E-participation Tools

Guidance Document

Preparatory Action on

Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century

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What this document is about

This document provides some initial guidance on the potentials generally provided by digital participation tools for engaging local citizens into the process of Smart Village strategy development. In short, Smart Villages are communities in rural areas that use innovative solutions to improve their resilience, building on local strengths and opportunities. They rely on a participatory approach to develop and implement their strategy to improve their economic, social and/or environmental conditions, in particular, by mobilising solutions offered by digital technologies. In this context, the question often arises whether digital technologies can be used not only as a tool for solving specific problems of rural communities, but also for supporting the cooperation of local actors in joint strategy development. So-called e-participation tools are often referred to in this context.

Over the last years, several digital tools have become available to better engage local citizens in political or strategic decision-making. In general, such e-participation tools offer the possibility to involve local communities in collective consultation processes independent of time and space constraints. Practically speaking, this means that individual members of the local community can get or stay involved even if it may not always be possible for them to meet with others at a certain time and/or place. This can be particularly helpful in communities that cover a large geographic area or where some community members live in remote areas. However, the e-participation tools currently available differ considerably in terms of the functions they offer, and not every tool is well suited to support every participation or collaboration process.

Against this background, this paper is intended to provide some initial guidance on the possible use of an appropriate participation tool in your own Smart Village project. This starts with the presentation of a pragmatic typology of principally available e-participation tools according to the core functionalities they provide. For illustration purposes, selected tools are referred in this context in the hope that such examples will serve as a useful starting point for your own search for a suitable tool. This is followed by some very basic considerations worth being kept in mind when taking a decision on whether an e-patricipation tool is to be applied in the framework of your own Smart Village initiative. Finally, it is briefly described by examples of the LiquidFeedback tool, a sophisticated open-source e-participation solution that has been applied in several countries over recent years, how collective opinion formation works in practice.

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A pragmatic typology of available e-participation tools

There are many digital tools that hold potentials for supporting local community engagement processes in one way or another. The table below provides a pragmatic classification of different types of tools along the line of core functionalities they generally provide. The availability of individual tools in certain languages, however, often limits their applicability to specific countries. Against this background, the following table is intended to provide a useful starting point for your own market search for a tool you may deem suitable for your specific community engagement purposes.

Type	Example	Core functionalities provided
Citizen sourcing tools	There are various online solutions available for collating ad-hoc feedback by the citizens such as chat room as part of a bespoke web site. A dedicated social media presence, e.g. on facebook (https://www.facebook.com/), can also be used for gathering ad-hoc feedback by the citizens.	- Typically, such solutions provide an information channel to citizens enabling ad-hoc feed back - While some solutions such as online help desks enable a one-to-one communication, other enables a one-to-many communications.
Formalised citizen sourcing tools	Issue reporting software such as Improve My City (https://www.improve-my-city.com/) and others	- Interactive information channel to the citizens - Workflow support - Data analytics
Community mapping	There are some tools enabling citizens to map analysing they wish on a map of their community such as Community Maps (https://mappingforchange.org.uk/) and Fisrt Life (https://www.firstlife.org/)	- Crowed sourced geographic mapping on themes initiated by the municipality - Crowed sourced geographic mapping on themes initiated by the citizens
Citizen survey tools	There are a variety of online survey tools that can be utilised by the government to gauge the views of the citizens such as Survey Monkey, (https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/uk/) and many others	- Design of an online survey (closed questions, open questions) - Collate response from the citizens - Analyse responses received
e-Petition tools	There are some platform where citizens can launch online petitions such as Care2petition (https://www.care2.com/) and others	- E-petitions make use of software which allows the posting of petitions online where others can also register their support. - Most e-petitions contain a detailed request containing what it is that the petitioner wants the government to do, or stop doing

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Type	Example	Core functionalities provided
		- Various functionalities to support campaigning among citizens
Citizen polling tools	There are various tools available on the market such as EasyPolls, (https://easypoll.bot/) and others	- Such polls are quantitative surveys carried out to gauge and compare citizens' views on predefined issues - There are several kinds of ICT-supported opinion polls such as telephone surveys, online/email surveys - The so-called deliberative polling typically provides the citizens with information about an issue and time to deliberate about it before coming up with a considered opinion.
Collective opinion formation tools	Collective opinion formation tools such as LiquidFeedback and others enable to involve citizens in a collective opinion formation process	- Citizens can raise any issue they like - Structured discussion process - Quantification of the collective opinion - Private and Group messaging - Swift and Secure File Sharing / upload of supportive documents/content - Instant Notifications - Visualisation functions of voting outcomes

