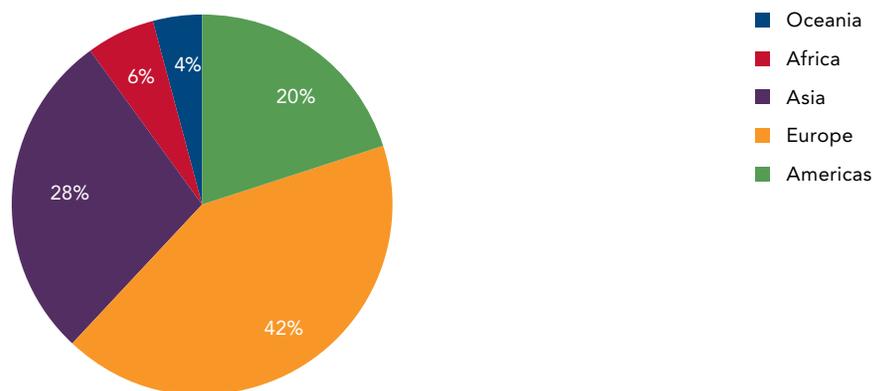


Figure 3.2. Top 50 countries on e-participation, by income level

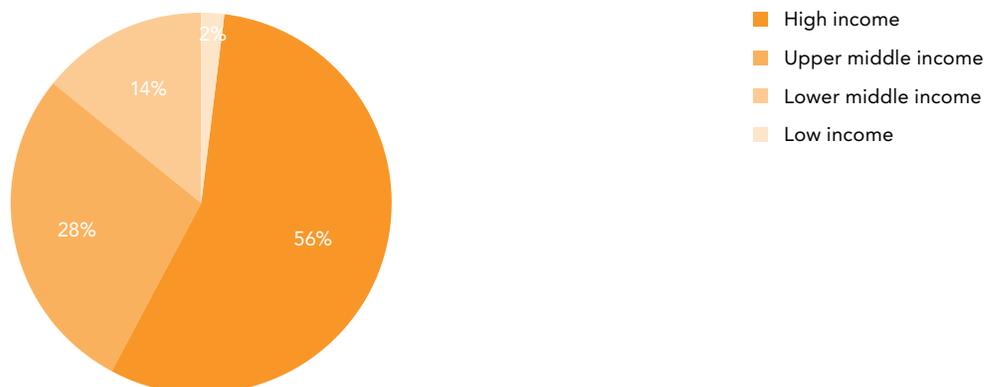


Table 3.3 lists the countries that score more than 66.6 per cent in all three stages of e-participation. These are all high income countries except for Colombia, which is an upper middle income country. The table shows that income level is important for e-participation, and it also implies that there are not many countries in the world which can achieve this. The top two countries, the Netherlands and the Republic of Korea, tied with an average total score of 90 per cent provision of all the services assessed.

Table 3.3. Countries that score more than 66.6 per cent in all three stages of e-participation

| Country | E-information (%) | E-consultation (%) | E-decision making (%) | Total (%) | Income level | Region |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-----------|--------------|----------|
| Netherlands | 96.30 | 86.36 | 77.78 | 89.66 | High | Europe |
| Republic of Korea | 96.30 | 81.82 | 88.89 | 89.66 | High | Asia |
| Uruguay | 88.89 | 95.45 | 66.67 | 87.93 | High | Americas |
| France | 96.30 | 77.27 | 77.78 | 86.21 | High | Europe |
| Japan | 85.19 | 86.36 | 88.89 | 86.21 | High | Asia |
| United Kingdom | 96.30 | 77.27 | 77.78 | 86.21 | High | Europe |
| Australia | 92.59 | 77.27 | 77.78 | 84.48 | High | Oceania |
| Colombia | 74.07 | 81.82 | 88.89 | 79.31 | Upper middle | Americas |

Equally noteworthy are those countries that offered the greatest number of e-decision-making services. They represent features that allow for the most active participation by citizens in influencing decision-making about public policies and services. Three countries, the Republic of Korea, Japan and Colombia, offered the greatest number of e-decision-making features at 89 per cent each.

