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E-Governance in Ireland: New Technologies, Local Government and Civic Participation

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Governance, Partnership and Participation

Civic participation, glossed as individuals identifying themselves as citizens with a duty to act for the 'public good', seems to be in decline. This decline, particularly when expressed as decreased political participation, and evidenced by reduced voter turnouts and a general alienation from government (Blondel, Sinnott et al. 1998; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996), form part of the 'democratic deficit' that has been on the agenda of many governments in recent years. It has often also been linked with a decline stocks of social trust, norms, and networks which people can draw on to solve common problems, commonly known as 'social capital' (Putnam, Leonardi et al. 1993; Putnam 2000)

Many governments have addressed this decline by attempting to increase public involvement in the formulation of government policy and the provision of services. This policy shift has been described as an increased focus on 'governance' rather than government (see Pierre 2000 for a general discussion of governance). Participation in policy formation by non-government interests has often involved varying kinds of organisations: economic interest groups (e.g., trade unions, employers, agricultural groups), social interest groups (minority ethnic or religious groups, disabled, homeless, elderly) or local community groups. These organisations now find their involvement in the policy process has been legitimised. Such organisations often describe themselves as part of the political process but not party political: they articulate broad political issues while remaining outside the formal electoral system.

In Ireland, this enhanced involved as often been formalised as 'social partnership' [for discussion of this, see chapter xxx in this book]. Initially, partnership in Ireland focused on economic policies and involved trade unions and employers. More

recently, social partnership has involved community and voluntary groups and has extended to social as well as economic policy formation.

In any representative democracy, citizens elect others to articulate their concerns. In partnership, the range of groups and organisations increases and the range of concerns articulated widens. The number and range of citizens whose interests are represented should also increase. However, despite the widening of representation, there remain individuals whose concerns remain unrepresented in this expanded arena of policy discussion. Many reasons may explain lack of participation. There may be a lack of information about the policy decisions being made or a lack of information about how to have an input into such decisions. Citizens may distrust the impartiality and fairness of those making decisions, so that citizens do not believe their interventions would be effective.

A common explanation is that people are content with the existing system, and they see no reason for greater participation. They are happy, as citizens, to hold the elected representatives accountable at election time, and do not want to directly participation in policy formation. This is the 'free rider syndrome' (Olson 1965): citizens know that, even without their intervention or participation, appropriate decisions will be made and so they choose not to 'waste' their precious resources of time and effort. Civil apathy may be cost-effective for individuals; while outcomes could be better, citizens get 'good enough' governance.

This latter explanation, however, can only be partially accurate. Grassroots protest groups often develop and, in Ireland, the rise of single-issue political candidates who campaign on community issues (e.g., hospitals, aid for disabled children, waste-management, local employment, refuse charges) indicate that, for many people, policy outcomes are sometimes not 'good enough'. However, while single-issue flash points

(such as bin charges) mobilise citizens to organise into ad-hoc groups which campaign and protest, these groups tend to disband once the issues is resolved or postponed. This is clear evidence of an interest in policy participation, even if there are inadequate structures to facilitate that participation.

New technologies have often been expected to provide a means for greater participation. Many governments, including European Union members states and the EU itself, have sought to use new information and communications technologies to increase public participation in dialogue, discussion and consultation. These projects have been described as 'eparticipation' or 'einclusion', and have included online forums, virtual discussion rooms, electronic polls and electronic voting. Reviews of these projects have indicated some success, but they remain pilot projects (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2003). There has been little evidence of new technologies emerging that encourage significant numbers of citizens to participate in policy formation. For example, while EU policies have been clear and detailed about improving governmental efficiency and service delivery through technology, the same can not be said of electronic governance or addressing the democratic deficit by improving public participation in the making of policy. A recent European Union policy document, "The Role of eGovernment for Europe's Future"(Commission of the European Communities 2003), could only propose that all eGovernment strategies should "promote … online democratic participation".

