

Public participation in the digital age

Background

Digital transformation is changing relationships between the state and society. Digital technologies are increasingly shaping all areas of our lives, defining the type of communications, the structure of social relationships and the interaction between citizens and governments as well as between non-governmental actors. New forms of participation, greater transparency, digital service provision and issues relating to the protection of human rights, such as privacy in the digital arena, have an impact on the way that constructive state-society relations are shaped as well as on the potential for non-governmental actors to cooperate among themselves.

Political and social discourse is increasingly taking place online. Digital applications have become a central location where positions are negotiated, discussions held and information disseminated. Citizens, civil society and state actors interact via social networks, in virtual discussion forums or within the scope of public services provided in digital form. Such approaches and formats, which enable new scope for action, networking and decision-making via information and communications technology (ICT) of state and non-state actors, are collectively referred to as digital participation. Human rights obligations prescribe a binding framework for all forms of digital participation – for example, they must be structured in a way that does not put users at risk.

Current data shows that in 2019, 58 per cent of men and 48 per cent of women worldwide had access to the internet, although the gender gap is frequently higher, especially in developing countries. At the same time, 97 per cent of the world's population live in regions with a mobile phone signal and 93 per cent in areas with access to the broadband network (International Telecommunications Union (ITU) 2019). This results in significant potential for the use of digital formats to

promote political participation: civil society organisations and initiatives use interactive websites or apps to win people over to their cause, to create digital spaces for the reporting of complaints or corruption cases, to enter into exchanges with citizens and, through this, to represent their views more credibly in political discourse. Organisations and individuals network via websites and social media to discuss political and social issues. The creation of a public sphere is now also taking place in the digital arena and includes also the less formal areas of civil society. Information from government actors reaches the general public in a short space of time, and political positions can be shared at the click of a mouse. By the same token, administrations and policy-makers quickly receive feedback on shared content. The available data allows social trends and moods to be identified at an early stage. Citizens vote online, sign petitions online, contact Members of Parliament via their websites or enter into dialogue with elected representatives and other citizens via social media. The use of digital applications as alternative channels for political and social discourse therefore offers the opportunity for more transparency, a stronger citizen focus and, ultimately, new forms of active democracy too. These applications thus complement the 'traditional' participation formats such as citizens' forums, citizens' panels, planning workshops or round tables.

However, digital participation also gives rise to new questions that advisory approaches must respond to. They include the right to the protection of privacy, data security and individual data sovereignty; questions surrounding the necessary digital skills and the digital infrastructure that is required to be able to participate in the online discourse; expanded and new forms of manipulation and propaganda as well as questions about respecting democratic rights and freedoms in the digital arena.

Significance for international cooperation

The sustainability goals and implementation principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development require that we accept shared responsibility for achieving the goals. Both state and non-state actors are called upon to make an active contribution to the achievement of the objectives. They also require alignment with the 'leave no-one behind' (LNOB) principle. Digital participation formats provide enormous potential for enhancing the impacts and activities of all stakeholders, facilitating interaction between the stakeholders, activating those knowledge holders who have had little involvement to date, and reaching a broader audience for achieving the objectives of the 2030 Agenda.

■ Digital participation in the context of constructive state-society relations

GIZ has also been promoting constructive relationships and interaction between state and non-state actors for many years. The strategy paper on constructive state-society relations (BMZ Strategy Paper 01/2010) aims to promote political participation and legitimate, transparent and accountable state structures. Discussion spaces between state and non-state actors arranged within the framework of this approach make a key contribution to improved state governance and the observance of democratic processes. The BMZ position paper 'Digital technologies for development' (2019) refers in particular to the relevance of digital media for political participation and the necessity to strengthen fundamental democratic rights such as freedom of speech and the right to privacy, including on the internet. Goal 4 – 'Good governance and human rights' – of the above BMZ position paper also refers in particular to new opportunities for participation of the population in our partner countries.

To date, the concept for promoting constructive state-society relations does not take into account the potential provided by digital participation. However, based on the three dimensions identified within the concept, the following potential for public participation in the digital age can be identified:

> Promoting civil society: Digital applications improve the organisation of civil society actors among themselves, their communication with their target groups and their internal organisational processes. They thereby increase their legitimacy as representatives of interests as well as allowing them to bundle interests more efficiently and effectively. The public audience that is reached and activated in this manner increases the potential for more effectively demanding and following up on the transparency and accountability of state actors. Thanks to digitalisation, civil society organisations also

have improved access to information that they require for their work, for example to socio-economic data and research, as well as information regarding their rights. Digital applications such as databases and communication structures with staff who work decentrally (in more remote regions) strengthen the effectiveness and efficiency of organisations. This places civil society organisations in a position to structurally design public participation more efficiently.