3.4. Trends by levels and sectors of e-participation

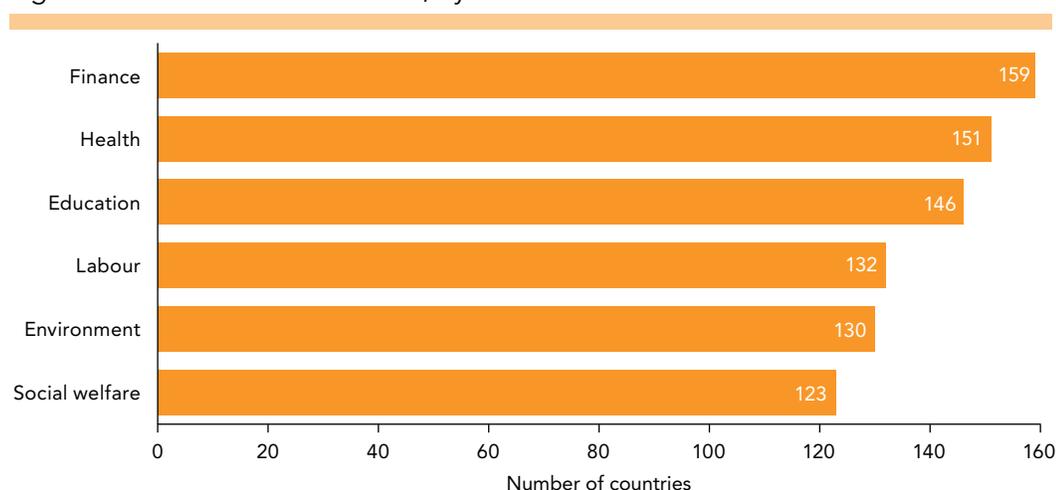
When government portals provide facilities for e-decision-making—such as a stated online e-participation policy; an online calendar of participatory events; online procurement announcements; online citizens' right to government information; and outcome of participation in a new policy, service or decision-making—they are beginning to empower citizens to meaningfully and effectively engage in public policies and co-produce public services.

The 2014 *Survey* looked at all three levels of e-participation (e-information sharing, e-consultation, e-participation) in sectors chosen on the basis of their relevance to the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. They include six sectors: education, health, finance, social welfare, labour and environment.

3.4.1. E-Information

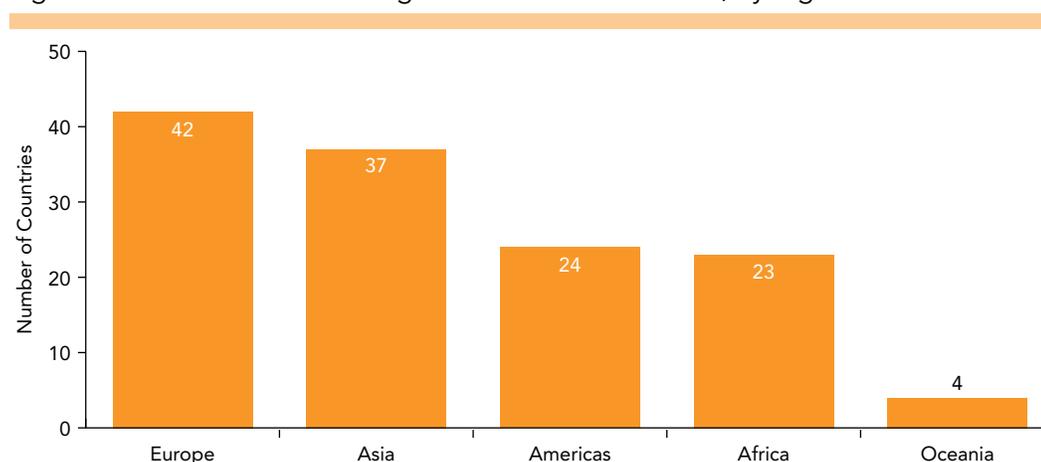
The number of countries providing archived information of the six chosen sectors is as follows: education (146), health (151), finance (159), social welfare (123), labour (132) and environment (130). 104 countries provide archived information about the six distinctive sectors, 22 countries do not share any information about the six sectors. Finally, there are five countries which share information in every sector except in the environment sector.⁴ As seen in Figure 3.3, more countries provided links to sources of archived information such as policies, budgets, legal documents, etc. on the financial sector than the other five sectors. Increasing transparency of spending priorities and resource allocation can empower citizens to demand accountability, in a more informed way, for public expenditure.⁵