Ireland and electoral clientelism

New technologies can have an impact on public participation and the wider political system, and Ireland provides a interesting example of this. Irish politics has been shaped by a lack of administrative information and accountability, linked with a

strong tradition of informal social and political action, that has been characteristic of Ireland since its independence. Ever since Chubb (1963) described politicians as local men who looked after their constituent's interests by "going about persecuting civil servants", Irish politics has been understood in terms of electoral clientelism. Chubb suggested that the Irish politician's primary task was to mediate between his local constituents and the state's administrative apparatus. Voters wanted state services, and politicians helped or appeared to help people obtain those services. Irish citizens have believed that, in order to obtain a government benefit or service, politicians had to intercede on the citizen's behalf. Citizens, it was thought, did not receive state benefits as their right; they received benefits as personal favours granted by powerful and beneficent politicians as a reward for political support. The tacit exchange of political support for special personal preference has been a cornerstone of Irish politics since independence (Komito and Gallagher 1999).

Various factors which have promoted and maintained political clientelism have been suggested, but lack of administrative information and accountability, distrust of the impartiality of the civil service, lack of confidence in the efficacy of interventions, and a monopoly by politicians on knowledge of the bureaucratic process are all central to clientelism (Komito 1992, 1989a, 1984).[1] The informal networks of clientelism are exclusionary and foster the private use of public resources for personal gain (Clapham 1982). Such clientelist networks would now be seen as examples of

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[1] Other factors include strong party loyalty on the part of voters, the electoral system of single transferable votes and multi-seat constituencies, and cultural traditions developed during colonial domination (sometimes described as a 'dependency culture').

negative 'bonding' social capital (Putnam 2000), and government policies would encourage more open public participation.

For many years, state structures helped maintain the market for electoral clientelism. Bureaucratic procedures were slow and inefficient, so it was difficult for citizens to obtain information about their entitlements, redress in the event of incorrect decisions, or proof that their case was being fairly decided. In the 1960's and 70's, the degree of state intervention in Ireland increased, and citizens' dependence on state assistance grew. Growth in demand led to delays in providing assistance, but, while civil servants responded slowly, if at all, to voters, they responded quickly to politicians who intervened on behalf of voters. This increased the demand for clientelist exchanges. Civil servants also provided little public information about the services or entitlements that were increasingly important for citizens, which increased the value of the information which politicians were able to dispense (Komito 1984).

These are primarily information issues, and were altered by the introduction of information systems in the civil service in the 1990's. The justification for IT investment was to improve the efficiency of service provision (see Pye 1992 for a more detailed discussion), and indeed the speed of processing cases increased.

Although information and communications technologies (ICTs) often do not alter organisational practices (Kling 1996), in this case, new information systems altered the market conditions for clientelist exchanges. Administrative delays had previously sustained the market for politicians to 'sell' their ability to provide information about the status of applications (Komito 1989a). The introduction of office information systems speeded the processing of cases and made it easier for citizens to directly inquire about cases, so the 'market value' of political interventions lessened. Furthermore, direct queries by citizens previously produced either no answer or an

answer only very slowly, because it was so costly to assemble the information; office information systems now enabled easier monitoring of cases by citizens (Komito 1998). Finally, Freedom of Information legislation has required that procedures and criteria for decisions be recorded, and available to the general public (Government of Ireland 1997); often, this has been done by making such information available via the Internet.

With increased accountability and access, citizens found they could monitor and influence the administrative processes of the state to a greater extent than previously possible. This has altered the clientelist 'market' – that is, the demand for politicians' special access, and thus the 'charge' which politicians can demand for their service and the 'price' which citizens are willing to pay for the service. Because citizens have alternative means of accessing information, the need for politician's access to information about services and processes has diminished considerably. A survey in the 1970s showed that 17 of Dublin respondents had contacted a politician at some point. Another survey in 1991 showed that 24 percent of all citizens and 21 percent of Dublin residents had contacted politicians in the previous year (Komito 1992, 1989b). In contrast, a recent study of social values and social capital found that the figure had dropped to 14 percent of all respondents and 13% of Dublin respondents who had contacted a politician in the previous year (National Economic and Social Forum 2003).