> Improving governance capacities: Digitalisation offers the potential to increase the transparency of governmental decisions and to disseminate information faster and more comprehensively. This also facilitates accountability towards the population. State actors have the opportunity to exchange ideas on service provision and political decision-making processes on a continuous basis; they can communicate more directly and promptly, allowing them to improve their citizen focus.

> Consolidating the legal and institutional framework:

The use of digital applications requires us to reflect on existing statutory regulations on participation rights and procedures. This can be taken as an opportunity to discuss the interplay and spaces for interaction between the state and civil society or citizens in policy-making, both online and offline. This also offers the potential to discuss social dialogue on those human rights that are relevant for the digital arena, such as freedom of opinion and freedom of information (laws). Data protection (laws) should also be part of the debate on legal frameworks for digital participation.

■ Digital participation and different participation levels

Interwoven with the three dimensions are different levels of participation, where analogue and digital participation formats can evolve. A general distinction is made between the following levels, which are arranged in ascending order according to intensity and the influence of the population: information; consultation; cooperation (with a possible progression to co-creation). The levels enable an assessment of the degree of participation that has been achieved or a conscious design and planning for a certain degree of participation. Digital applications (e.g. interactive websites, apps) can be used to achieve or shape these participation levels.

■ Digital participation formats give rise to new questions and challenges.

To date, a systematic reflection on the use of digital approaches for the promotion of constructive state-society relations, particularly with a view to opportunities for digital

participation, is still pending. The same applies to challenges regarding the design of digital participation formats. Using digital applications for participation processes results in new or different challenges and dilemmas that need to be monitored. While it is true that digital media and participation formats can generally reach a larger target group than analogue formats, there is a risk that certain groups of individuals will still or once again be excluded from participation processes. This applies in particular to people without access to the internet, women and girls, illiterate persons, and individuals who do not have adequate digital literacy. Particularly in rural areas and poverty-stricken regions or urban districts, digital solutions frequently run contrary to the 'leave no-one behind' principle. Furthermore, although improved state transparency and more diverse communication channels of non-state actors improve the information basis for discourse between state and non-state actors, this can also result in information overload, which in turn may lead to information and data misuse and misinformation if it is not correctly categorised and assessed.

Current observations also show that it is still difficult to initiate online genuine political debate that goes beyond a simple exchange of information and positions. Common reasons for this are the lack of personal contact with participants in the discussion, lack of moderation, or concerns regarding the protection of privacy. The risk that state or non-state actors could tamper with information gains a new meaning in light of online offerings. For example, images and videos can be tampered with using certain software, and bots influence the forming of opinions on social media. Depending on the context, there is a risk of the government abusing digital participation processes, for instance in terms of influencing the controlled forming of opinions, the digital monitoring of civil society groups and individuals or the generation of data about specific population groups. The design and implementation of these processes must therefore always be viewed against the background of the prevailing participation culture and practice within the partner country.

For these reasons, this paper develops positions that provide guidance for the use of digital participation formats in the context of promoting political participation and that respond to the aforementioned dilemmas. The positions are based on the Principles for Digital Development.

Our position

■ **Digital (participation) approaches unfold their potential when combined with analogue participation concepts.**

We focus on a comprehensive participation strategy as the basis for selecting and designing specific participation formats

(either analogue or digital). Such a strategy defines the actual purpose of the participation process (e.g. level of participation: information, consultation, cooperation), defines process steps, analyses the target group(s), provides hints on suitable channels to get the target group(s) involved and, consequently, presents suitable participation formats. Here, digital participation formats should be viewed as part of the methodological (and technical) tool kit, which a participation strategy can use alongside 'traditional' formats (e.g. town hall meeting). In most cases, a participation strategy weaves together very different formats – depending on the process step and target group(s). The overarching effectiveness of a participation strategy therefore lies in the targeted interweaving of the formats – known as blended participation. This ensures inclusive implementation. In keeping with the digital principle of 'understanding your local ecosystem', for every participation process we start with a context-specific consideration which includes factors such as the utilisation rates of various digital applications as well as the risk of further excluding certain population groups.