Figure 3.3. Archived information, by sector



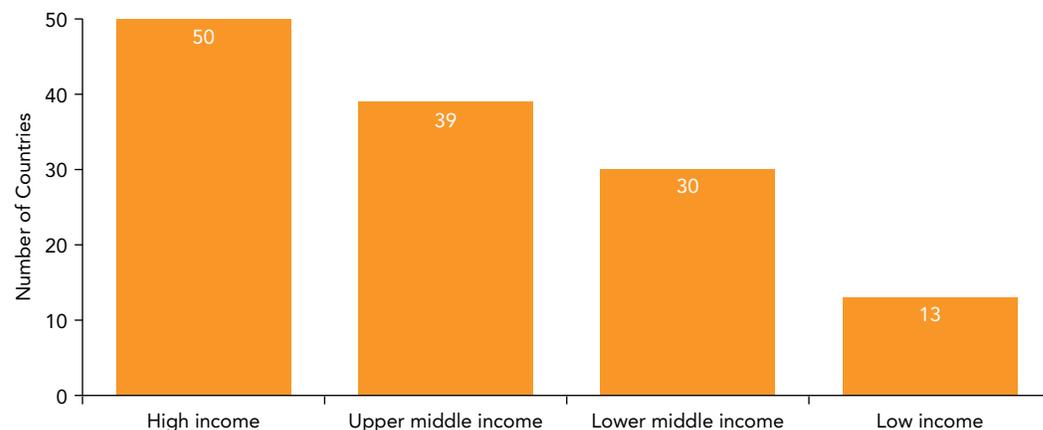
An increasing sector of concern for governments and citizens alike—given threats to biodiversity, depletion of fossil fuels and other minerals and climate change fallouts—is the environment sector. Figure 3.4 illustrates that the majority of the countries that deliver e-information on environmental issues are in Europe (42 countries). There is almost an equal number of countries from Africa and Americas (23 and 24 respectively) that also provide e-information on environmental issues.

Figure 3.4. Countries delivering environment information, by region



Furthermore, Figure 3.5 shows that the provision of this information is concentrated in the high and upper middle income countries (50 and 39 respectively). Given that the countries most susceptible to the negative impacts of environmental degradation generally tend to be low income countries, the provision of environmental e-information to the public in these countries is of increasing importance.⁶

Figure 3.5. Delivery of environment information, by income level



A successful example of e-information is highlighted in the Uganda case study (see Box 3.1).



Box 3.1. Ureport of Uganda: Mobile Participation

Ureport is a free, SMS-based system that allows young Ugandans to speak out on what is happening in communities across the country and work together with other community leaders for positive change. The mission of *Ureport* is to inspire action to unite and share the responsibility of creating a better environment for the society. It aims to inspire action from leaders and inform them about what is going on and what action the community prefers. *Ureport* includes but is not limited to:

- Weekly SMS messages and polls to and from a growing community of *Ureporters*
- Regular radio programmes that will broadcast stories gathered by *Ureport*
- Newspaper articles that will publish stories from the *Ureport* community.