A survey of 'political culture' in the late 1960s showed a strong preference for contacting politicians rather then officials or local community figures (Raven and Whelan 1976). In contrast, the number who had contacted an official or community representative was 10.7% for all respondents and 13% for Dublin respondents (National Economic and Social Forum 2003). Thus, not only has the level of contact

with politicians decreased, but the relative importance of politicians as compared with other figures has also decreased. This marks a significant shift away from clientelist political exchanges in Ireland.

With a decrease in the electoral value of clientelist exchanges, politicians are finding other means of attracting marginal voters. The 1990's saw the growth of policy oriented political parties (left-wing, right-wing, nationalist, and environmental), and, more recently, the growth of community candidates who articulate the concern of citizens in a particular locality, including issues such as increased development investment in rural areas of Ireland, investment in local medical services, and so on (Murphy 2005). The growth of 'policy' politics and single-issue community candidates is not solely the result of new technologies decreasing politician's monopoly over information, but the success of these parties and candidates is an indication that the political market has changed, and politicians can now 'sell' themselves to the electorate through policy actions.

This does not mean that individual clientelist networks are irrelevant; politicians report that voters still expect politicians to be available, but that such activities are now one of many resources in the politician's portfolio, and by no means the most important. While politicians would still report that electoral success requires maintaining a local presence, the abolition of the dual mandate in 2003 has meant that TDs can no longer sit on County and City Councils. They must, increasingly rely on local councillors to look after individual citizens, and are more likely to involve

themselves only when local interest groups (e.g., resident's associations, school committees) are active.[2]

This move from individual constituents' queries has also been linked to an increased number and activity of Dail committees that exercise oversight over government departments. These committees provide national politicians with a greater role as mediator between interest groups and the state rather than individuals and the state (Gallagher 2005). Whether on local or national issues, national politicians are now more likely to mediate between groups and the state, rather than individuals and the state.

It is difficult to prove that new technologies have been the major reason for this shift towards a system of more open public policy decisions and resource allocation (in contrast to the use of public resources for individual personal gain), but it has clearly been significant.[3] The clientelist exchange of individual political support for state benefit is far less central as a basis for the structure of Irish politics, and so new technologies have contributed to a significant transformation in Irish politics.

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[2] The exclusion of TDs from local authorities has not been without its problems. TDs recently complained that "city and county managers no longer respond to them, access to files has been curbed, while constituency representations are being ignored." (Irish Times, 29 July 2006: 7). This emphasises the need for TDs to access new sources of power and publicity.

[3] New technologies have had indirect, as well as direct, consequences. For instance, Freedom of Information legislation has provided for more open and transparent government decisions, but the move from paper to electronic documents that has reduced the cost of Freedom of Information transactions and so enabled more information to come into the public domain.

New technologies and policy networks

Unfortunately, the evidence that new technologies encourage greater political participation in policy, in Ireland or elsewhere, is less apparent. One of the earliest experiments in the use of technologies to enhance public participation at local level was in Santa Monica in 1989 (Docter and Dutton 1998), and it was one of a number of experiments in community building using new technologies (Tsagarousianou, Tambini et al. 1998). In many of these studies only a small percentage of the local population used the technology, so it has been difficult to make extrapolations about technology, community and participation. Since then, however, there have been studies of communities in which a majority of residents use new technologies (Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002; Huysman, Wenger et al. 2003).

A community of special relevance for this discussion is Blacksburg, Virginia in the United States. This community was the recipient of significant technology investment in the mid-1990s, and by 2001 it was a 'wired community': over 75 percent of local businesses had their own web sites, over 80 percent of residents had internet access (which included discussion lists), and over 120 non-profit organisations subscribed to a bundle of internet services that included information sharing software (Kavanaugh and Patterson 2002). Did the prevalence of these technologies encourage greater community participation as well as political participation? While new technologies increased the levels of participation amongst those who were already active, and made their actions more effective, the evidence is less clear that new technologies led to new people becoming involved (Kavanaugh and Patterson 2002). Increased technology usage over three years did not lead to increased community involvement,

as measured by memberships in formal voluntary organisations or by amount of activity in these organisations.[4] On the contrary, research suggests that the people who use new technologies for policy issues tend to be people who are already activists -- those who already 'network' (or, in social capital parlance, have bridging links based on weak or thin network ties) use new technologies to network more effectively (Kavanaugh, Reese et al. 2003; Agre 2002).

