

E-Governance in Ireland: new technologies, local government and civic participation

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1. 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 declining. This decline, particularly when expressed as decreased political participation, and evidenced by reduced voter turnouts and a general alienation from government, form part of the ‘democratic deficit’ that has been on the agenda of many governments in recent years. Whether decreased participation is due to apathy or increased use of non-government channels for political action, it undermines the legitimacy of governments. One policy response has been to increase involvement of the wider society in the formulation of government policy and provision of services; this has been described as ‘governance’ (see Pierre, 2000 for a general discussion of governance). There has been an increased involvement of organisations in the policy process; these organisations would often describe themselves as political but not party political. They see themselves as part of the general political process but as articulating broad political issues while remaining outside the formal electoral system. This enhanced involvement has 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 a representative democracy, citizens depend on others to articulate their concerns. Participation in policy formation by non-government interests involves 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 formal groups extend policy participation beyond the traditional political structures. In partnership, the range of groups and organisations increases, the range of concerns articulated widens, and, hopefully, the percentage of citizens who feel that their interests are represented increases. Despite the widening of representation, there remain individuals and interests who do not have direct policy input and whose concerns remain unrepresented even in this expanded arena of policy discussion.

Many reasons exist for a lack of participation. One reason for poor participation may be a lack of information about the policy decisions that are to be made and a lack of information about how to have an input into such decisions. Another barrier may be a distrust of the impartiality and fairness of those making decisions, so that citizens do not believe their interventions would be effective. A third barrier may be the difficulty in 'breaking in' to the existing system of non-governmental organisations, either in terms of creating a new organisation, participating in existing ones, or just having individual input. Of course, it could be argued that a lack of participation is not because of any such barriers but simply that such people are content with the existing system, and they see no reason for greater participation. They are happy, as citizens, to hold the participants accountable (especially at election time) for policy outcomes, but are not motivated enough to participate in policy formation. Citizens benefit from the 'free rider syndrome'; while outcomes could be better, this is 'good enough' governance', as far as most

citizens are concerned. While this general satisfaction may be true some of the time, issues do arise about which citizens feel strongly enough to want to participate in policy formation. The rise of single-issue political candidates who campaign on community issues (e.g., hospitals, aid for disabled children), anti-globalisation street protests, public protests on bin charges and waste dumps all indicate that, for many people, policy outcomes are not 'good enough'. The problem is that single issues 'flash points' (such as bin charges) mobilise citizens to organise into ad-hoc groups which campaign and protest, but which tend to disband once the issues is resolved or postponed. Is it possible to create long term policy communities, at local or national level, that will include such citizens?

Many governments, including EU members states and the EU itself, have sought to increase participation by the use of new information and communications technologies to create such policy communities for dialogue, discussion and consultation. These projects have sometimes been described as 'eparticipation' or 'einclusion', and have included online forums, virtual discussion rooms, electronic polls and electronic voting (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003). There are few examples of such projects having significant impact, and little evidence of new policies or procedures emerging that effectively encourage citizens to participate in policy formation. Even though the European Union has initiated significant investments to improve government through the application of new information and communications technologies, most of these e-government proposals involve improving the delivery of services, more efficient processing of information and improved access to services by citizens. These projects have provided specific and concrete benefits in administrative efficiency and citizens have improved access to resources or the delivery of resources. Citizens, as

consumers of services and customers of the state have gained, but there is little in such projects that enhances the citizens as participants in policy making processes. 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”. While EU policy has been effective at 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.

2. New Technologies and community participation

Can governments could use new technologies to increase participation? 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 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 et al., 2003). These studies give a better indication of the potential of new technologies to enhance local community interaction and communication – what would now be labelled as building ‘social capital’. 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?

Contrary to some expectations, research found that 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.¹ However, there was clear evidence of increased amounts of informal communication amongst individuals, including increased communication amongst members of voluntary groups. Of necessity, this also mean an increased amount of information being distributed amongst members of the community. The authors argue that increased levels of communication and information flow suggest increased levels of social trust. This trust does not manifest itself in greater participation in voluntary organisations, but would still fall within the rubric of what is now called ‘social capital’(Kavanaugh and Patterson, 2002, Prell, 2003, Putnam, 2000). This identifies an unexpected, but important, issue in the use of new technologies: while use of communications technologies was not linked with greater participation in voluntary organisations, it was linked with increased communication amongst people who were already members of such organisations and increased communication amongst all individuals, whether members of voluntary organisations or not (see also Hampton and Wellman, 2002).

This may offer an explanation for the ineffectiveness of new technologies in facilitating greater public participation in governance. If new communications technologies do not increase the amount of participation in formal voluntary

organisations, then participation in existing non-governmental organisations involved in social partnership will not increase either. However, communities permeated with new communications technologies do display increased levels of informal communication and information, and perhaps such increased informal communication and information flows be translated into greater political participation? If decreasing levels of social trust and solidarity are linked with decreasing levels of political participation (Putnam, 2000, Putnam et al., 1993), then enhancing community formation will also assist political participation. Informal participation may be as significant as formal participation in social capital in local communities, despite problems of measurement (Newton, 1999); new technologies can increase communication, and so increase participation.