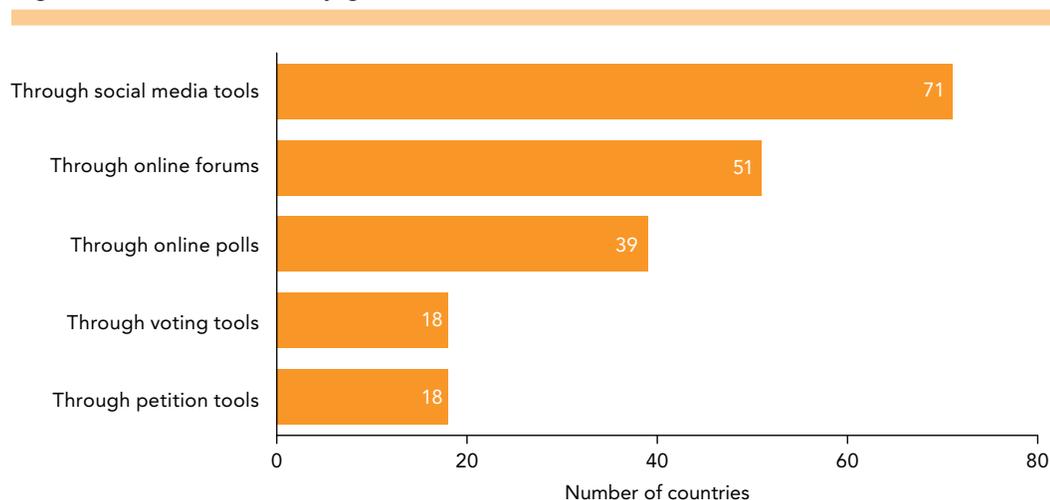
Source: Ureport: <http://ureport.ug/>

3.4.2. E-Consultation

A key factor that determines the design, deployment and use of particular citizen engagement technologies is the availability of adequate capacities, on both the side of the government and that of citizens. Figure 3.6 provides a comparison of tools used by governments for e-consultation. 95 countries, or 49 per cent, of the 193 United Nations Member States provide a facility on their national portals for

citizen feedback concerning the improvement of their online services. 71 countries provide raw or non deliberative public opinion on public policies through social media, 51 through online forums, 39 through online polls, 18 through online voting and 18 through online petitions. Fewer governments use tools for e-consultation than for the provision of e-information.

Figure 3.6. Tools used by governments for e-consultation



It is noteworthy that governments tend to use social media tools in a more extensive way than online forums. To give one example, the Government of Slovenia uses an online tool *predlagam.vladi.si* to interact with its citizens (see Box 3.2).

Box 3.2. Slovenia “I suggest to the government”

The online tool *predlagam.vladi.si* is managed by the Government Communication Office of Slovenia. Public officials from various government ministries are ready to respond to citizens’ initiatives and evaluate their proposals. If they have any problems, questions or constructive suggestions for improving the functionality of online tools, citizens can e-mail and call the Government Communication Office. Online tools available for citizens include:

- facilitating publication of new proposals;
- informing the competent authority that the *predlagam.vladi.si* will open a debate on a proposal and ask the relevant party to take an active part in it; making sure that all comments are published according to the rules of *predlagam.vladi.si*;
- hiding inappropriate comments and in their place publishing the reasons;
- judging the adequacy of the response of the competent authority;
- publishing responses to the competent authorities.

