



**United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
Division for Social Policy and Development**

**Report of the Expert Group Meeting on “E-Participation: Empowering
People through Information Communication Technologies (ICTs)”**

24-25 July 2013
ITU Headquarters, Geneva

Executive Summary

The Expert Group Meeting was convened to help prepare the priority theme for the 52nd session of the Commission for Social Development in February 2014. Using the definition of empowerment provided by the previous EGM in September 2012, the Meeting focused on how ICTs can provide an essential enabling environment for empowerment of all, especially people living in vulnerable situations. In that sense, the growing use of ICTs is a process that can improve the process of participation in decision-making necessary to solve economic and social problems. For this to happen, however, there has to be an expansion in access to modern ICTs, especially broadband and mobile, both generally and particularly by underserved populations. There has to be more research on the key factors in successful use for empowerment. The existing human rights and citizen participatory governance framework can be used to encourage making ICTs available and used for empowerment. The new technologies should be designed to meet user needs, in terms of simplicity and openness, including for older persons, persons with disabilities and other social groups. Experience shows that when governments use ICTs to deliver services and obtain input for decision-making, this is a cost-saving means of improving government services. This, however, needs carefully designed tools and persons trained, at the governmental decision-making level, as well as in the public, to use these effectively. Civil society organizations can also use ICTs to influence decision-making at all levels, including the international level, but must learn to use the tools, especially for networking. Finally, ICTs should be used to engage publics in the discussions around the new Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals and empowerment through ICTs should be included in the strategies to achieve these goals themselves.

Background

The Division for Social Policy and Development (DSPD) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), in collaboration with the Division for Public Administration and Development Management (DPADM) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), organized an Expert Group Meeting on “E- Participation: Empowering People through Information Communication Technologies (ICTs)” from 24 to 25 July at ITU Headquarters in Geneva, as part of the preparations for the 52nd session of the Commission for Social Development (CSocD) that will take place in February 2014 and to promote the 2013 theme of the Economic and Social Council Annual Ministerial Review on "Science, technology and innovation -- as well as culture -- for sustainable development".

The meeting was convened in the context of draft Resolution 1 in the Report of the Commission for Social Development (E/2012/26) in which the Economic and Social Council decided that the

priority theme for the 2013-2014 review and policy cycle should be “promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all”.

The outcomes of the meeting are intended to provide important inputs to the work of the Commission, in particular demonstrating the impact of ICTs and e-Participation on people's empowerment and how they can be used as a means to implement the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

E-Participation and Empowerment: Opportunities and Challenges for All

The Expert Group Meeting took note of the definition of empowerment that had been agreed by the 2012 Expert Group Meeting, which was: “empowerment means effective participation by members of society, as individuals and groups, in decisions about their lives, that is conditioned by a supportive enabling environment, and leads to the solution of economic and social problems confronting them.” In this model, empowerment is a means to achieving other ends (the solution of economic and social problems confronting people). It has always been known that information and communication are also means for people to be empowered. In this context ICTs are a means for improving another means.

The Group noted that in the past research had shown that information and communication played a supporting role in empowerment, which was driven more by organizations than by information. Over the past twenty years, however, the quantity, coverage and speed of information accessibility had changed the role of ICTs. The Internet and social media have grown in speed, coverage and accessibility at a rate unprecedented in history. The rate of technological change has, if anything accelerated. While there are regional differences in broadband coverage, even this is improving. New technologies like mobile smart phones are reducing the cost of Internet access and leapfrogging over former technological hurdles in telecommunications. The potential for ICTs-provoked empowerment – political, economic and social – is great. The Group noted that increasingly the delivery of government services has been improved by use of ICTs. Examples from countries as diverse as Singapore, India, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, Colombia and Denmark show how public information and public services can be made available. Civil society organizations, as well as communities have also found that ICTs make it possible to network, apply and use information to pursue their organizations’ ends. As one Group member noted, democracy demands empowerment and participation, economic, political and social. Digital technology/ICTs open up and democratize societies. Government can use ICTs to influence people and people can use it to influence governments.

The Group noted that the pace of change was such that social science research documenting effects was still incomplete. However, initial evidence shows that the effects of ICTs access and use are highly positive. Still, there are a number of issues that need to be resolved. These include ensuring access to an open, yet responsible Internet, government policies and practices that make best use of the media, preparing people to use ICTs successfully and creating an effective and safe environment to use ICTs as a tool for empowerment.

There is no better example of empowerment than meeting the public health challenges of the world’s increasing aging population with ICTs and its impact on policy-makers. The expert group was provided with examples of how ICTs and e-technology can play a major role in public health issues, (e.g. “Health Promotion/Disease Prevention”). There are a variety of

individual and societal challenges associated with maintaining quality of life in the aging process; they include independence, social interaction, health care and community involvement. Successful community-based programs that embrace these issues need to be an essential part of such healthy aging policies.