Based on this, we define and formulate the objectives of using various different participation formats (digital and analogue). The participation strategy also maps how the results of individual formats are integrated into further process steps in each case. When designing participation processes during participatory budgeting, this could look as follows: the results from initial web-based brainstorming are discussed in an on-site workshop format with interested citizens. An initial preselection is made. These results can in turn be put up for further discussion and voting on a digital participation platform. The steps through to the final idea(s), for which funds from the budget are to be provided for implementation, can also take place in an interweaving of different participation formats.

■ **User-focused approaches in the designing of digital participation formats increase their acceptance and inclusiveness.**

We ensure that the design of digital participation formats is geared to the actual user realities in the partner countries and is therefore inclusive. In concrete terms, this means that the technical functions of the digital solutions selected in each case acknowledge the available digital literacy and specific utilisation preferences of the population.

To guarantee this, we develop an iterative process for designing the digital participation mechanism, based on the digital principle 'design with the user'. By involving the target group(s) in designing the selected mechanism, we increase acceptance, break down potential mistrust and, over the long term, ensure greater utilisation. We also ensure that state

actors are in a position to use the application and enter into constructive dialogue with the target groups. This ensures that the digital skills of the people involved are taken into consideration and strengthened.

The information gathered through direct engagement with the target group(s) is used in the design, testing and further development of the proposed digital solution – until a digital participation format is created that is easy to use and takes into account the specific context, culture, language and user behaviour of the population. In this way, we avoid digital solutions that are not used due to a lack of user-friendliness and that potentially reduce the basis of trust between the population and, for instance, state actors. We take particular care to ensure that marginalised groups who are at risk of being further excluded through advancing digitalisation are taken into account in these design processes. When advising civil society organisations on improved exchange with the target group, this could be structured as follows: we work together with representatives of the target group and the civil society organisations on a design process in which potential digital solutions are developed, tested, further developed or rejected in order to achieve the set objective. This activity is technology-neutral. Only during the course of this joint process is a decision made regarding whether the improved exchange should take place via text messaging channels, an app-based chatbot or, perhaps, existing social media or whether a digital solution is ultimately, in fact, not suitable for achieving the set objective.

■ **Data-minimising digital participation formats ensure the protection of personal rights.**

We ensure that the developed digital participation formats allow straightforward participation that gives the population the opportunity to make an individual decision on the personal data that is transmitted via the respective digital solution. Here, we follow the GIZ Responsible Data Guidelines, which represent an operationalisation of the digital principle ‘privacy and security’. Applying the aforementioned guidelines, we consider the potential risk of abuse by involved or other actors. In fragile contexts in particular, we draw up a privacy impact assessment.

We advise our partners on how this must be designed in specific application cases and contexts and work together to develop a process that ensures the informed consent of the population to data transfer. This includes disclosure of the type and purpose of the project and the collected data, the expected benefits, reasonably foreseeable risks, possibilities for non-participation, procedures for ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and the users’ rights in connection with the use of their data. At the same time, we make sure that this information is easy to understand in the users’ specific

context. The digital participation solution must provide the option to obtain answers to questions regarding the protection of personal data.

To increase knowledge about privacy protection in the digital sphere, we strengthen the capacities of state as well as non-state actors. To this end, we analyse existing national framework conditions and, in the event of gaps, consider the possible risks against the background of European standards. We proactively position data-protection-related aspects in the design and implementation of digital participation mechanisms, in order to strengthen all participants’ trust in the procedure.

■ **Strengthening state capacities ensures responsiveness and the capacity to absorb the results of digital participation processes.**

When advising our partners, we ensure that the respective addressee of digital participation mechanisms has the necessary capacities to respond to them. While we strengthen non-state and user capacities to participate in processes, we also ensure that state actors have the necessary technical and communicative capability to respond in a suitable manner and to include the results in the political process. We advise our partners on designing and implementing the necessary change process. We focus specifically on strengthening the digital literacy of state partners. Often this means supporting partners in managing dashboards – the interface of a software programme that provides an overview of citizens’ feedback, information or ideas and presents the status quo regarding individual messages as well as necessary actions.

Experience and practice of implementation too often shows that the lack of responsiveness, for example due to long processing times or insufficient reporting on the interim statuses of the participation process, leads to frustration and mistrust among the population. This is a potential source of conflict. We advise our partners on how to ensure responsiveness in institutional, technical and communicative terms.

■ **Digital participation formats require a trained moderator to enable constructive dialogue between participants.**

We ensure that the interaction and communication within the scope of digital participation opportunities do not negatively impact the personal rights of individuals. To this end, we advise our partners on designing and implementing context-dependent communicative rules for interaction. We specify standards (‘netiquette’) that are presented transparently to all users in simple language. For digital formats in which users

comment or enter into discussions directly, we advise our partners on integrating moderators into the participation concept. The moderators are being made identifiable as such and ensure that inappropriate behaviour or communication between participants is prevented.