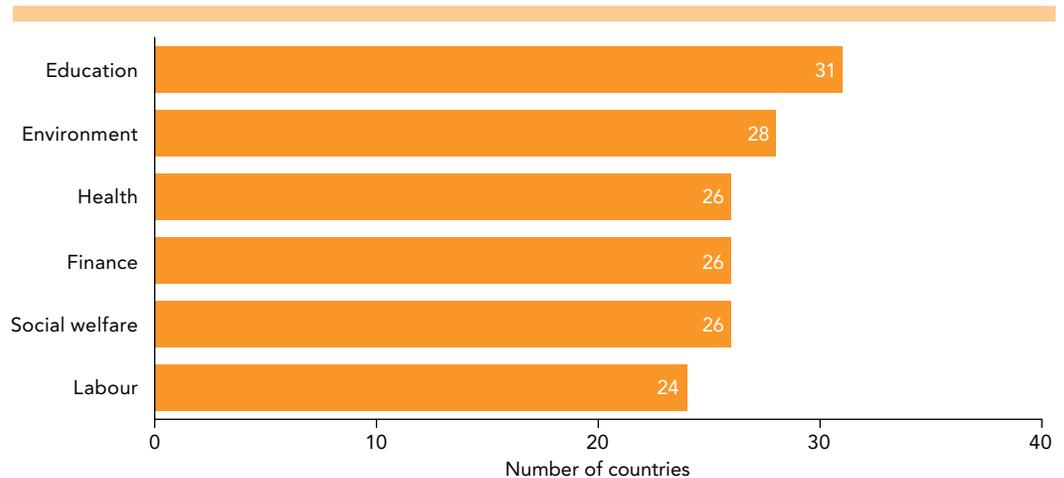


Source: <http://predlagam.vladi.si/>

Governments tend to use social media for several reasons. First, the public is already very present and familiar with social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. These platforms provide an opportunity for governments to “leap-frog”, bypassing having to set up their own platforms. Second, these are cost-efficient as social media initiatives do not require high investment costs, as they typically ride on commercial and non-governmental platforms.

Once these tools are in place, governments can also consult on sectoral issues that affect the quality of life of their people. This is a step beyond the simple provision of information, described above. The 2014 *Survey* assessed whether governments had e-consulted people on issues related to education, health, finance, social welfare, labour or the environment in the previous 12 months. More governments e-consulted on educational issues, with just over 16 per cent, followed by environmental issues, at over 14 per cent than the other four sectors (see Figure 3.7).⁷

Figure 3.7. E-consultation in the past 12 months, by sector



To keep up the momentum of citizen engagement, the responsiveness of public officials and administrators to e-participation is important. When people take the time from their busy lives to give feedback on or provide input into government decision-making, they should be acknowledged. However, given demographic differences between those public officials in decision-making positions and youth, it is important to build capacities in governments to bridge this gap. Otherwise, there is a danger that governments can be sidelined in online citizen-to-citizen dialogues and discussions.

The national portals were assessed for features that seek and use citizens' comments to improve online services. Table 3.4 illustrates that 68 out of the 193 United Nations Member States provided such features and 20 provided information about the outcome of citizens' feedback through statements explaining that the site had been upgraded based on the feedback received. Such features of e-decision-making can show elements of responsive improvements.⁸

Table 3.4. Consultation with citizens on improving e-government services

| | <i>Seek and use citizens' comments to improve its online services</i> | <i>Provide outcome on feedback concerning improvement of its online services</i> |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Number of countries | 68 | 20 |

3.4.3. E-decision-making

Figure 3.8 provides a comparison of tools used by governments for e-decision-making on issues in sectors assessed in the past 12 months. Among the e-decision-making facilities, financial issues were provided by the largest numbers (14 countries or 7 per cent). However labour and health sectors were used by the smallest number of countries (5.2 per cent).