Many aged citizens in the developing world, living in remote areas (in some cases as much as 70-80 percent of the total population) with little or no electricity or connectivity are unable to benefit from the many benefits of ICTs. These variables hinder the utilization of ICTs which, in turn, limits many areas of growth (e.g., economic, education, socialization and health care). While connectivity barriers are serious inhibitors of ICTs, ethnographic assessments are just as important. It is essential for outsiders (e.g., researchers and stakeholders) to invest in learning and understanding cultural phenomena as it relates to the meanings of certain things within a community system. Otherwise, deployment and diffusion of ICTs will be unsuccessful and potentially jeopardize the health and wellbeing of communities.

The rapid use of ICTs in both developing and developed countries has made it a practical and versatile tool that can provide solutions for present day social and economic issues. Keeping this in mind, the International Council for Caring Communities (ICCC), a non-profit organization (NGO) with United Nations Special Consultative status, along with the United Nations' Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) explored this topic focusing on aging. Together they brought it to the attention of government officials and decision makers to help achieve the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were agreed to in September 2000 by all 147 Heads of State. The challenge was to incorporate the powerful use of ICT as a means of addressing the implementation of the MDGs and thus began an "out of the box" approach.

In 2007, ICCC, realizing a global knowledge gap existed, was inspired to apply the power of information communication technologies and established the "Age of Connectivity: Cities, Magnets of Hope...Imagining the Possible," initiative to "cross-pollinate" initiatives between the developed and developing world, building on lessons learned to accelerate opportunities and the application of new services. Within the framework of UN-HABITAT and with other UN partners, three High-Level Working Sessions were held in October 2008, November 2009 and June 2010. These working sessions gathered a non-traditional group of decision makers and experts from government, international organizations, local authorities, the private sector, academia, and health organizations to explore the use of ICTs to enhance community, health, wellbeing and quality of life. One of many recommendations coming from these working sessions was to address information "gaps" and identify successful projects from all corners of the world.

This expert group meeting not only reinforced this concept but provided successful health care ICTs scenarios that could be applied throughout the world.

Access and openness

Effective use of ICTs requires broadband connections, without which access to information is restricted in terms of speed and amount. The emerging trend is also for connections to be through mobile smartphones that can easily access information. Broadband connections are still poorly distributed, with most consumers in developed countries having them, but far fewer having them in developing countries, although this is changing rapidly. Similarly, while the spread of mobile phones is universal, most are not what are called smart phones.

Creating the necessary infrastructure for ICTs involves a partnership, particularly in improving access for underserved areas and underserved populations. The goal is to improve access for all. Telecommunication companies whose motivation is to increase revenue provide much of access, but governments have a responsibility for creating infrastructure in areas where market forces are less likely to invest, including particularly rural areas. Critical partnerships between the public and private sectors to provide infrastructure is a preferable method for achieving this kind of access.

Empowering youth through ICTs

Today, ICTs empower young people in ways that they have never experienced before. They provide them with the ability to connect, share, inspire others from anywhere and realize their potentials. ICTs have created many opportunities for youth and, are considered as a powerful tool in generating employment opportunities. Youth can connect with one another, access to knowledge, information and tools and inspire people to actively participate in their community. For example, social media networks may play a significant enabling role in helping to offset some of the challenges that youth face especially in employment opportunities.

While innovative practices are already being implemented by governments, non-governmental organizations, civil societies and businesses, the challenge remains to strategically unlock ICT's potential to lower youth unemployment across all developed and developing countries. The first step is to further advance education and training using ICTs in all countries.

Second, it is important to promote entrepreneurship and inspire young people to create business – and subsequently new jobs – especially in underserved and rural communities. ICTs, in combination with microfinancing, can serve as a launch pad to develop the next generation of young entrepreneurs.

Accessibility and Assistive Technologies for Persons with Disabilities

Another issue is ensuring that the technology meets user needs. This includes both hardware and software. This is particularly important for groups like persons with disabilities. “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, art.1).

According to the World Bank/WHO World Report on Disability issued in 2011, there are one billion persons living with disabilities around the world, two third of which live with severe disabilities limiting their use of ICTs if no accommodation is provided. No effort to empower people through the usage of ICTs can ignore this challenge: the group reviewed statistical evidence which points to significantly lower rates of technology adoption among persons with disabilities and elderly users.

In light of those facts, article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities establishes the requirement for States Parties to ensure that ICTs are accessible to persons with disabilities and provides a clear roadmap to implement policies and programs. It specifies among key dispositions that States Parties must promote Universal Design defined as “the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. “Universal design” shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities

where this is needed.” States Parties should also fund R&D in accessible technologies such as the localization of assistive technologies in different languages, set standards and promote the use of the Internet and new technologies among persons with disabilities as well as their awareness and adoption of assistive technologies.