Some basic considerations on the use of an e-participation tool

It is unlikely that broader participation of local citizens or other stakeholders in the development of a Smart Village strategy or related activities can be achieved through 'going online' alone. Experiences gained with e-participation tools in other civic participation contexts suggest that there is no reason to assume that people would suddenly become passionate about engaging in public matters just because an online tool is made available to them. Apart from using an e-participation tool, there are many other ways people may spend their time in a meaningful way. They may for instance have parents with health problems, or they may need to pick the children from school. People will thus decide themselves whether the time they are supposed to spend on

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using an e-participation tool is indeed worth the time they would otherwise spend on alternative activities and life tasks. Against this background, the adoption of any e-participation tool at the part of the citizens will not at least depend on their perception as to whether they have the possibility to indeed exert an influence on any discussions to be led or decisions to be taken. Against this background, some basic considerations deserve attention when considering the utilisation of any e-participation tool.

The deployment of any e-participation tool should be strategy-driven

The deployment of any e-participation tool must be guided by a comprehensive strategy towards stakeholder participation in the envisaged deliberation process, and not the other way round. To this end, agreement should be reached beforehand in what way current decision power is to be distributed among the users of the e-participation tool - if at all - and how stake holder knowledge, expertise and opinions flowing through the tool are ultimately to be brought to bear on the further shaping of a Smart Village strategy and/or any related activities.

Roles and responsibilities should be clearly spelled out

The responsibilities of different stakeholders who may have a role to play in putting a digital participation process into practice should be anticipated in advance, including the role of the public administration which may need to be involved in one way or another. Careful consideration should be given to any resources required for putting a desired participation process design into practice by means of a specific e-participation tool.

Data privacy issues should receive attention at an early stage

As far as the processing of personal data is concerned European data protection legislation, namely the General Data Protection regulation (GDPR), creates certain obligations for any party (e.g. a municipality or a voluntary organisation) offering an e-participation tool to citizens. In general, currently available e-participation tools tend to support online-participation processes in a legally compliant manner. However, depending on a given participation strategy, certain aspects may require special attention. For example, the GDPR contains specific rules for the protection of personal data of underage users (Article 8), and a specific consent procedure may need to be put in place if community members under 16 are to be involved in the online participation process. Any data protection issues potentially associated with the use of a particular e-participation tool as part of your overall-participation strategy should therefore be identified at an early stage.

A short case study on collective opinion formation by example of the LiquidFeedback tool

Generally speaking, LiquidFeedback powers internet platforms for democratic proposition development and decision making. The software was developed in the framework of an independent open-source project published by the Public Software Group e.V., a non-for-profit organisation based in Germany.[1] The developers have joined together in a further non-for-profit organisation, the Interaktive Demokratie e.V. association[2], to promote the use of electronic media for democratic processes on an international level. Initially, the software was developed with a view to supporting democratic deliberation and decision-making processes within political parties.[3] Later, the focus has been extended to other application domains such as local municipalities, associations, cooperatives, grass roots movements and corporations. Today, LiquidFeedback is utilised by public bodies and corporations in Europe and beyond. When it comes to local communities in particular, the software is typically operated as a permanent participation infrastructure enabling the citizens to launch own initiatives at any time. It can also be used for polling the opinion of the citizens' on certain policy proposals, while not being limited to collating simple "yes" or "no" responses

Benefits LiquidFeedback offers to local communities

Involving the citizens in political or strategic decision-making processes is anything else but a new idea. Town hall meetings and public hearings are for instance typical means of civic participation which have been practiced in many local communities around the world for a long time. However, increasing levels of Internet penetration among public bodies and citizens do provide new opportunities for civic engagement with help of online means. Other than in traditional town hall meetings online media generally hold

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[1] The Public Software Group e.V. was founded in 2009 as a non-profit association based in Berlin, Germany. The organisation's main task is to support the free software community by creating and publishing liberally licensed open source software. See: http://www.public-software-group.org/ (last access: 11/05/2018)

