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## The “e-Agora” challenge

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### *Introduction*

The Lisbon European Council (CEC, 2000) sought to make Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”. This objective was reinforced by the Commission in the *i2010* initiative which sets the strategic framework for ICT policies in the Union and underlines that: “Information and Communication technologies provide the backbone for the knowledge economy” (CEC, 2005). The Knowledge Society is seen as a key factor for growth and employment, contributing to economic and social development in Europe.

The conjoint realization of sustainable urban development within a knowledge-based society has been summarized by the notion of the eAgora illustrated in Figure 1. This is taken from the Intelcity roadmap developed under the EU’s 5th Framework Programme. This roadmap projected a vision of an integrated open intelligent information city platform system to support and integrate achieving the knowledge society and sustainable development of cities.

Ancient Greeks went to the Agora, a civic square used for public assembly or commerce, to do business or discuss plans for their community. Intelcity envisaged modern Europeans behaving similarly but in the eAgora. By bringing together unconnected sources of information in one place, and making that place available in digital space to everyone, from city planners, building developers, politicians, to individual citizens, the eAgora could support improved management of cities and so help in achieving long-term physical, social and economic sustainability .

In turn, this vision of the eAgora is based on wider vision of ICT-enabled participation in eDemocracy; on the active participation of citizens, using ICTs, in decision-making and on collaboration between disparate stakeholders for policy-making purposes. Such eParticipation consists of three main components (OCED, 2001): information provision; transactions (delivery of on-line services), and deliberation (citizen engagement in civic decision-making).

The timeline and trajectory for achieving the eAgora shown in Figure 1 raise an obvious question: *how are we progressing towards achieving the EU's desired Sustainable Development in the Knowledge Society?*

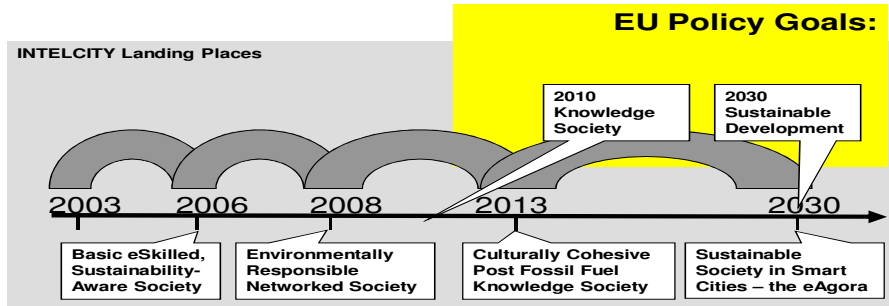


Figure 1: Intelcity Summary Roadmap diagram

This paper will discuss this issue by presenting the analysis developed by the EU IntelCities project ([www.intelcitiesproject.com](http://www.intelcitiesproject.com)) to examine the types of policies currently being adopted by cities to engage their citizens as active participants and key stakeholders in the community. These findings suggest that at the current rate of progress, it is still open to question whether the eAgora will emerge to act as an effective vehicle for enabling citizen engagement to help deliver sustainable development by 2030 (Lombardi P. and Cooper I., 2007; Lombardi et al., 2009).

However, to answer this question properly requires evidence acceptable to all the parties involved. Evidence can come in many forms but in the vast majority of cases will be reflected in some sort of quantitative measure. If this is accepted as a requirement then the questions become: *What aspects of civic performance do we need to evaluate? In which form do we display this? And is the e-Agora an effective space for displaying this information?*

These are not easy questions to answer and there are literally thousands of organisations attempting to establish and to disseminate sets of information which will address this issue, at least in part and in a wide variety of forms, including UN, World Bank, OECD, EU and national institutions, such as Legambiente in Italy. Current lists of indicators, indices and assessment tools which have been developed for measuring and displaying performance at different spatial levels, potentially in the eAgora, show that progress has been made. However there are still a very large number of indicators, perhaps the majority, most specifically those which relate to social and political issues, that are difficult to capture and represent meaningfully. In addition if we only use quantitative measures then we risk foregoing the richness of human culture and society and consequently lose something significant, especially in terms of creating sustainable communities. Issues such as inter-generational equity, aesthetics, governance, self-identity and esteem and their relationship to place, can come into this category (Lombardi and Cooper, 2008).

