

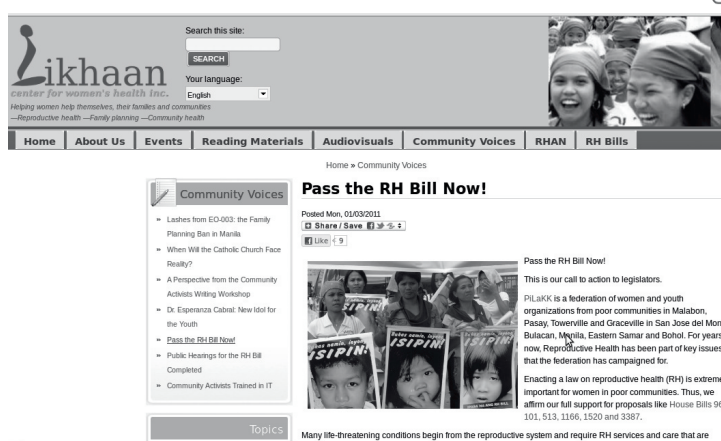


Enhancing participation in governance through ICTs

Insights from a project with community reporters in Manila

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The principle of democratic participation in governance is enshrined in the Philippine Constitution of 1987. However, even after a quarter of a century post the adoption of this principle, the concept of 'people's participation' in governance – particularly policy formulation and legislation at the national level – remains a mere aspiration. This is especially true for the marginalised women, men and youth in Philippines.

Much of the difficulty lies in establishing an adequate and effective infrastructure whereby information can be communicated, ideas discussed and debated, and feedback and inputs from the public brought to the attention of legislators and other policy-makers. But with the wider diffusion and accessibility of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), there is now an opportunity to democratise information and decision-making and achieve the realisation of the constitutional principle of people's participation.

In 2010, under the aegis of the Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society (CITIGEN) research programme, *Likhaan*¹ undertook an action research project, which sought to explore whether and how ICTs can play a role in influencing lawmakers both directly

and through the mobilisation of public opinion, to pass a reproductive health law that accounts for the realities of those most in need of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

This policy brief elucidates the need for policy and programmatic intervention by the government in order to:

1. Direct government spending towards public provisioning of ICTs with a focus on remote areas and marginalised communities.
2. Enhance the ICT capacity of key government institutions such as the Congress of the Philippines, by providing for common minimum standards in the design of government websites, with a view to maximise them as venues for dissemination of public information and discussion.
3. Encourage government officials to utilise ICTs in interacting with the public, and educate them in the use of democratic and participatory ICT-based methods of public consultation.
4. Promote government support for open and accessible standards and modes of ICTs.
5. Encourage government agencies engaged in working on women's empowerment and rights to strategically adopt ICTs in meeting their goals.

People's participation in governance: An overview

The principle of democratic participation in governance and the process of government decision-making is enshrined in the Philippine Constitution of 1987. Article XIII, Section 16 of the 1987 Constitution notes that:

The right of the people and their organisations to effective and reasonable participation at all levels of social, political, and economic decision making shall not be abridged. The State shall, by law, facilitate the establishment of adequate consultation mechanisms.

The purpose of the said provision "is for the people on the local level, provincial level, regional level, and national level to be consulted so that there will be an effective mechanism, so that we can check whether the decisions made on all levels are relevant and responsive to people's needs"². In the same vein, the said provision is a cornerstone of the "pluralistic society" envisioned under the 1987 Constitution, which "assures better opportunities for meaningful participation by the people in the charting of the national destiny"³, as well as a "novel" attempt to "[strengthen] the sinews of the sovereignty of our people"⁴.

Despite the noble intentions behind this provision, institutionalising "people's participation" in "social, political, and economic decision making", particularly at the level of the national government, participation remains only a distant aspiration nearly 25 years after the adoption of the constitutional principle.