The effective use of new technologies by voluntary groups is evident throughout the world; social movements use new technologies to organise internally and challenge existing government policies and even government structures (see Della Porta and Diani 1999; Melucci 1996 for a discussion of social movements). Anti-globalisation protests, usually timed to coincide with meetings of either the World Trade Organisation or the G7 group of nations, are obvious examples of such movements (for a review of cases, see Kahn and Kellner 2004; Johnson and Bimber 2004). These groups, however ephemeral, have 'real space' manifestations in concrete political actions, which disrupt activities and claim headlines, and mobilize people across nations (see Surman and Reilly 2003).However, the aim in a participative process is to engage citizens in an on-going process of dialogue, rather than a series of protests which tend not to involve either protest groups or governments in dialogue. It has been suggested that three general modes of civic participation in policy formation can be identified: information, consultation, participation (see Macintosh 2004;

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[4] This assumes, of course, that social capital is measurable by memberships in voluntary associations or the level of participation in voluntary associations, which is debatable. The main advantage of memberships in voluntary associations is that they can be relatively easily measured by surveys (Newton 1999).

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2003 for a discussion of this tripartite distinction). At the most minimal level, technology can be used by governments to enable one-way information flows. In this mode, new technologies may be used as a mass media communication channel, similar to newspapers, pamphlets, radio or television, or narrowly directed at particular individuals or groups, but there is no scope for interaction. For example, local authorities and national government departments make information available, via web pages, electronic newsletters or even electronic mail, on a range of government activities. Information is made available, as governments choose, on issues that governments choose, in the format that governments choose.

A more interactive mode would be consultation, in which governments engage citizens, seeking their opinions on specific issues. This consultation can take place via electronic discussion lists, often web based. These forums, organised around policy issues, encourage citizens to indicate the extent to which participants agree with the proposals and why, perhaps enabling citizens to suggest alternatives. In the consultation processes, the issues are formulated by policy-makers, and citizens are restricted to responding to pre-selected issues, often in a predetermined manner. This is the electronic equivalent of a survey, and mechanisms include e-petitions and e-referenda, as well as developing online 'communities of interest' in which interested or selected citizens participate in structured discussions. Governments still determine the issues and the rules. An example of popular, rather than official, consultation is the increasing number of telephone polls, in which radio or television listeners respond to a simple yes/no question by phoning or texting the appropriate number.

This can provide a large number of responses in a very short time; in Ireland, some have had participation rates of over ten thousand phone calls.[5]

At the most inclusive level would be participation, in which citizens actively engage in defining issues, structuring the consultation process, and having a clear impact on final policy outcomes. This tripartite distinction is sometimes 'fuzzy' at the edges, as is any distinction between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' structures for policy participation.

There are now many examples of one-way information flows in Ireland. Some information has to be available so that services can be delivered online (e.g., tax rules are made available to encourage people and companies to file tax returns online), while other information has resulted from the Irish government's desire for Open Government and its need to conform to Freedom of Information legislation. Information made available this way can be used by local groups to mobilize citizens and become the basis for political action. In a recent case, government attempts to nominate a retired judge to the European Investment Bank had to be withdrawn. The Irish government acted as though the nomination had already gone through but, when it activists discovered that, according to European documentation, the nomination still had to be approved, public opinion forced the government to rescind its nomination

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[5] The participants may be unrepresentative due to self-selection and are still only be a small percentage of the total population of over three and a half million people, but a sample size of ten thousand is still likely to have predictive value. For instance, in April 2002, 72 per cent of the 8,430 participants were dissatisfied with the bishops' statement on clerical child sex abuse (Irish Times, April 10, 2002). In October 2003, three out of four of 16,000 particpants agreed that residents should pay to have rubbish collected, which was during a high visibility protest over such charges (Sunday Independent, October 19, 2003).

