

PART III

Chapter 32

**Participation at the Municipal Level
in Italy: The Case of Bologna**

by

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Why would local government invest in inclusive policy making?

The inclusion or involvement of citizens in the decision-making process and in designing (and monitoring) service activities is increasingly mandatory if the quality of public policy is to be enhanced and the challenges of the information and knowledge society faced. The Municipality of Bologna is reshaping itself, moving from a mainly “hierarchical” and complex organisation to a more citizen-centered one. A “perspective shift” on the part of the public administration is underway from the delivery of services (e-government and distributive portals) to interaction and knowledge sharing, and from debate and dialogue to “listening”. The traditional arenas of representative democracy are complying with their own institutional requirements and are equipping themselves with the means to allow for more direct citizen intervention and inclusion. This marks a quantum leap compared to the past. The aims are mainly to:

- Allow more direct citizen participation in consultation and decision-making processes.
- Renew citizens’ interest in areas of dwindling political participation.
- Build a more solid consensus around the choices planned.
- Foster an ongoing dialogue to ensure balanced power and voices.
- Promote transparency in the public administration.
- Provide more direct and equal access to information, knowledge and services.
- Reduce discretionary administrative practices.
- Reduce the various “divides” and gaps in order to empower citizens’ status and competences.
- Improve the quality of life and the economy.
- Inject social knowledge/capital into the public administration and counter the natural entropy of such complex and vertical organisations.

The commitment of Local Public Bodies is crucial to promoting inclusion, co-operation and shared visions of the future with citizens, thereby creating the conditions for a real “democracy of proximity” based on the widening and deepening of the “public sphere”. Bologna aims to cultivate proactive citizens, so the Municipality is investing in citizenship and e-Citizenship at all levels. The Municipality has always been open to the use of ICTs both in the reengineering back office activities, as well as in citizen and community relations. Iperbole – Bologna’s free civic network and community portal (with 500 000 hits daily) – was set up in January 1995 as a “telematic bridge” between the community and the city in order to build an “information and knowledge society at the local level” (www.comune.bologna.it, www.iperbole.bologna.it). Bologna was the first public provider in Italy, and the second in Europe after Amsterdam. Since 2006, Iperbole wireless has been created as an experimental service for the community. It provides citizens and also students of Bologna University with free broadband Wi-Fi access in public (outdoor and indoor) places within the area of the city centre of Bologna. Because reducing the digital divide is an important issue, Bologna strongly supports projects that aim to reduce the emergence of a two-tiered e-community, where

electronic means could become another source of marginalisation and social injustice instead of being an instrument of cultural growth and emancipation.

An important requirement for the e-society is the chance for every citizen, both in professional and non-professional environments, to be able to use web resources intensively and in a critical, creative and productive way. The aim is to create a virtual environment in which you can learn the rules and to build a community where the least experienced can share opportunities with the more experienced. For these reasons, the Municipality has started to experiment with e-participation and mobile/wireless free connections, which improve the choices for the potential users. This project will implement and improve the interactions between citizens and the public administration, ensuring easy access to a wide range of facilities, paying attention to privacy policies. The Iperbole 2.0 project, an experimental platform allowing the implementation of new communication flows through the use of 2.0 tools (My Iperbole – www.comune.bologna.it/lamiaiperbole) has very recently been launched. The main features of the project are: interactivity, customisation and open source. Iperbole 2.0 is an open platform of services, multi-channel and easy to use. Everyone can customise the layout of the portal, choosing which contents to be displayed, adding links or RSS feeds.

Which tools, when and for whom?

The Municipality of Bologna is exploiting a wide range of tools to build negotiated consensus in the wider community around the choices planned in decision-making processes. Services, structures and procedures have to be available to citizens both in traditional and innovative ways in order to foster a constant dialogue and voices that are “balanced in power”.

The objective is to involve citizens at all stages of the decision-making process so as to secure real interest and commitment. The risk is to engage citizens too late and to create a sense of meaningless participation. In order to generate consensus around participation processes, the first step is to have clear rules about the role of citizens and administrators, aims and outcomes of the processes.