Figure 3.8. E-decision making features in the past 12 months, by sector

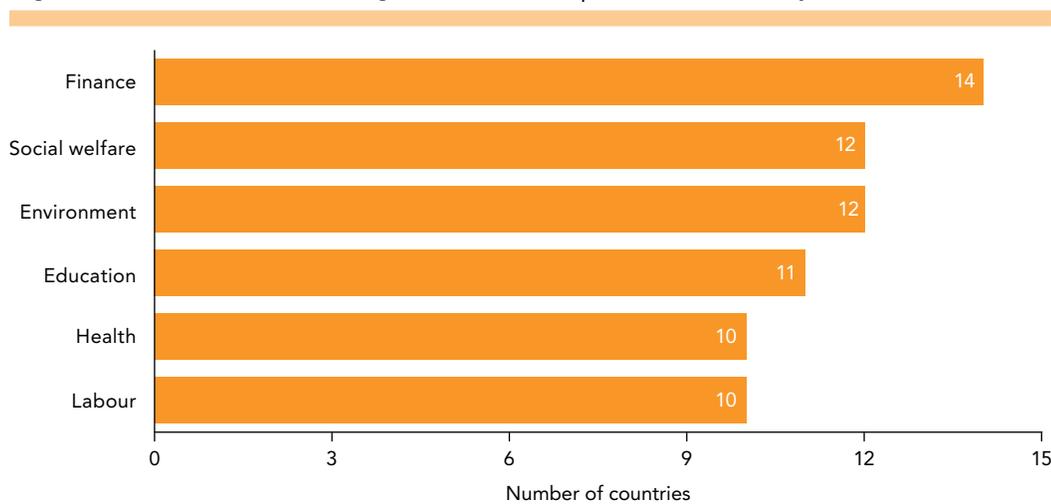
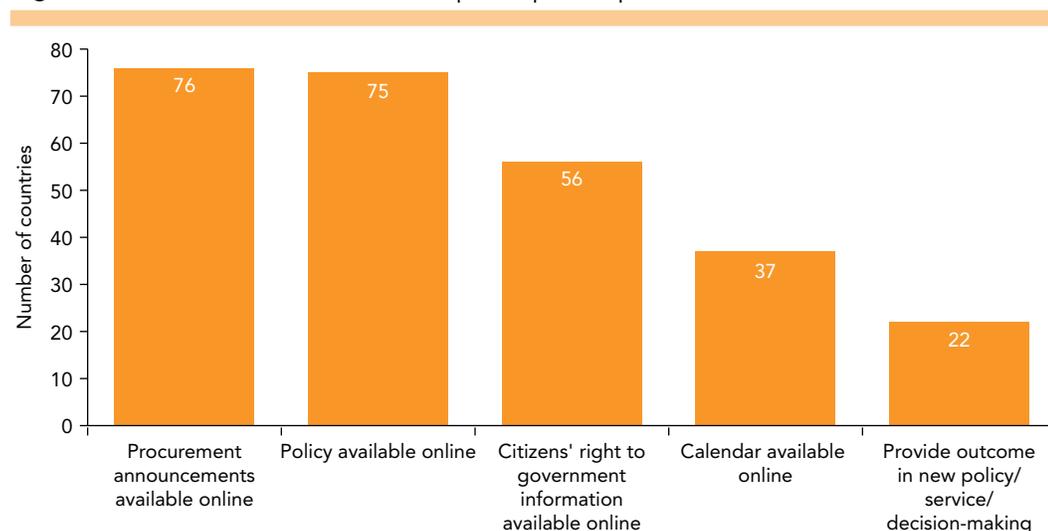


Figure 3.9 shows the extent of government's commitment to e-participation as indicated by an online e-participation policy, an online calendar of participatory events, online procurement announcements, online citizens' right to government information and outcome of participation in a new policy, service or decision-making. The greatest number of countries (76) allow for participation online in procurement announcements, followed by (75) placing their e-participation policy online. This trend demonstrates a steady progress in making available e-decision-making features.⁹

Figure 3.9. Countries with online e-participation policies



Even though governments may rank high on E-Government Development Index, they need to look separately at improving e-participation features if they wish to lay the foundation for soliciting active public participation. Although there is a high correlation between e-participation and other e-government features, other variables may be involved, such as income level and thus influence high e-government and e-participation scores.

3.5. The potential of e-participation for sustainable development: opportunities and challenges

3.5.1. Enabling environment for e-participation

Careful strategies are needed to create an enabling environment for e-participation. These strategies include legal and institutional frameworks by governments, capacity-development for digital media literacy for citizens and a seamless integration of online and offline features for enabling public participation. Successful strategies also address both formal and informal approaches to citizen engagement.

Governments may designate independent offices or create independent functions to introduce or improve freedom of information legislation, privacy and data protection legislation.

In doing so, it is helpful to build and capitalize on existing e-government initiatives—infrastructure and related e-services while undertaking new e-participation initiatives. Governments may be pressured to make budgetary cuts for their support to e-participation features during times of fiscal austerity. However, without proper consultations with people or managing societal expectations, public trust in e-participation services may be undermined.

Digital media literacy can facilitate e-participation by increasing the capacity of people. In order to be an effective e-participant, the inclusion of digital media literacy and lifelong learning efforts should become a social norm. Such literacy also includes the formation of relevant attitudes, development of skills and transfer of knowledge.