3. Ireland and brokerage

Can changes in information and communication flows actually have an impact on participation and the wider political system? Ireland provides an interesting case study in this regard. 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 (in most cases) *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. This 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 these brokerage exchanges 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 creating and maintaining this aura of clientelism (Komito, 1992, Komito, 1989a, Komito, 1984).² Informal brokerage networks are exclusionary and foster the private use of public resources for personal gain (Clapham, 1982). Such networks, often associated with political clientelism, would now be seen as examples of negative social capital (Putnam, 2000), and public policy should encourage the transformation of such private exchanges into a system of more open and public participation.

For many years, the state maintained the market that encouraged citizens' beliefs in 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 enabled politicians to claim special power. 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, while denying voters the knowledge by which clientelist claims could be disproven (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 political behaviour or administrative practice (Kling, 1996), in this case, new information systems altered the market conditions for brokerage 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, as procedures and criteria for decisions are recorded in electronic information systems, it became possible to make those records available to the general public via the Internet as part of ongoing administrative reform and an increased concern with accountability in public life (see MacCarthaigh, this volume)

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 underlying foundation for the tacit market in brokerage – that is, the market demand for politicians' special access, and thus the

‘charge’ which politicians could demand for their service and the ‘price’ which citizens were 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 percent 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, Komito, 1989b). In contrast, a recent study of social values and social capital found that the figure had dropped to 14 percent for all respondents, and 13% for Dublin respondents, who had contacted a politician in the previous year (National Economic and Social Forum, 2003). Similarly, a survey of ‘political culture’ in the late 1960s showed a strong preference for contacting politicians rather than officials or local community figures (Raven and Whelan, 1976). In contrast, by 2002, 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.

With a decrease in the electoral value of clientelist exchanges, politicians must find 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 focus on an issue of concern to everyone in the locality (increased development investment in rural areas of Ireland, investment in local medical services, and so on). 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. Thus, changed information flows can have broad political consequences: new technologies are fostering a system of more open and public policy decisions and resource allocation, in contrast to the use of public resources for personal gain.

4. Ireland and public participation

On the other hand, the evidence that new technologies encourage greater political participation in policy is less apparent. Despite the increase in accountability within some areas of government (see MacCarthaigh, this volume), this accountability does not seem to extend to the general public. It has been suggested that three general modes of civic participation in policy formation can be identified: information, consultation, participation (see Macintosh, 2004, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2003 for a discussion of this tripartite distinction). At the most minimal level, technology enables 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 can 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 how far the participants agree, or not, 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 predetermined issues 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; some have had participation rates of over ten thousand phone calls.³

At the most inclusive level would be participation, in which citizens actively engage in defining process and setting the agenda. This can be done without the consent of government, as evidenced by the use of new technologies by social movements 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 examples of informal groupings lacking a formal structure and recreated, afresh, at each new event. These groups, however ephemeral, have 'real space' manifestations in concrete political actions, which disrupt activities and claim headlines, and are mobilizing people across nations (see Surman and Reilly, 2003). 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.

This tripartite distinction is sometimes 'fuzzy' at the edges. 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. When used by motivated citizens, information made available this way can 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 (also see O'Toole, 2000). At the local 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.

There are fewer cases of national or local government consultation, as opposed to information dissemination. Some local authority web sites have copied the idea of radio and television polls, and provide yes/no poll questions on their web sites (e.g., www.ennis.ie). 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.

Particular events are often a catalyst for such communication. In 2003, there was a controversy regarding a large residential plan for Adamstown in South County Dublin (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. Although there was no electronic bulletin board to facilitate discussion of the issue, the concerns raised by individual emails 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 did check the information and conveyed that information back to residents via public meetings. One result was a dedicated web site (www.adamstown.ie/) on these issues.⁴

A more effective means of participation would be open notice boards, in which individuals and groups could raise and discuss issues, rather than being dependent on local authorities or other interest groups to decide policy agendas and outcomes. However, attempts to facilitate electronic discussions on local issues tend to have very low participation rates; participation in Dublin city's site (www.dublin.ie), for instance, is minimal. Is there any means by which participation could be increased? An obvious precondition of participation is that citizens need evidence that their participation can change policy outcomes. Rothman (2003) points

out that trust is rarely given unconditionally, especially to governments composed of unknown and unaccountable individuals. Trust is earned, based on actual interactions that citizens have with particular agencies of the state. That trust, once gained, can be extended to other agencies of the state and transmuted into a social capital that leads to greater commitment to civil society.

Governments could use the improvements in administration and service provision resulting from e-government investments as a lever to improve public participation. 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. As new technologies permit citizens to monitor and influence the provision of services, this provides convincing evidence that intervention has an impact, and individual intervention can be effective. Continual interactions with local authorities on the provision of services such as road maintenance, lighting repair, public amenities such as parks, and so on provide evidence that local authorities listen and respond to citizens. This conviction that citizens can exercise influence can be transposed to the policy arena, encouraging citizens to believe that they can also alter policy decisions.