The Municipality is also conducting so-called “laboratories of participation” on various topics and projects, mainly environment and urban planning, carried on both in meetings/working groups and on line platforms to determine at what level people wish to participate. So far, it seems that it is more suitable and easier to manage for participation processes at the district level. People feel the need to take care of their neighbourhoods, and they have the right skills and the experience to talk about that and also they commit themselves quite easily at that level. This generates a useful exchange of knowledge, ideas and proposals with the administration.

As technologies are evolving and changing, the City of Bologna has continuously developed new online services for citizens, keeping up-to-date with the new opportunities offered by the digital convergence of ICT. Over the coming years, the multi-channel communication strategy is intended to progressively offer the possibility and the opportunity to communicate and interact with citizens at any time and anywhere in a complementary way, using different channels (also the “traditional” ones) addressed to different targets, in different moments and contexts. One of the priorities of the communication strategy is the promotion of a new “electronic citizenship” for all, in order to spread information and knowledge of the new rights in the virtual sphere and make “netizens” aware of the potential of ICT, as well as support them in their interactions with and within these new channels.

The instruments to get citizens involved may vary from the collection of signatures to start popular initiatives, questionnaires, complaint channels or face-to-face meetings to electronic tools of e-Democracy (newsletters, polls, on line forums). The multi-channel and mobile approach (seamless communication) seems to be the most fruitful and easy for the citizens/users.

Strengths and weaknesses of online tools

Traditional channels for participation are still the leading instruments for civic engagement today since it is easier to involve citizens, especially those people who cannot or do not want to access digital media. The digital culture is not so widespread, so people place greater trust in “live” face-to-face events, even if it is very difficult to encourage people to devote their time to participating. However, digital communications media could be new enabling factors for wider participative policy-making processes, since they make it easier (in terms of time, space, place, setting) for people to participate, thus widening the range of possibilities for participation (multi-channel interactions and platforms) and attracting new target populations (young people, for example).

Based on our experience, the main weak points to be tackled are:

- Involvement in e-participation on the political side.
- Commitment by administrators at every level of government, office and facility.
- Sustainability models for e-governance and e-democracy services.
- New skills and profiles within the administration.
- More efforts to simplify language and eliminate “jargon”.
- Gender issues taken into account.

The main strengths on which to build are:

- Mediation/moderation by professionals.
- Availability of all the documents and information related to topics under discussion.
- Involvement of all kinds of local “social actors” and stakeholders.
- New communication and production models for ICT applications in collaboration with women’s associations (e.g. on language, models and gender issues).
- Policies and actions in favour of “e-citizenship inclusion” of new citizens (e.g. immigrants) and their communities.
- Network of free access points (with on-site assistance) for disabled people.
- Free wireless access and connections in public places (indoor and outdoor).
- Open source and open contents/formats approach.

Overcoming internal and external barriers

The City of Bologna aims at promoting the real participation of those social groups at risk of exclusion, improving their quality of life and helping them to overcome every kind of barrier. In particular related to:

- **Disability:** Special measures adopted to support people with specific disabilities (sensory, motor or cognitive impairments) using the human and technological resources best suited to the physical context in which these citizens live and relate socially. In Bologna, for example, we have set up specific public access points to Internet for disabled people and we pay attention to the accessibility and usability criteria and rules in implementing e-services and the Iperbole website.

- **Social gap:** Programmes exist for people at risk of social exclusion. In particular districts, support and help with policies and services are provided to vulnerable populations, for example, immigrants and elderly people.
- **Gender divide:** Innovative projects are fostered in co-operation with the network of gender associations to develop new communication and production models reflecting language, models/formats and gender issues. Since 1995, the Iperbole Civic Network activities and services have played a key role in empowering women in accessing and using ICTs. Due to this “public” engagement in Bologna, the “gender divide” is less strong than in other parts of Italy. In fact, 50% of the users of the public Internet points set up by the Municipality are women, and nearly 40% of the “netizens” are women, too. Now, we are working on a project (together with the Emilia Romagna Region and the Server Donna service-www.women.it) focused on e-services and gender issues, in particular the language and semantics used in Internet.
- **Knowledge:** Informing citizens about decision processes in a highly understandable way. Awareness-raising activities, information and communication “literacy” activities have to be further developed to facilitate participation and inclusion. Despite efforts to break down digital barriers, and even in a university town such as Bologna that was a pioneer in promoting ICT for citizen, parts of the population are at risk of being cut off from e-participation processes (due to age, gender, social-economic situation, etc.).
- **Digital divide:** A multi-channel approach to promote mobile and ubiquitous communication would enhance e-Inclusion, allowing citizens access to services and applications anytime/anywhere from the most suitable device. It is crucial to reach and involve all citizens with more targeted actions of e-literacy and training.