(O'Toole 2000). At the community level, residents' groups will scan web lists of planning applications and then make submissions to influence planning decisions and, if necessary, organise protests and neighbourhood meetings. Official information dissemination can be the basis for extra-governmental participation by social movements and interest groups.

Sometimes, individuals and interest groups combine a number of different technologies in ways that become vehicles for consultation, whether local authorities or national governments intend this or not. Politicians receive queries from citizens via email, which they often act on and then inform citizens, either individually or collectively via an electronic newsletter, of the policy response. More significantly, residents and community groups use technology to organise their own activities and coordinate representations to politicians and officials. Officials now receive 'round robin' emails – a message will have been distributed to members of a residents' group or sports club and each will then send the message to local officials. It is clear to officials that the message has simply been reproduced, but, for officials, it is a straw poll of those who feel strongly enough about an issue to engage in some level of policy discussion, and is taken seriously as an indication of community opinion.

In 2003, there was a controversy regarding a large residential plan for Adamstown in South County Dublin (http://www.sdublincoco.ie/) which attracted significant local and national media attention. The controversy led to a substantial number of email messages to the County Council, as well as more traditional protests (individual letters, representations from residents' groups, politicians being lobbied, and so on). Although there was no electronic bulletin board to facilitate discussion of the issue, the concerns raised by these interventions were addressed and responded to in the form of a series of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) which were available on the

Council web site. Politicians and other interested parties consulted the information and conveyed that information back to residents via public meetings. One result was a dedicated web site (http://www.adamstown.ie/) on these issues. This ad-hoc interaction was 'consultation' in a limited fashion; the web site served only as a mechanism to explain and persuade. The council responded to questions that were raised and decided if the issue required action, but the local authority determined the issues about which it would seek citizen input, determined the scope of consultation, and reserved for itself the right to a final determination.

A similar strategy was followed by Meath County Council in 2005-6, with regard to a contentious plan for a motorway near an archaeological site. In response to concerns about the motorway, Meath County Council launched a dedicated web site (http://www.m3motorway.ie/) in 2005. The aim of the site was to persuade as well as inform, but any impact on policy was limited to the traditional avenues of politicians and interest groups. There was no mechanism by which citizens can contribute their opinions, or engage in an electronic dialogue with the local authority.

The Mobhaile project

Attempts to facilitate electronic discussions on local issues tend to have very low participation rates; participation in Dublin city's site (http://www.dublin.ie), for instance, is minimal (see also Arnold, Gibbs et al. 2003). However, there is no technological impediment to providing greater policy participation, even if community network experiments have not been encouraging. An obvious precondition of participation is that citizens need evidence that their participation can change policy outcomes, and evidence suggests that low participation rates are linked to a perception that participation has little impact (The Power Inquiry 2006). Rothman

(2003) points out that trust is rarely given unconditionally, especially to governments composed of unknown and unaccountable individuals.

The first step to earning that trust is to demonstrate that citizen input will have an impact of government. One solution is online consultation on specific projects which demonstrate that input on these issues has had an impact on policy deliberations. For instance, an e-consultation research project (http://www.e-consultation.org/), funded as part of North-South government initiatives in 2004, has encouraged participation and discussion of issues and agendas by citizens in organisations such as Waterways Ireland (http://www.waterwaysireland.org/). Eventually, this may create the necessary sense of trust, but it will be a long-term process, especially when the impact of citizen input on policy outputs may be very minor. The most significant problem with such an initiative, as with other similar initiatives (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2003) is that citizens need to be sufficiently engaged in policy processes to find and use the site. As with the Blacksburg project, the question remains, how to involve those who are not already involved?