The second part of this chapter will focus on these difficulties, highlighting the need for new methods and an alternative view of how to go about the capture and representation of the types of data with which we need to work.

### *The cities - citizens equation*

Achieving the eAgora vision puts citizens at the centre of attention in the design of such on-line developments in terms of accessibility including, for example, the visually disabled, different age and language groups.

Encouraging participation was reinforced by the eEurope 2005 Action Plan (CEC, 2002) intended to form part of the delivery of the Lisbon strategy to build a knowledge-based economy by 2010, with improved employment opportunities and social cohesion. Unfortunately, despite the substantial body of knowledge with regard to the different applications of eParticipation, the reason why so few are utilizing the full potential of eGovernance as a tool is uncertain (Harald & Krimmer, 2005). In particular, why are so many cities not facing the challenge of involving the public in participatory and deliberative thought processes that could augment government's decision-making?

A published report on the promise and problems of eDemocracy (OECD, 2003) identified some of the major barriers to digital citizen engagement and identified five main challenges, using the citizen as a point of reference. These are: Coping with the problem of scale; Building capacity and active citizenship; Ensuring coherence throughout the policy-making progress; Evaluating the benefits and impacts of offering digital citizen engagement; Ensuring government commitment.

For active participation to be a successful factor for increased well-being social cohesion and urban sustainability, politicians and administrators must highly value the input of the citizens, for at the end of the day, the decisions made concern the citizens' life and the taxpayer's money. Therefore, appropriate mechanisms must be developed and deployed to enhance the involvement and the engagement of broader and / or new groups in the democratic process.

Previous studies by Lombardi and Cooper (2007; 2008) and Deakin et al. (2005; 2006) have reviewed respectively the expectations and aspirations of citizens in the European cities visited by the IntelCities Roadshows and the present contents of cities' existing web sites using the Citizen Engagement matrix.

The European Union (EU) IST Framework 6 research IntelCities project (2004) developed a prototype integrated information system for cities, known as the 'eCity platform', which links the range of electronic local government services (e-government.) with those of local planning, urban development and regeneration (e-planning). This project introduced a user-provider paradigm of service delivery where it is the needs of the former that set the technological requirements of the latter (Curwell et al., 2005).

In Intelcities, the roadshows were used to identify what kinds of services and types of devices citizens currently preferred to use. The roadshows also identified the types of services the participants currently accessed. Typically (but not universally), the participants recruited by each city of their roadshow had good e-skills. Internet technologies were most frequently used as a means to access services (via PC and laptop). The very low preference expressed for using local television was seen as surprising, especially since this is the predominant mode being employed by Siena - one of the case study cities in IntelCities (Curwell et. al., 2005). However, the low preference for public access points, such as kiosks, indicates the poor experience and low take-up of this type of terminal in these cities.

There was a noticeable lack of cross-regional differences in the level of e-skills and technology preferences expressed in the three cities taking part in the roadshows. As illustrated above, the Internet technologies were most frequently used, via computer and laptop. This is clearly the main form of access either at home or at work. One noticeable distinction was a strong Italian preference for the mobile phone, whereas French participants expressed a preference for supplementing this technology with personal, face-to-face contacts. They were also interested in future development of TV. A lack of interest in personal digital assistants (PDAs) was common to participants from all three cities.

The roadshows also identified the types of services the participants currently accessed. Roadshow participants did not yet contact public services on a daily basis. In Marseille, only transport services were contacted daily by a significant number of workshop attendees, otherwise, the majority of proposed services were only contacted on an infrequent basis. Figure 4 shows the most common activities undertaken using the Internet. Getting information, leisure and entertainment were the most frequent. And this suggest a personal/domestic focus for participants from these European cities as well. In the roadshows, concern was expressed over:

- the expanding digital skills gap
- the 'digital divide' - how the technologies are distributed and access for all (e.g. high cost versus low income, disabled users, etc.), and
- other underlying structural issues related to security and ownership of the data and access by third parties.