The points above are all in accordance with the Mandate Programme of the Administration and the Charter of European e-Rights of citizens in the Information and Knowledge Society. This Mandate Programme involves the Municipality in partnership with local stakeholders, taking part international networks. Drawing upon the lessons learnt from significant experience in implementing, deploying and evaluating services, applications and processes for inclusion/e-inclusion, we have decided to base our activities on these main e-rights:

- Rights to access to technological equipment and networks (also broadband), equal opportunities, privacy and personal data protection.
- Rights to education and training, providing each citizen with the content and knowledge she/he really needs.
- Information rights, through user-friendly, high understandable, complete, high quality and up-to-date public information.
- Rights to participation, reinforcing the fundamental rights of citizens and ensuring a public administration that is actively engaged.

People will participate only if the commitment of governments is real and sincere. There is a need to promote a culture of participation on the political side and an acceptance of engagement by administrators at every level of government. But the cultural obstacles to participation lie on citizens’ side too and they will be overcome only through literacy actions and policies to support active citizenship. Even if at the local level it is – to a certain extent – easier to reach citizens and find suitable environments and solutions to facilitate inclusion processes, exclusion could remain a real condition for parts of population but could also be a kind of “conscious choice”.

If all else fails, there is a need to rethink the process globally, first of all hearing the voices of all those who will be affected by the policy. Efforts to promote inclusion in decision making can benefit from the involvement of all kinds of actors, even if they are “outsiders” since they may bring innovative solutions and points of view.

Towards Web 2.0 for local government

As mentioned above, Web 2.0 platforms that allow bottom-up, social- and user-generated content, could help to promote participation, inclusion and sense of belonging to the community. As a Municipality, we are working – together with the Emilia-Romagna Region and other cities of the regional territory – on a project of a new model for an institutional portal (territorial). We will test the technological and organisational aspects related to production, editorial and communications methods/processes. This will be developed and shared amongst the partners, through the application of participatory and social web tools that highlight and give importance in particular to:

- Bottom-up aspects in the production of shared content.
- Participation and inclusion of social creativity and capital.
- Change in the method of interaction with citizens, so as to gather knowledge and skills on the web portal and put them back into circulation in an organised way.

The new participatory and social portal model we intend to pilot will have several distinctive characteristics. It will be:

- **Participatory:** Active users who enrich the collective knowledge through interaction with each other and with the administration.
- **Personalised:** Not only distribution of information and services as predefined by the editorial framework but also flexible consultation methods based on the user’s adaptability to the requirements of the various target groups. These include professionals, citizens, businesses and simple readers or navigators. This too takes place in a participatory context defined by interaction with the users.
- **Inclusive:** Not just one language is considered but also the languages (and specific/sector based languages) of the users, who become co-producers. In fact, not only a few major languages, but many languages that “live” in urban communities, will be taken into account.

So, the innovation of Iperbole 2.0 implies a complex shift from a traditional, distributive, more broadcasting structure to a social sharing of contents too (wiki, blogs, user generated contents, etc.). This change requires a global rethinking about the role and the use of the public administration websites and communication models in general (editorial frame, professional profiles, back-office organisation, etc.).

The spirit of open and participative communities (such as creative commons and open source ones) can be applied to civic networks, opening a challenging phase of their evolution, since the rights to access are progressively changing into rights to participation and co-production. New spaces of dialogue, exchange and interaction will be experimented to create and promote new forms of horizontal, multi-lateral and polycentric interaction among citizens, public administrations and groups of interests. A key success factor is also inter-institutional, multi-level co-operation (at regional, national and international level), in order to achieve resource effectiveness, generate synergies, and standardise approaches and languages.

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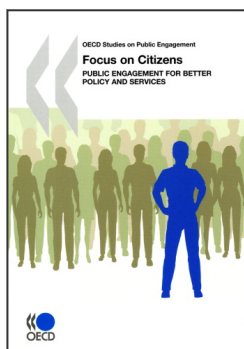
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