A strategy by which such involvement could be engineered would be to use the improvements in administration and service provision resulting from e-government investments as a lever to encourage public participation. Trust could be earned, based on actual interactions that citizens have with particular agencies of the state. That trust, once gained, could be extended to other agencies of the state and transmuted into a social capital that leads to greater commitment to civil society. An increasing number of local authority services are available online (paying for refuse collection is one example), and there has been a consistent increase in the number of people availing of online services (Central Statistics Office 2006, 2003). Continual interactions with local authorities on the provision of services such as road

maintenance, lighting repair, public amenities such as parks, and so on could provide evidence that local authorities listen and respond to citizens. This lesson that citizens can exercise influence could be transposed to the policy arena, encouraging citizens to believe that they can also influence policy decisions.

Mobhaile is a project initiated in 2004 which provides an example of an information system that combines e-government and e-participation functions. As citizens use the system to access government services and benefits, they could also use the system to participate in policy formulation. It was developed by the Local Government Computer Services Board in conjunction with a number of local authorities in Ireland including South County Dublin, Westmeath, Tipperary North and South, Meath, and Mayo. The project name derives from an Irish term which roughly translates as 'my community' (http://www.mobhaile.ie) and provides a community interface for both government and community information.

The system can use information that exists on local authority information systems and make it available to the general public in an interactive format (e.g., planning applications, bin charges, availability of sports grounds). That information can be combined with links to other government service providers (e.g., Department of Health, Revenue Commission), as well as information about social and economic activities in a community.

Information about local services is accessed through a geographical interface, so that individuals access the information of relevance to their locality. It will be possible to connect to the site and obtain information only about those portions of services (e.g., garbage collection, bus routes, planning submissions) relevant to a local neighbourhood. Since only those that are relevant to the local area are presented, this has obvious benefits in fostering a sense of geographical community. Residents will

be able to exchange information about the services and issues of relevance to that locality, whether it is to tell each other when the street light will be fixed or whether the planning permission for a nearby development was approved.

The information system enables two-way information flow, so that a service fault can be reported (e.g., faulty street light or abandoned car) by locating it on a map. Such a service is obviously beneficial to the local authority, since it enables rapid notification of problems that need attention. More significant, though, is the enhanced accountability and participation it provides for citizens. The geographical input/output format is linked with an open-ended web form so that individuals can pinpoint a location on a digital map and then write a text that indicates a problem – whether that problem is a broken street light, abandoned car, blocked drain, or any other issue which requires attention. Citizens can receive evidence that their participation is effective because they receive feedback on the particular issues raised. Such a responsive system improves citizen's trust in, and increasing citizen's power over, the local authority system.

The web interface extends to 'community building' because it can also displays local social and economic services as well as government services. Some information is picked up automatically from the local authorities own information systems (e.g., business premises from local taxation lists), but business or voluntary groups can also register with the local authority. There are many benefits of being registered; in addition to location information, businesses and groups can contribute announcements or descriptions about their activities. A business can register the service it sells and provide information about that service, a church can provide information about church services, or a sports club can provide information about matches to be played. Once registered, groups have access to a targeted local audience, and can also be notified by

the local authority of issues that affect their particular locality. They can also use the service for internal organisational tasks (discussion board for members, email notifications about meetings, shared documents, and so on). All of this creates a local information portal in which the range of local community activities can be accessed. The portal functions as a local notice board combined with local town hall, encouraging the easy diffusion of salient information that is relevant to local residents. Crucially, the definition of 'salient' is only partially defined by outsiders, it is also defined by the local residents who contribute information.

Individuals will access the local Mobhaile site for specific service requests, but, once habituated to using the site, they can also use it for community participation and policy input. The project contains elements that encourage individual participation and the extension of that participation into ad-hoc community activity. For instance, members can write personal 'blogs' (online diaries); blogs are one of the easiest means of making personal opinions available to a wide audience currently available on the Internet. Community groups can use the system to enhance membership participation, but can also encourage participation by previously non-involved citizens.

The project moved from design to pilot stage throughout 2005-6, and many of the functions were slow to become available for citizens who wished to use Mobhaile. The political benefits will also be dependent, to some extent, on a parallel Irish government project for citizen electronic authentication (www.reach.ie), which will enable citizens to carry out a range of confidential transactions with government departments via the site. As with Mobhaile, progress on authentication systems for citizens has also been slow. For the moment, Mobhaile remains an encouraging, but not yet realized, vision of citizen participation.