The group reviewed the different aspects of ICTs interfaces and contents and how they can be made accessible for different types of disabilities: hardware such as electronic kiosks and ATMs, computers, tablets and phones, operating systems, mobile applications and computer software, services and contents such as web sites and television programs. The group noted the lack of implementation of those solutions among a majority of States Parties to the CRPD. It therefore recommended that as an essential component of policies and programs for empowering people with ICTs, the roadmap defined by the CRPD for accessible and assistive ICTs should be fully implemented.

This implies that standards and functional requirements for ICTs accessibility by persons with disabilities must be met. Governments should therefore recommend standards, but because information technology and the Internet are essentially borderless, governments should adopt to the greatest possible extent international technological standards set by bodies like the ISO, ITU, the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) or the Worldwide Web Consortium. International standards are important to ensure open market and competition, cross border economies of scale, lower costs and interoperability which benefit users. Consistent with the above, Governments should also ensure that e-government services are accessible and should implement public procurement policies including ICTs accessibility criteria.

Freedom of Opinion and the Internet

A universally accepted human right is that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” A human rights approach to the Internet is to maintain its open character. At the same time, there are accepted limitations on openness for national security, protection of privacy and preventing crime, including such issues as child pornography. There must be a balanced approach, but at present there are no agreements on what should be built into Internet governance. This issue is still being discussed in forums like the Internet Governance Forum, established after the World Summit for the Information Society. Determining the appropriate balance is a critical task in ensuring that ICTs will lead to empowerment.

Natural Disasters Prevention

In the aftermath of terrorism and recent natural disasters, both government and private sector have recognized more than ever the need of preparedness for natural disasters and cyber terrorism using ICTs.

ICTs are vital in planning and implementing most disaster risk reduction initiatives. However, the potential of ICTs is required to be harnessed in early warning, preparedness and response systems along with adequate emphasis on building human capacities to use ICTs to promote e-Participation. For example: Warning systems need to be put in place especially for persons with disabilities and older persons as major disaster victims. The preparedness plans should consider what type of communications equipment will be needed such as mobile phones, social media and satellites.

Role of government

The Group extensively reviewed how governments could develop e-participation. There were two elements in this, the provision of public services using ICTs and use of ICTs to engage the public to participate in decision-making.

An increasing number of governments are using ICTs to deliver services that are based on providing information to the public and receiving it from them. The evidence shows that this can make government more efficient and reduce cost. However, to be successful, the facilities provided need to be simple to use, accessible to older persons and persons with disabilities and well-communicated. They imply that the public has access to on-line services. There is a particular need to ensure that the services can be provided to vulnerable populations, including older persons, persons with disabilities and persons with limited access to ICTs. Innovative approaches, such as information kiosks, have been shown to be effective. Other experiences have suggested that the service provision also needs to be responsive so that those persons using the services are shown that their information has been received.

For ICTs to be effective, government officials at all levels need to be trained in the technological and human demands of the information culture, including how to use the information provided to improve services. This is important for encouraging innovation as a way of updating and improving services. Decision-makers at all levels need to be trained. And specific capacity-building programs need to be designed to be e-leaders by using the potential of ICTs to reach the public and develop support for government policies such as strategies on the use of ICTs at national and local levels.

Similar issues arise for international organizations, which are increasingly reaching out to global publics as a way of ensuring that the policies and programmes adopted by their Member States are known and are effective. Documents of international organizations are now available on-line and in an increasing number of cases, efforts have been made to obtain public input on such key issues as the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

Engaging the public to participate in decision-making implies overcoming a number of challenges. The first is to have in place policies that will encourage the public to participate. This can include placing proposals on websites and requesting comments on them, or using on-line surveys to gauge public preferences. For this to be successful, the mechanisms used need to be easy to use and accessible in a language comprehensible for all stakeholders.

A second issue is interpreting the responses. In order to determine the meaning of public input, staffs who are analyzing the responses need to be trained in the interpretation of findings to determine how representative they are. This in turn means that the government must have a clear sense about the characteristics of the communities being served so that who is contributing input can be determined.

A third issue is conveying to the public a sense that their participation in the decision-making process was effective and that they have influenced the final decisions about policies and programmes.

This expert group meeting reaffirmed the role of government to drive effective policies and regulations required to establish a balance that attains a level necessary to promote rapid growth of new services and applications and to minimize barriers to entry. There is a need for effective regulatory frameworks that minimize licensing hurdles and adopt technological neutrality,

allowing competition between different delivery platforms and greater end-user access while protecting infrastructure, intellectual property rights on content and technologies developed and consumers. Most importantly, development of legal and regulatory frameworks that curb crimes, build trust on investors, technology developers and end users.