The presence of an active moderator also ensures that the purpose of participation pursues the desired results and objective. At the same time, this helps dismantle any reservations and mistrust that people may have, particularly from those who have had negative experiences with social media, such as exclusion, defamation and potentially verbal attacks on often marginalised groups. We always bear in mind the risk of exposing individuals and groups and, where necessary, develop extensive mitigation measures as well. This is important above all for digital participation formats that involve the submission and discussion of ideas. The presence of a moderator must give the participants the assurance that their idea, for example for the participatory budget or in idea-finding processes on the design of public spaces, will be further developed in a constructive discussion.

■ **Digital participation formats offer the potential to improve the feedback loop on participation processes/procedures.**

In many cases, the weak points in the implementation of participation processes are a result of the lack of transparency regarding how the results will be used further. This has a negative effect on the population's willingness with regard to participation. Digital participation mechanisms allow quick and easy publication of the documentation of specific procedures. It is also possible to create transparency regarding how the results and recommendations of the participation procedure have been used and how they have influenced further policy-making and implementation. Digital participation mechanisms can therefore represent a form of public participation record. For instance, in the case of interactive websites, a specific section containing results can take on this role. Other options include notification via text message or app-based chat groups about the latest developments or next steps in certain processes.

We advise our partners on implementing this potential as an integral component of their participation strategy. At the same time, we pay attention to how state actors in this process maintain the power to make decisions regarding the use of the results through clear communication and, at the same time, strengthen the acceptance of the process.

Experiences

■ **AU DataCipation project**

The project for 'Citizens engagement and innovative data use for Africa's development (DataCipation)' advises the African Union (AU) on establishing an interactive information platform to improve the dialogue between citizens and political representatives of the AU and its member states. Under the keyword 'listening', the objective is to promote the direct exchange of opinions using various different formats (e.g. social networks, blogs, live chats, discussion forums, innovative 'mapping' technologies). This makes the African Union's actions more transparent and increases its reporting and accountability obligations. Further participation opportunities are to be supported through open innovation and crowd sourcing functions (citizens develop their own ideas, discuss them online and incorporate them into political processes). This greater interaction also increases the pressure on the AU to provide evidence for information through arguments and data and to present developments in an understandable way. At a higher level, this supports evidence-based policy-making. The 'interactive information platform' encourages the cooperation of citizens across national borders. The platform is supplemented with (physical) co-creation formats in which participants develop innovative solutions, for example for e-governance and e-participation.

■ **Inclusive violence prevention in South Africa**

In South Africa, GIZ supported the city of Johannesburg with making public spaces safer as part of the 'Inclusive Violence and Crime Prevention' programme. Digital applications and participation processes play a key role here. Prior to this, young people in particular had been largely ignored as active members of society who could help prevent violence and crime. This was changed by means of a blended participation approach that intertwined digital and analogue methods. Together with the city of Johannesburg, GIZ worked to regenerate the End Street North Park with involvement from local residents and park users. This took place using both analogue methods such as regular exchange forums between the population and city representatives to discuss ideas for redesigning the park as well as public events in the park (e.g. sports courses, story hours). Another component was the use of the computer game Minecraft to redesign the park virtually. Using photos, construction plans and digital maps, the park was reconstructed in virtual form as a Minecraft landscape, giving participants the opportunity to use the software to express their own ideas for the End Street North Park in Minecraft worlds which they had created themselves. The outcomes were presented to the landscape architect

commissioned for the project, who fed them into his detailed plans.

Innovations

The two GIZ projects, 'Sustainable Urban Development – Smart Cities' in India, and the urban development project in Ecuador, are taking an innovative route to make urban development processes more easily understandable and citizen-oriented. They are cooperating with HafenCity University Hamburg (HCU) to develop interactive touchtables. These tables are mobile participation stations that integrate digital elements. They visualise all kinds of city data – everything from planning information to data regarding infrastructure systems – and can present various development scenarios. Citizens receive access to issues of evidence-based planning in a simple and playful way. The aim of the initiative is to demonstrate various application possibilities through two pilot projects in Ecuador and India. The tables are being developed as an open source hardware and software solution to ensure that they can be built, adapted and used in other contexts.

Published by:
Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

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GIZ is responsible for the content of this publication.

Eschborn 2020