Social media initiatives around the world are good examples of how digital media can be used for the advancement of e-participation, creatively and attractively. Social media brings opportunities for cost-effective ways for governments to engage with citizens in e-decision-making and co-creation of services, especially since many citizens are already on popular sites. They provide platforms that enable citizens to become content creators for public policies (one good illustration is crowdsourcing) and services that governments can tap, providing a wealth of information.

Governments can develop a strategy for utilizing citizen-generated content for policy-making and service enhancement processes. However, it is not only social media and web sites that matter for successful e-participation. Traditional communications means and tools—such as radio, television, seminars, workshops, schools, universities, talk shows, face-to-face debates—combined with digital means, can help make public engagement more productive.

The use of all kinds of public media, including traditional offline channels, can be integrated into e-participation initiatives for further advancement. In this respect, the use and creative adaptation of existing local traditions of face-to-face public deliberations may be encouraged and “digitized” as part of e-participation measures. In addition, public media can be utilized in raising public awareness and direct education of both citizens and government officials.

Together with more traditional technologies—e.g. dedicated web-sites, universal One Stop Shop portals or Internet discussion forums based on Web 2.0 functionalities—they form a pool of public engagement technologies, old and new.

As the technology becomes more complex and sophisticated, it will bring to life business networks as third-party intermediaries to support new business models. The network of goods and services will be based on business partnerships and become increasingly data-driven, personalized and web-oriented. The engagement of business support services will be inevitable. Such new technological and business opportunities will be invaluable to the empowerment of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups through a new generation of online services driven by data-based architecture.

3.5.2. Readiness for e-participation

One key to a government’s success in e-participation is to self-assess its readiness to undertake such initiatives. A possible assessment framework could define what is measured and consider political/ administrative, social and technical perspectives. The administrative side may be represented by legal/organisational frameworks, modalities/channels and outreach plans. The social dimension should consider e-participation levels such as e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making. The technical perspective of e-participation considers specific citizen engagement technologies present in the field of open government/ data, social media, mobile/wireless communications and dedicated web sites/portals. The assessment should include how e-participation provisions link with traditional offline channels, both complementing these and extending their overall reach and impact.

Periodic assessment would allow governments to not only monitor progress against the framework but also open up the possibility to compare themselves to others that also use the framework. More importantly, as difficult as it is to measure, the assessment should not only look at “readiness” but also examine the actual impact on governance and sustainable development.

3.6. Conclusion

Formal and informal institutions for e-participation must work effectively to reach out to all. Constitutions, national bills of rights and other legislation may need to be updated to cover the digital arena for the right for access to information, the right to petition, the right to take part in referenda, among other rights to participate in public affairs. Enabling legislation that provides freedom of information or protects the privacy of individuals can also include online protections.

However, without designated public institutions to implement the measures and procedures to guide citizens, these rights would remain only as legal protections and not be translated into civic realities. Informal institutions such as social networks and allied e-business interests, among others, are also important for promoting e-inclusion.

To increase the chance of success for their e-participation strategy, governments can benefit from those platforms and channels that are being used by citizens rather than creating new ones. Promoting a clear idea and understanding of e-participation will help those groups that are difficult to reach. They should encourage issues-related participation and provide consistent feedback on consultations to the public.

Through e-participation, ICTs can help governments become better listeners and more agile partners in sustainable development efforts. Participatory budgeting, data mining and interaction on social media allow public managers and policy-makers to take the pulse of a constituency and shape public services to more closely address the needs and aspirations of people. Newer methods of outreach, such as crowdsourcing, can be effective methods of communication at the local level.¹⁰

Given these conclusions, the following recommendations will contribute to an environment for successful e-participation for sustainable development:

- Setup legal and institutional frameworks to enable freedom of information, privacy and data protection in order to secure a safe environment for e-participation
- Empower people through capacity development for digital media literacy to educate citizens and foster the development of skills, transfer of knowledge and outreach initiated by the public
- Build on existing e-government initiatives, platforms and channels already used by citizens to create visibility, a stronger relationship and trust with the public at low cost
- Promote the use of ICTs, digital and social media tools to enhance the spread of information and citizen engagement
- Ensure the integration of offline and online communication tools for an inclusive policy-making and service enhancements.