Of course, citizens must receive evidence that their interventions are welcomed and lead to changed policy outcomes. To what extent are local authorities willing to cede policy making to local residents? There are many reasons why local authorities retain, for themselves, final policy decisions. Local authorities consider themselves to be the guardians of the 'public interest', whereas local activists may not be representative of community opinion. Local activists may have vested interests, and decisions could be determined by those interests who are most vociferous and best organised: decisions based on listening to those who shout loudest. Additionally,

such activists come and go; it is the local authority who 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. While local authorities might desire to retain the right to decide how seriously they consider the input from 'participation' or 'consultation' they desire, excluding the wider community from some participation is no longer feasible.

New technologies are a particularly strong factor in undermining the autonomy of local authorities. 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. The question is how to use new technologies to create an on-going policy community, bowing to the inevitable of greater participation, but in a way that encourages continual dialogue. As continual problems with residential planning in Ireland shows, the correct balance on these issues is not obvious (see, for instance, Komito, 1983), all greater, then, the need for dialogue amongst experts, officials and citizens.

5. The Mobhaile project

Mobhaile is a project currently under development in Ireland which provides an example of an information system for interactions amongst citizens, community and voluntary groups, businesses and local government that will facilitate the development of community 'social capital'. It is being 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’ (www.mobhaile.ie) and provides a community interface for both government and community information. The starting point of the system is taking information that exists on local authority information systems and making it available to the general public in an interactive format (e.g., planning applications, bin charges, availability of sports grounds). That information is combined with links to other government information sources, 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 particular relevance to their locality. It is possible to connect to the site and obtain information only about neighbourhood elements of services (e.g., garbage collection, bus routes, planning submissions). Users do not have to wade through all the bus routes and timetables, since only those that are relevant to the local area are presented. This has obvious benefits in fostering a sense of geographical community; residents can 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 sense of 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. The message is then dealt with by local authority officials, and the citizen receives a report. Citizens receive evidence that their participation is effective because they received feedback on the particular issues raised. This feedback is the essential element required to create trust in government. 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 social and economic services as well as government services. Some information is picked up automatically from the local authorities own information system (e.g., 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.

The aim is that individuals will access the local Mobhaile site for specific service requests, but, once habituated to using the site, will begin to 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. The design of the system is, by intention, very open, so that new functions can be added to suit the needs of local people. For instance, a recent addition was the facility for group members to write personal 'blogs' (online diaries); blogs are one of the most open means of making personal opinions available to a wide audience that is currently available on the Internet. The project is currently moving from design to pilot stage. By early 2005, it is expected that a range of community and voluntary groups will have begun to use the site, and a range of local authority services will be provided through the site. It is also intended to operate in conjunction with an 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. It is an example of how participation in the provision of specific services can be the central kernel for greater participation in more general local authority policies. Fundamental to this process, however, is that local authorities listen to citizens and respond 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.

6. Conclusion

In recent years, the number and range of groups that participate in policy formation in states has increased. However, there still remain individuals who do not participate in such groups and who are, whether by choice or not, excluded from participation. These individuals may become involved as issues arise that mobilize

large numbers of citizens. In these cases, new technologies have reduced the threshold for individuals to create ad-hoc groups that act in order to influence policy outcomes. Such interest groups tend to be short-lived and lead to little policy discussion. The need is to facilitate long-term participation, involving more citizens who will engage in dialogues with other interested parties. Up to this point, 'e-government' programs to encourage the use of new technologies to increase public participation in policy formulation have had little impact. Attempts to use new technologies to encourage more people to join community and voluntary groups may be misdirected. While new technologies increase the effectiveness and commitment of those who are already participants, they may not increase the number of people who join such groups. However, new technologies do increase levels of informal communication amongst individuals and levels of information exchange between individuals and service providers. Such information exchange can then become the basis for community participation, since changes in government administration enable information to be made available at a relatively low transaction cost.

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. If governments do respond, then the effectiveness of interventions encourages further participation, thus creating a virtuous circle of ever greater participation. The first step, in such a case, is to encourage the initial participation. The use of new technologies to obtain government services can encourage that initial participation. Initially, 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. This can then be extended to demonstrate that interventions on policy can have some impact on outcomes, even if the result is

compromise amongst competing interests. The Mobhaile project is an example of a project which encourages greater participation by citizens in local communities. The project fosters information exchange amongst residents by providing a community-focused location for the provision of administrative, business, and community/voluntary services. In this way, it capitalises on the demonstrated affordances of new technologies in facilitating greater communication amongst individuals and the development of informal linkages amongst individuals. Such initiatives will permit an expansion from 'e-government' to the broader arena of 'e-governance'.

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¹ 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).

2 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').

3 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, 10 April 2002). In October 2003, three out of four of 16,000 participants agreed that residents should pay to have rubbish collected, which was during a high visibility protest over such charges (Sunday Independent, 19 October 2003).

4 It is noticeable, however, that this site falls into the category of one-way information-provision, rather than consultation, much less participation.