There was a clear balance of opinion in favour of public rather than private provision of civic on-line services in terms of creating greater trust and confidence in citizens (Curwell et al., 2005).

In the second stage of the IntelCities project, three further roadshows were held to investigate the priorities citizens have for where and why online civic services should be provided. The main findings showed that although some citizens do want be able to access e-services through local community centers and libraries they mainly want to do so in their own homes. Such results also suggest that, in Europe, we are current moving towards an eDomus model of using ICTs rather than the eAgora proposed to support the Knowledge Society.

The citizens who took part in the IntelCities roadshows also indicated that they want to be able to use local council services and tools whenever they want them – 24h/7day. In addition, they want their cities to consider, when developing online services, the ability new digital technologies to speed up service delivery, allowing citizens fast and flexible access to information which is currently paper-based (86% in East Manchester) and to provide citizens with equal access to the services their city can offer, because new technologies can help include people who currently find it difficult to access and use city council service.

The IntelCities Citizen Engagement Matrix was devised to examine the types of policies currently being adopted by cities to engage their citizens as active participants and key stakeholders in the community. This matrix consists of a list of 40 on-line tools and services mapped against increasing categories of engagement. Using the OECD's model of information, consultation and active participation as a starting point, the Citizen Engagement Matrix examines five possible levels of city-citizen engagement in e-space as shown in Figure 2.

At the most basic level, towards the left hand end of Figure 2, cities may provide their citizens with just on-line information or may allow e-based financial transactions. Citizens remain largely unengaged since information flows mainly from cities to citizens. Moving to the right across the Figure, next consultative e-services establish a degree of reciprocity through the use, for instance, of multiple choice polls and closed question surveys. Typically such cities are consulting their citizens through provision of fixed questions and a choice pre-determined responses. Further right in Figure 2, deliberative involvement signifies greater engagement between cities and their citizens. In such cases citizens are being encouraged to review and consider background information before expressing their views. Finally, at the right hand end of the Figure, the OECD’s category of active participation are divided to identify whether cities or citizens instigate decision-making processes.

Deakin et al. (2006) used these categorisation system to review the web sites offered by European cities. They concluded that a large proportion of such cities now offer e-services that provide a wide range of information sources on-line and that encourage citizens to pay their bills using digital technology. Further, many cities are reported as having developed their e-services to enable more complex on-line transactions and consultative exercises. However, as Deakin et al. indicated, if cities are to reach the OECD’s vision of: “... increasingly well-educated, informed and critical citizens [that] expect high quality services, streamlined administrative procedures and a government that takes their views and knowledge into account in public decision-making”, then cities will have to engage all their citizens in the use of new digital technologies for consultative and deliberative purposes. They concluded that, while improving access is a precondition of engaging citizens in policy making and consultative activities, at present few European cities currently offer the range of e-services expected by advanced ICT users or presupposed by the OECD.

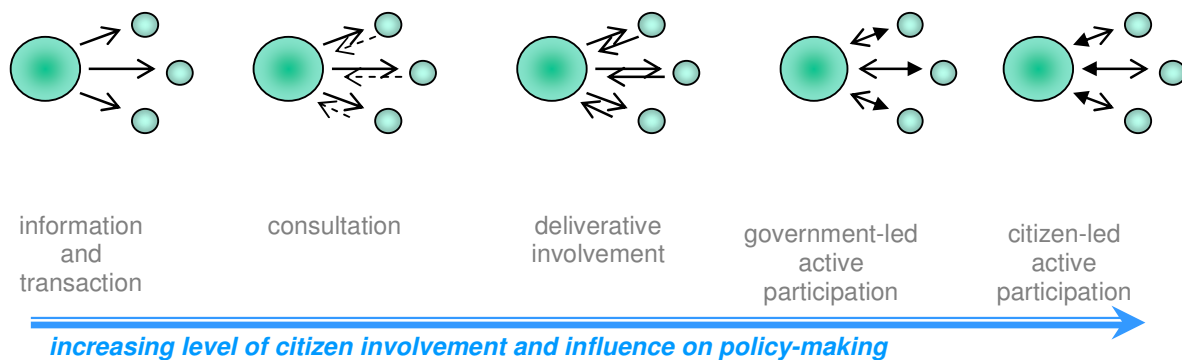


Figure 2, Defining the levels of citizens involvement on decision-making (adapted from the OECD definitions)