Role of civil society and communities

Historically, empowerment has been achieved through organizations of civil society, as well as local communities. ICTs can increase the effectiveness of these organizations if it is used properly. Again, there are two dimensions. The first is that civil society organizations can use the Internet to project information about the organization and its concerns. This can help publicize and legitimize the organization. The second is that the organizations can use ICTs to network among members and other organizations, especially using social media.

For this to be effective, however, the organizations need to know how best to use ICTs. Those civil society organizations that have done so effectively can provide guidance and training to other organizations within the same constituencies.

Creating an effective environment

The key to using ICTs for empowerment is to create an effective environment for it. A number of suggestions have already been made, but some additional findings can be noted. As it has been noted, the use of ICTs is related to many international norms, which can promote the effective use of ICTs for empowerment. In many cases, how to apply the norms to ICTs has not been fully elaborated, but if this can be done, the citizen participatory governance can be an instrument for encouraging governments and civil society to use ICTs.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights includes key text on freedom of expression and access to information in its Article 19. It also contains provisions that define limitations on the right. Work that will show how this applies to ICTs has not yet been completed. The Human Rights Committee, that monitors the Covenant, issued a general comment (no. 34) on Article 19 that included text which stated (in paragraph 15) that “States parties should take account of the extent to which developments in information and communication technologies, such as internet and mobile based electronic information dissemination systems, have substantially changed communication practices around the world.” One means to encourage openness is for those concerned with State practice to follow periodic reporting to the Human Rights Committee and other human rights bodies in terms of ICTs openness.

Similarly, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in its article 21 states that “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice ... including by ... (d) Encouraging the mass media, including providers of information through the Internet, to make their services accessible to persons with disabilities”. The guidelines for reporting by States call for information to be provided on this. The convention review committee should pay particular attention to this, as should civil society organizations concerned with the exercise by persons with disability of this right.

The on-going negotiations to define Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals are one of the international processes that have been using ICTs to engage publics. In defining these

objectives, the role of empowerment through the use of ICTs should be included as a key implementation factor.

One element in this is undertaking programmes that will make it easier for people to use ICTs. The quickly moving technologies make demands on potential users and establishing training and other capacity-building efforts will be significant. Every institution, whether public or private, should assess the needs and current skills of users when new software and other technological improvements are developed with a view to ensuring that they are easy to use and are functional. Organizations, to which users belong, including civil society, communities and constituency groups, should also engage in efforts to determine the best way to reach and engage their participants through ICTs. Human-centered design should be a preferred approach.

Finally, the developments of ICTs make the creation of networks through which information can be shared and common positions agreed both easy and effective. Organizations seeking to influence decision-making, as well as connecting people socially, should work to develop these networks at local, national and transnational levels.

Recommendations for the Commission

Based on its examination, the Expert Group recommends that the Commission:

1. access to and use of ICTs can increase empowerment generally and particularly of social groups. Conclude that
2. that scholars and practitioners encourage further research on the relationship between e-Participation and empowerment, especially of social groups. Recommend
3. human centered and socially-responsible science and technology promoted through the citizen participatory governance. Endorse
4. including access to and use of ICTs as a factor in reviewing State implementation of key human rights instruments like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Recommend
5. that governments and private sector, in partnership, increase access to broadband communications, especially through mobile devices, especially for underserved populations. Recommend
6. producers of new technology to ensure that it meets user needs in terms of access, language, simplicity, safety and effectiveness. Encourage
7. that governments carry out strategies to encourage a responsible use of internet, to protect privacy and prevent crime and child abuse. Recommend
8. that governments increasingly provide services using ICTs where relevant, taking into account the experience of governments that have innovated in this. Recommend
9. governments that will utilize ICTs to provide services to undertake carefully designed Urge

programs of training both decision-makers and technical personnel at all levels in design of websites and other instruments and in the interpretation of information provided by target populations.

10. Recommend
that governments adopt policies, national strategies and procedures that will encourage the public, individually and as constituency groups, to participate in decision-making processes using ICTs and that civil society groups train and encourage their members to participate actively.
11. Recommend
that governments and private sector develop ICTs and e-technology public health strategies that will improve the aging process (e.g. Health Promotion/Disease Prevention).
12. Urge
governments to improve infrastructures, promote capacity-building in both citizens and public officials and increase the offering of applications such as crowd sourcing platforms and open data that improve participation, collaboration and transparency.
13. Recommend
that international bodies developing the post-2015 development strategies incorporate empowerment through ICTs in the process of agreeing on the strategies and incorporate this into the strategies themselves.