[2] The Interaktive Demokratie e. V. was founded in 2010 as a non-for-profit association based in Berlin, Germany. Its members support democracy development from local communities to intergovernmental organizations with practical experience in planning and implementing electronic participation systems. See: http://www.interaktive-demokratie.org/index.en.html (last access: 11/05/2018)

[3] Björn Swierczek (2011): 5 years of Liquid Democracy in Germany. In: The Liquid Democracy Journal on Electronic Participation, Collective Moderation, and Voting Systems, Issue 1, 2014-03-20. Available at: http://www.liquid-democracy-journal.org/ (last access: 11/05/2018)

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potentials for enabling civic participation without requiring the citizens to meet up at a particular time and in a particular physical place. Similar to traditional town hall meetings, LiquidFeedback does not provide an alternative to constitutional elections of the parliamentary republic. Rather, it offers an additional communication channel between citizens, public administrations and other stakeholders, similar to the idea of a petition. Other than existing online petition platforms, LiquidFeedback does however not just offer the opportunity to mobilise supporters for a particular concern or policy proposal to be submitted to a person in power or a public entity. Rather, it allows considering pros and cons, enhancing existing propositions and suggesting alternatives as part of a structured deliberation process. Beyond enabling collective idea development in a transparent and fair manner, the system also enables quantification the collective preference in relation to competing propositions by means of preferential voting. Even if a voting result may not necessarily be legally binding, Liquid Feedback enables informed decision making by responsible decision makers based on the popular vote. Experiences from existing implementations suggest that decision makers tend to become more communicative by explaining their politics both in the debate and following the decision.

How LiquidFeedback is typically applied by local communities

The LiquidFeedback software leaves room for localised configuration to enable meeting legal and other requirements potentially prevailing in a given jurisdiction. A local community that plans to operate the system typically defines a dedicated usage policy in advance. A number of generic questions deserve attention in this context.

Who may participate?

It should be clear in advance who shall be allowed to participate in the collective proposition development process. It would seem logic that those people who are affected by a decision should be allowed to participate. In practice, operational criteria are required to be applied when it comes to identifying who these people are, e.g. in terms of age, place of residence and/or other criteria. By design, LiquidFeedback is not intended for anonymous use where participants can sign up to the platform without control whether a user belongs to the intended group of participants. There are different reasons for this. To begin with, manipulation with help of fake accounts, so called "sock puppets", needs to be avoided. Today, there is even software for setting-up and managing an army of "sock puppets" in social networks and all appear to be living persons. Also, it has been shown that secret electronic voting can't be implemented in a

safe way such that the anonymity and the results of a poll can be verified by the participants. To solve these problems every single participant in the LiquidFeedback system has to be relatable to the correspondent real person. Without transparency regarding the identity of the participants, it would be impossible to discover certain errors or manipulations. To guarantee the principle of "one person, one vote" a proper accreditation process has to be organized to grant access to the system only to those people who are intended to use it. Practically speaking, every participant must be identified during the accreditation process as an "existing person".

What shall be subject to participation?

Principally, LiquidFeedback is not restricted to single issues that may be discussed, but it allows discussion on any topic the participants like to discuss. Particular subject areas can be predefined by the local community, but it is also possible to set up a minimal system and let the system grow over time by making the participants decide on the subject areas to be added. In order to avoid wrong expectations and pointless efforts by the participants, the subject of participation should however be clearly defined, e. g. civic participation in a defined local area or on a specific topic or policy domain, and be actively communicated to the participants.

Why should citizens participate?

Civic participation is not a self-fulfilling prophecy. In fact, citizens can be expected to spend time and effort on using any online participation system only if they are motivated to do so. Experiences suggest for instance that citizens tend to make an effort to participate in political decision processes if they see a chance to improve their personal situation. Motivation also depends on their personal assessment of their chances to influence the decision and the possible impact of a given participation. When implementing LiquidFeedback, the question thus arises why the citizens should invest time and effort in writing initiatives, reading, and commenting on other people's proposals, and rating and voting upon them? Installing a LiquidFeedback system whose outcome doesn't have any real world consequences seems pointless. If the result of voting shall not be binding per se, then elected representatives or other types of decision makers should at least feel committed to consider the outcome within the further decision-making process. Often, LiquidFeedback decisions are introduced as suggestions into the decision-making by representatives. This can still have a large impact if the results are acknowledged as trustworthy and indisputable. A clear

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procedure for the further utilisation of LiquidFeedback outcomes by relevant decision makers or public bodies - of course in line with legal requirements that may exist in a given jurisdiction - should therefore be defined and communicated to the citizens in advance.