To a large extent, the difficulty lies in establishing the "adequate consultation mechanisms" envisioned in the Philippine Constitution. With a population of nearly 102 million spread out over 7,107 islands, the physical difficulties in conducting traditional face-to-face, town hall type consultations are daunting, particularly for issues taken up at the national level. Prior to the automation of the national elections in 2010, even the regular and most fundamental consultation of the electorate through elections was a painful process, where the canvassing of votes and eventual determination of winners generally took over a month.

But, the automation of the elections – essentially involving the use of ICTs in the form of encrypted data transmissions through wireless cellular networks – shows the way towards making the idea of people's participation through "adequate consultation mechanisms" possible. By tapping ICTs – an area

where, according to a 2010 report of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the Philippines already enjoys a fairly high level of access at 29.7% - information dissemination and discussion with the public can be undertaken, to some extent, more democratically through remote participation.

Current ICT policy

While the Philippine government has officially adopted a general policy to create and establish "an enabling legal, policy and institutional environment to develop, promote and advance information and communications technology (ICT)"⁵, and while most government offices have set up and maintain their own websites, the use of ICTs and the Internet as a means to strengthen and promote people's participation in governance has not been maximised.

Most government websites – including those of the agencies principally involved with ICT, the now defunct Commission on Information and Communications Technology (CICT) and its successor agency, the Information Technology Office (ITO) of the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) – are little more than static electronic bulletin boards with no features and mechanisms to allow for interaction or feedback. While there have long been plans to create a truly interactive eGovernment Portal, these remain very much on the drawing board.

On the other side of the fence, despite the previously mentioned, relatively high level of Internet access in the Philippines, people in poorer communities – even in urban areas – still experience considerable difficulties in obtaining access to ICTs and the Internet. Even if official statistics would tend to paint a picture where nearly one in three Filipinos have access, this is misleading and does not take into account stratification arising from differences in economic standing as well as gender.

And while again, official general government policy states the need to "ensure universal access and high-speed connectivity at fair and reasonable cost" as well as "the provision of information and communication services in areas not adequately served by the private sector"⁶, specific policy directions and the framework to meet these objectives are clearly absent.

If properly harnessed, ICTs can forward the de jure objective enshrined in the Philippine Constitution of institutionalising 'people power' by enabling the de facto participation of citizens at all levels of government decision-making. Especially for

marginalised communities, given proper conditions, ICTs can open up the possibility of real engagement with governance.

Likhaan's action research project

Likhaan undertook an action research that aimed at channelising into the public debate on reproductive health, the realities and aspirations of women and youth in poor communities, through the strategic use of ICTs. The project created enabling conditions for some community members to become citizen reporters by providing technical training in computer skills along with several sessions of mentoring and discussion.

Community reporters authored articles and uploaded them from Internet cafes onto *Likhaan's* e-magazine. They wrote in *Tagalog*, the local language, about everyday life experiences, framed by concepts such as the right to a better life, the development of their communities, social justice, etc., giving the abstract notion of sexual and reproductive health and rights a rootedness in their lived reality. Their articulations therefore provide a rationale for the passage of legislation that assures their access to reproductive health services.

The research indicates that ICTs can be used for advocacy purposes, allowing activists and their communities to share their realities and struggles with a larger audience. Most significantly, the ICT platform allows for the publication of stories grounded in the local and the intimate. In these stories, the poor are depicted not as victims but as agents of social change.

Further, the use of ICTs proved to be an empowering experience for the community reporters. Their increasing mastery of the technology; the publication of their articles; the validation of the grounded knowledge put forth in the articles even as they themselves deepened their own grasp of that reality; and, the collective support and solidarity of the research team; were elements cited by the activists as contributory to their sense of empowerment. It is also interesting to note that despite their initial lack of computer skills and the barriers to access, none of the activists felt intimidated or stifled by the technology.