Civic authorities need, in the first instance, to provide a virtual version of the public realm that their citizens can then move into and occupy. Corsi (2006) reported a series of consultation workshops on eGovernment held in 2005, in which 22 countries participated, to prepare for the EU’s Framework 7. These workshops sought to identify, using foresight methodology, breakthrough R&D ideas and policy developments for citizen involvement and empowerment up to 2020. This foresight exercise was driven by a clear set of preferences.

For instance, citizens were depicted by 2020 as expecting low-cost, user friendly, broadband, interactive, constantly updated, mobile and instant access that will allow them involvement in political decision-making at every level. This ICT-based opportunity, seen as necessary as a means of renewing the relationship between them and (local) government, maps directly onto the workshops' vision of a 'sharing society', as shown in Figure 3.

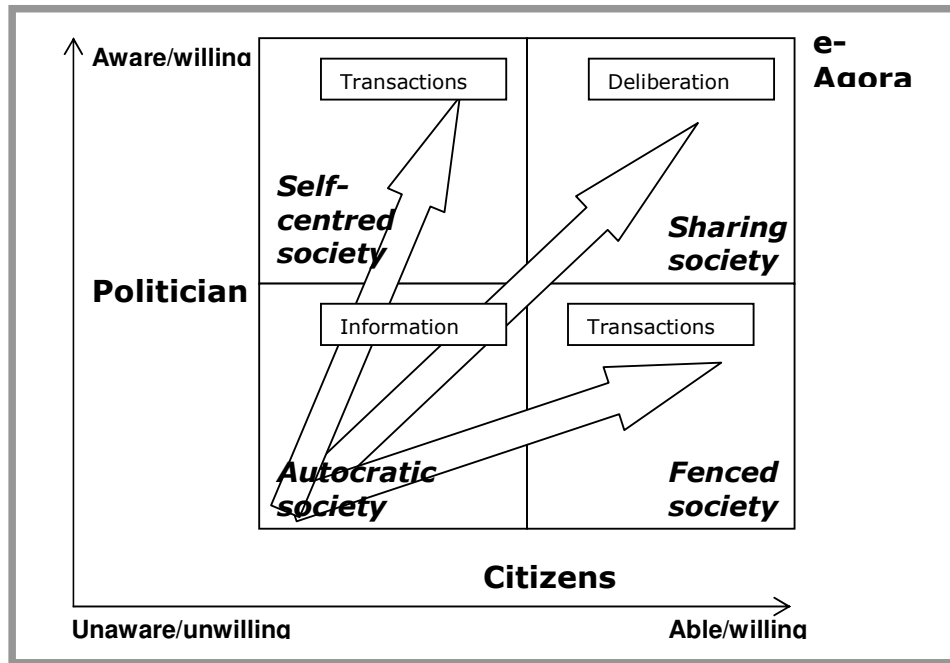


Figure 3 FP7 workshop's scenarios showing potential engagement in e-spaces by politicians and citizens (adapted from Corsi, 2006)

However this is only one amongst competing possible outcomes identified by the workshops. Corsi argued that, whether this preferred option arrives is dependent on not just the ability, but also the willingness, of politicians and citizens to engage with each other in e-space. If politicians are unwilling to cede a fully developed virtual public realm to citizens - to enable them, for instance, to take part in deliberative decision-making - then civic e-spaces are likely to remain restricted to the provision of information or, at best, be used for transactions of civic services, as illustrated by the left-hand side of Figure 3. Conversely, if citizens refuse to move in and occupy civic e-space, then this is also likely to result in similar restrictions to information provision and service transactions, as illustrated by the bottom row of the diagram. Only if politicians are willing and able to provide an appropriate virtual public realm and citizens are willing and able to move in and exploit it, will the desired eAgora become established.