Conclusion

The Mobhaile project provides an intriguing example of how individuals could be encouraged to become involved in policy formation. The operative word, however, is 'could'. Previous examples of local policy debates suggest that local authorities are not always willing to cede policy making to local residents. In interviews, officials in local authorities described themselves to be the guardians of the 'public interest', and believed that local activists were often not always representative of general community opinion.[6] Local activists may have vested interests, and decisions could be determined by those individuals who are most vociferous and best organised: decisions based on those who shouted loudest (as one local official commented, Komito 1985). Additionally, such activists come and go; it is the local authority who will be held accountable for the consequences of policy outcomes.

Even if the community, as a whole, votes on an issue, there is may still a balance to be struck between the 'common good' versus the 'not in my back yard' approaches to policy. When an issue mobilizes a large number of citizens, new technologies enable ad-hoc groups to organise effectively and quickly in order to exert pressure on local authorities. This 'swarming' effect is often very effective, and local authorities have to respond. The problem, from the local authority's perspective is that, once the issue has been resolved, the mobilized citizens often fade into the background as the ad-hoc groups lose coherence. For many officials, retaining the right to decide their response to community input is a legal necessity, as well as a moral necessity. It is a means of ensuring that the wider community is not excluded from participation by

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[6] This information comes from interviews conducted in 2004, and research conducted from 1978-1980 (Komito 1985).

unrepresentative activists, and that the public good is safeguarded.[7] However, the correct balance on these issues is not obvious, as continual problems with residential planning in Ireland shows (see, for instance, Komito 1983); officials are not always correct in their decisions; policy must involve balanced contributions from citizens and politicians as well as officials.

The issues of legal accountability and democratic representation must be addressed, however, there are means by which information systems can facilitate such problems. If local government will not (or can not) cede decision-making responsibility to ad-hoc individual and group inputs by local citizens, there are alternative solutions. Local authorities could formalize the procedures for policy input. For instance, when a local housing estate wishes to change its name, the authority conducts a plebiscite and will abide by the decision of a sufficient number of authenticated voters. The same can be done on a wider range of policy issues; citizens could authenticate their identity, via Mobhaile, and then the local authority could use the outcome as a valid expression of democratic decision making.

Even on those issues which the local authority feels they must retain final legal responsibility, the consultation process could at least be documented in a transparent manner. Policy input could be recorded, and the process by which that input is considered could be documented and available for inspection. If citizens had evidence that their views were seriously considered, and could see evidence that their views sometimes altered policy outcomes, then the demonstrable benefits of participation might provide sufficient incentive for further participation.

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[7] It should be noted the local officials (especially in the late 1970's and 80's) were often concerned with safeguarding the public good as much from politicians as from citizens.

Technological solutions to the problems of accountability, representation, and participation can be found, if there is sufficient commitment by local authorities. The Mobhaile project provides an example of information systems that can facilitate policy input from citizens normally excluded from policy input processes. It capitalises on the demonstrated affordances of new technologies, levering the use of new technologies to obtain government services to encourage initial participation. Such interaction demonstrates that the system is trustworthy and that citizens' interventions can be effective in service delivery, for a very low 'cost' for the citizen in either time or effort. If governments demonstrate responsiveness, then the effectiveness of interventions encourages further participation, thus creating a virtuous circle of ever greater participation.

Fundamental to this process, is local authorities listening to citizens and responding to issues that they raise in a meaningful way. If this happens, then in every interaction with the local authority, citizens learn that they can influence policy outcomes at local level. The current use of new technologies to present information, as with Adamstown and M3 developments previously mentioned, will not be sufficient to persuade citizens that electronic participation has a meaningful or measurable impact. If government policy seeks to encourage the formation of policy communities, then governments must be responsive to interventions and engage in a dialogue with individuals. The evidence remains to be provided that governments are willing to cede participation, or even meaningful consultation, to citizens. Without that evidence, the transformative potential of new technologies on governance will remain unrealized.

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