While it was beyond the scope of this research to monitor impact, it would seem that mainstream media had not picked up any of the activist's articles; anti-reproductive rights legislators continued to ignore the voices of the poor represented by these articles; national level discussions continued to be dominated by tropes of morality, sexuality, the dangers of

contraception, abortion and large populations. In this case, the attempt to bridge the local and the intimate with the institutional and national, through the use of ICT and the Internet, seems to raise many questions about how and under what conditions marginal voices can gain a legitimate place in public debates and politics.

Recommendations for policy

If the potential of ICTs as the primary component of deepening public participation and as an adequate consultation mechanism is to be realised, certain policy and programmatic interventions are necessary.

1. Public provisioning for inclusive governance

Public provisioning of ICTs needs to be recognised as a basic right of citizens in the information society, and as a precondition for citizens to participate and exercise freedoms. In order to meet the obligation in the ICT policy to "ensure the provision of information and communication services in areas not adequately served by the private sector", the government needs to direct public investment to improve access in remote areas and for marginalised communities, in lieu of the current practice which tends to replicate efforts by the private sector in areas that are already heavily serviced.

The government also needs to be cognisant that an enabling institutional framework, sensitive to the gendered and inequitable nature of society, is needed for effective access to ICTs by marginalised communities. For instance, the design of public access models for marginalised communities must promote their engagement as rights-bearing citizens in the public sphere. For women, this presupposes a safe, community-based space with technology and connectivity, that is also a space for training, discussion and learning, allowing them to negotiate the constraints of traditional gender roles.

2. Standards for government websites

The ICT capacity of key government institutions, particularly those engaged in policy-making, such as the Congress of the Philippines, must be enhanced by adopting a policy providing for common minimum standards for the design of government websites, with a view to maximising them as venues for dissemination of public information and, more importantly, discussion with and feedback from the public at large, and marginalised communities in particular. Government websites must be mandated to provide mechanisms for

interaction with and feedback from the public, and a common set of technical standards must be adopted to ensure this.

3. Participatory ICT-based methods in governance

Government institutions must be encouraged to utilise ICTs in interacting with the public. One problem that has arisen even after the advent of the official recognition of the importance of ICTs is that, despite the availability of ICTs and Internet-based facilities, most government offices continue to conduct their operations in the traditional, 'non-ICT' manner. If the potential of ICTs is to be realised, there must be an official policy that reorients government offices and officials towards giving primacy or equal weight to ICT-facilitated transactions and interactions with the public. A new culture of ICT use not only needs capacity building in technical aspects, but also in participatory methods of communication and consultation without which such interactions will not serve the purpose of democratic governance.

4. Open technology platforms

Steps should be taken to improve government support for open and accessible forms and modes of ICTs. Now that the lead role in managing ICT policy has been placed with the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), the same agency should also be encouraged to explore the development and adoption of less expensive, more accessible ICTs to allow a broader base of participation and use, particularly for the marginalised. Open technology platforms are critical for maximising outcomes from public investment and ensuring sustainability of public access.

5. Adoption of ICTs by women's agencies

Government agencies specifically engaged in work on women's empowerment and rights, principally the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW), should be encouraged to adopt ICTs strategically, both as a means for consultation and discussion, and as a method for promoting women's empowerment.

Endnotes:

1. *Likhaan* is a collective of grassroots women and men, health advocates and professionals dedicated to promoting and pushing for the health and rights of disadvantaged women and their communities. Established in 1995, it has developed models of care that help harness the social creative powers of women and young people.
2. Commissioner Edmundo Garcia, Record of the 1986 Constitutional Commission, Vol III, 11 August 1986, RCC No. 53
3. Dissenting Opinion of Sarmiento, J., in Taruc v. Ericta, G.R. No. L-34856, 29 November 1989, 168 SCRA 63
4. Dissenting and Concurring Opinion of Puno, J. in Santiago v. COMELEC, G.R. No. 127325, 19 March 1997, 270 SCRA 10
5. Presidential Executive Order No. 269, 12 January 2004
6. EO 269, *supra*

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