For this to happen, however, integrated policy approaches for the conversion of local government to local governance that will enable the transformation of urban public administrations to innovative, effective, transparent and accountable institutions governing or steering the urban community in the Digital Age will need to emerge first; policies with process, that will change the relationship between local government and citizens with the help of ICT.

Lessons are still be learnt about the implications on public administrations of the transformation from representative to participatory democracy in modern European policy and the role of citizens in local decision-making using the digital technologies. And finally, the continuing silence on the part and opportunities of integrated sustainability in local digital government is a great contrast with the way ICT's are actually changing the role and responsibilities of public administration in the Information and Knowledge Society will have to be broken.

Whether European cities and their citizens will develop, in the future, the stronger appetite that is clearly required to live up to the OECD's expectations remains to be seen. At present, the OECD's aspirations, as operationalised through IntelCities's projected e-Agora, do not seem currently to be shared by either side of the equation – cities or their citizens - needed for their effective implementation.

### *The need for bottom-up metrics*

If sustainable development is really to be based on substantive (as opposed to vestigial or cosmetic) community participation, then this will require a change in citizens' attitudes, beliefs and values. Even these changes will not sufficient, of themselves, to reach the ambitious goals that have been set across Europe through Local Agenda 21. The rigorous adaptation of decision-making processes to include community participation is also necessary.

While the link to science, and the ability to identify and track material issues through indicators, have become more sophisticated, there are still difficulties associated with sustainable indicators. Some of these have to do with the problems associated with setting standard or fixed indicators, even within fairly small geographical envelopes. This is because the significance of environment varies with geography, and because cultural differences can result in concern focusing on widely differing matters. A review of a number of Eurobarometer survey results since 2000 show this quite conclusively (see, for example, European Commission, 2005).

Beyond this, there are both practical and conceptual difficulties in integrating indicator sets. For example, access to public transport can have both direct and indirect effects on people's health. Another example is the potential effects of some airborne pollutants on education attainment levels. All four of these parameters are often captured as single indicator sets but are rarely integrated. If they were, then public policy-makers might be influenced to act more decisively where linked factors are show to be significant.

SD indicator sets across Europe differ strongly with respect to their size (Hametner & Steurer, 2007). While some countries have a small set with about 20 (headline) indicators (such as France, Germany and Norway), others use rather comprehensive sets with more than 100 indicators (such as Italy, Latvia, Switzerland and the UK). Some of these latter countries also use a smaller number of headline indicators for communication purposes. A few countries (Finland, Italy, Slovakia and Slovenia) also use aggregate indices such as the Human Development Index (HDI) or the Ecological Footprint. The EU SDI framework themes 'economic development' and 'climate change and energy' are the ones that are addressed most coherently. 'Public health' is another prominent issue in all national SDI sets analyzed. In contrast, fewer countries obviously use indicators for the themes 'good governance' and 'global partnership'. This conforms with the revised EU SD indicators set from 2007 that no longer contains a headline indicator for 'good governance'. As

Eurostat's 2007 monitoring report points out, "good governance is a new area for official statistics, which is reflected in the lack of robust and meaningful indicators on this topic" (Eurostat, 2007, p. 268).

A further problem, as Sveiby and Armstrong (2004) pointed out, concerns the difficulty in identifying indicators that accord with the majority of the population. The fact that methods of capturing this information vary widely, and different methods are effective in different cultures, makes this variation within populations even more difficult to quantify. Attitudes and behaviour patterns shift markedly within populations, sometimes over a short period of time, making longer-term monitoring a difficult proposition. The belief that climate change is now a significant threat is a clear example. The concern about working conditions in factories and agriculture in developing countries is another. These concerns have increased markedly in many countries, but there are still regions in Europe, and beyond, where other priorities loom much larger in the concerns of the population.