How LiquidFeedback's collective deliberation process works

By design, LiquidFeedback is a collectively moderated system. This means that it does neither rely on a request commission, nor is it necessary to involve a dedicated moderator. Instead, all participants gain equal rights in a scalable structured discussion process where it is ensured that minorities gain a fair share of representation and that even individuals may put up their proposals for discussion. The system is designed in such a way that noisy minorities won't harm other minorities in the discussion process. Moreover, non-transparent lobbying during the collective deliberation and decision process is prevented. Predefined rules and timings ensure that plans on decision processes are made public in time. Decisions are made by recorded vote only, and all voting-relevant data in LiquidFeedback is made available to all participants in both human- and machine-readable format. This enables a transparent decision-making process and ensures that participants can verify the voting procedure. Rather than merely enabling "yes" or "no" responses, by design LiquidFeedback encourages participants to support propositions made by others, suggest improvements or come up with alternatives. A sophisticated voting system is facilitated to allow participants to express their opinions without needing to consider tactics. Its mathematical properties avoid that similar proposals harm each other by vote-splitting.

As mentioned earlier, LiquidFeedback does however not only support decision-making in terms of voting. To provide a fair process for decision-making that scales even with larger numbers of participants, LiquidFeedback employs a structured discussion where it may not be possible for every participant to reply to every contribution. A typical opinion formation cycle within LiquidFeedback is organised according to subsequent phases, each lasting a pre-specified period.

The admission phase

A group of alternative initiatives starts in the admission phase when its first initiative is created. During admission phase, the system determines if there is interest at all in discussing the issue. This is done by requiring a certain quorum of supporters (including potential supporters) for at least one of the alternative initiatives. If no initiative manages to pass the first quorum, then the issue will be closed after a pre-set time and not discussed or voted upon further.

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The discussion phase

Whenever a group of alternative initiative enters the discussion phase, then all participants can notice that there is a real interest to resolve or at least discuss an issue. During the discussion phase (as well as the admission phase) supporters of initiatives may give suggestions, and initiators are able to update their drafts with a view to improving their resolutions and arguments. Whenever an initiator updates a draft, all supporters are notified about the update. It is up to the supporters to revoke their support or to update the rating of suggestions whenever the initiators change their current proposal. The discussion phase takes a fixed amount of time that is to be specified in advance. After this time has elapsed, all alternative initiatives enter the verification phase.

The verification phase

Because initiators can change their drafts during the discussion phase, it might be possible to betray supporters of an initiative by making a certain proposal and then in the last minute change this proposal in a shocking way. The verification phase exists to give supporters time to revoke their support: During verification it is not possible to update initiative texts anymore. However, it is possible to add new alternative initiatives, which will be competing against the existent ones. This enables participants to re-create an initiative which was changed or revoked by an initiator in the last moments of discussion phase. Supporting initiatives (as well as revoking your support for an initiative) is possible during the admission phase, the discussion phase, and the verification phase. The verification phase, like the discussion phase, also takes a fixed amount of time. Each initiative needs to pass a second quorum of supporters at the end of verification phase.

The voting phase

During the final voting phase all participants may vote in favour or against those alternative initiatives which have passed the second supporter quorum. In addition, it is possible to express preferences amongst those initiatives you are in favour of or against.

Where to find further information

Several online resources are available in relation to LiquidFeedback:

- Interaktive Demokratie e. V. (IAD) Website: http://www.interaktive-demokratie.org/index.en.html

- The Principles of LiquidFeedback Website: http://principles.liquidfeedback.org/

- The Liquid Democracy Journal Website: http://www.liquid-democracy-journal.org/

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- Public Software Group's Website: http://www.public-software-group.org/

- Commercial services by the inventors of LiquidFeedback:
  http://liquidfeedback.com/

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