Because of all of these difficulties, the elementary question of whether the European economy is moving towards sustainability or away from sustainability cannot be answered with consensus on the basis of the indicators and the integrative framework currently in use (Munda, 2005; Deakin et al., 2002). In addition, there is still significant work that needs to be done on incorporating the general public effectively or substantively into policy-making processes (Curwell et al., 2005; Lombardi, 2007; Deakin et al., 2007).

The growing demand of stakeholders to participate in decision-making procedures, or even to control decision-making, is increasingly recognized by governments. Initiatives are being taken to implement legislation to legitimize public participation. This has been increasingly recognised by the Social Multi-Criteria Evaluation (SMCE) scientific community. Science for policy implies a responsibility of scientists towards the whole society and not just towards a specific or abstract or mythical decision-maker. In this context, *transparency* becomes an essential feature of public policy processes. *Social Multi-Criteria Evaluation* has been explicitly designed to enhance transparency; the main idea is that the results of an evaluation exercise depend on the way a given policy problem is *represented* and thus the assumptions used and the interests and values considered have to be made clear and explicit. However, effective and successful public participation can only be realized in cases where these initiatives are supported by sufficient resources, staff, information and commitment to guarantee that the outcomes of such processes are actually followed up.

The work reported by Lombardi and Cooper (2008) has shown that civil society (CSOs) needs to be enabled to make efficient use of information to mobilize citizens in order to achieve goals set with regard to sustainable development. Members of the public should be able to contribute to the development and enhancement of sustainable development indicators, by providing new metrics for assessment and enhancement of their activities in their community neighborhood, the city and the larger city region. All of this will have to be put in place if the emerging Knowledge Society is to take into account the visions, knowledge and interests of the widely different stakeholders who make up communities in our towns and cities.

A new indicator system of forward-looking and cross-cutting indicators on good governance for sustainable development is highly relevant to a range of interrelated EU SD/KS policies at a variety of spatial scales. It would directly support the implementation of the EU Renewed Sustainable

Development Strategy (SDS) (2001) which called for the development of indicators capable of capturing the full complexity of SD.

In the medium term, such a new set of indicators might bring out further opportunities to break the link between economic growth and environmental degradation, by providing relevant and robust indicators which are socially acceptable to citizens themselves – and not just to top down policy-makers. Furthermore, by integrating indicator sets, both practically and conceptually that serve specific areas, - such as ‘good governance’, ‘sustainable development in city planning and management’, ‘democracy’, ‘innovation’, and ‘well-being’ - public policy could be made more influential since it would link multiple factors that are of major significance to the lives of citizens themselves.

In other words, the meaningful participation of the public, through the civil society organizations (CSOs), requires that all relevant stakeholders are provided with the information and resources necessary to enable them to contribute to and influence the decision-making process. Furthermore, the design of decision-making process should foster comprehensive stakeholder participation. This makes the accessibility of reliable and easily understandable information essential. And the availability of this information should result in a situation where (urban) sustainability goals are not planned for CSOs but are co-produced in close cooperation with them. In the next section, three case studies of CSOs are reported which illustrates the problems associated with assessment measurements.

### *Conclusion*

Europe needs strong cities! It also needs citizens committed to the effective delivery of sustainable development. Urban policy has to make a positive contribution to the quality of life of citizens across Europe, in order to ensure that all citizens perceive Europe as contributing positively to their day-to-day lives and to the welfare of their local communities. New research is required which is able to compliment the aims of the Bristol Accord (2006) to deliver sustainable communities that are safe, fair, thriving, environmentally sensitive, well run, served, connected and designed. This research should be focused on creating an increased understanding of the urban knowledge and metrics necessary to adapt and harmonise the measuring system, assessment tools and procedures of professionals and decision makers in order to ensure that policy interventions move urban environments in the directions that support more sustainable behavior in more sustainable communities.

Good governance of local communities supported by CSOs skilled in use and deployment of suitable indicators developed from such research will be therefore an essential adjunct to supporting the continuing prosperity of European cities along with the well-being of their citizens.

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