

Fostering e-Participation in Colombia

Enrique Cusba García
Citizens Engagement Coordinator
Edificio Murillo Toro between 12 y 13 streets
Bogotá - Colombia
+571 3442270
jaime.cusba@gobiernoenlinea.gov.co

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the framework and initiatives followed by Colombia to foster e-participation. E-participation implies openness and inclusiveness and the current ICT policy provides the basics for the accomplishment of such principles as the progress in infrastructure, access to services, applications and citizens and public servants capacities has enabled citizens' engagement. In addition, e-participation involves the provision of information, consultation and decision-making. The Crystal Ballot Box facilitates those three levels of participation so it becomes a relevant example of active e-participation in Colombia.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4. [Computers and Society]: Public Policy Issues

General Terms

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Keywords

E-Government; E-Participation; Crystal Ballot Box; Vive Digital

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the E-Government world assessment conducted by the United Nations, Colombia is among the top performers in e-participation. This country ranked 26 worldwide in the 2010 e-participation index [1] and it was number 6 in 2012. Moreover it continues to be leader in Latin America and the Caribbean. These facts have led Colombia to be considered as an emerging leader among developing countries that have begun to catch up with high-income nations [2]. Hence, the present paper describes those factors contributing to e-participation in Colombia and the Crystal Ballot Box as an example of active participation.

E-participation is open and inclusive and it comprises information, consultation and decision-making, the latter being the ultimate goal. These aspects are examined in section 2. Section 3 points out the factors accounting for openness and inclusiveness, in terms of infrastructure, access to services, applications and users' capabilities. Section 4 presents the most remarkable e-participation experience occurring now. Here, it is

possible to identify the multichannel strategy, multi-stakeholder efforts and the outcomes achieved so far. These elements allow observing the existence of the three levels of e-participation and provide some insight for other countries interested in improving citizen's engagement by making use of technology.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of e-participation assumes that technology brings new opportunities to improve government performance by linking citizens and representatives through public debate. OECD argues that active participation is "a relationship based on partnership with government in which citizens actively engage in defining the process and content of policy-making" [3]. UNDESA, in turn, states that e-participation is a "participatory, inclusive, deliberative process of decision-making" [4]. Therefore, e-participation encompasses the possibility for citizens to influence government decisions as an ultimate goal.

A second distinctive is openness and inclusiveness. According to OECD openness implies that citizens become more informed about policy choices and inclusion deals with engaging citizens who are 'able but unwilling' to participate and those 'willing but unable' as well [5]. Thus, in order to achieve these principles, governments have to promote actions to improve civil servants skills and create a supportive political and administrative culture. Furthermore, governments have to leverage technology, particularly Web 2.0 tools and applications to encourage citizen engagement. Finally, public agencies must design e-participation initiatives according to specific contexts in each country and evaluate such enterprises.

The third characteristic of e-participation deals with the ways it becomes visible in practice. OECD (2001) mentions three levels: information, consultation and active participation. Information refers to "a one-way relationship in which government produces information for use by citizens". It involves "passive" access to information based on direct citizen demand and "active" access, that is, government spreads information to citizens.

Consultation, in turn, regards to a "two-way relationship in which citizens provide feedback to government". Here, government defines previously the issues to be consulted to citizens, manage the whole process and citizens express their views on the issue. Finally, active participation refers to a "relationship based on partnership with government in which citizens actively engage in defining the process and content of policy-making". Even though the final decision corresponds to government, in this scenario there exist real opportunities for citizens to set the agenda, propose policy options and manage the dialogue.

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3. OPEN AND INCLUSIVE PARTICIPATION

Colombia has been making progress in the ICT policy following a framework that encompasses actions on infrastructure, services, applications and users. The “Live Digital Plan” (Vive Digital) includes key elements necessary to keep up a progressive e-participation improvement, openness and inclusiveness. Such elements are described as follows:

3.1 Infrastructure

Colombia has gone from 2.2 million Internet connections to 6.2 million in the last two years. In 2013, Colombia will reach 7.8 million of connections and in 2014 it is expected to reach out 8.8 million. Complementary, in 2010, 17% of households had Internet access and in December 2012 this percentage was 33.8%. In 2013 it is planned to reach 43% of households and the goal for 2014 is 50% of households connected. Regarding the small and medium enterprises, in 2010 only 7% of them had Internet connection; in 2012, the figure reached 20% and it is expected to achieve 50% in 2014.

Additionally, in 2010 only 200 municipalities had connection to optical fiber and now there are 553. In 2013, 226 additional municipalities will be connected and in 2014 the goal is to get a total of 1,078 municipalities, which means 96% of the national territory [6]. On the other hand, the mobile telephony penetration is 105.3 percent and nearly 7 million children have benefited from the purchase of 577.000 computers delivered to more than 13.500 educational centers.

3.2 Access to Services

In order to promote new services, wider use of ICT infrastructure and ensuring massive citizen access to ICT, Colombia has implemented measures that have allowed, through public-private actions, the widespread use of the Internet. These measures include subsidies for Internet access targeting low-income inhabitants. Here, nearly 1,000,000 families will benefit from Broadband Internet subsidy that may be used to fund the computer or the Internet service fee.

As complement, 101 “Live Digital Points” (Puntos Vive Digital) have been installed throughout the country. Such points are community spaces equipped with computers and Internet connection that offer access to citizens; 25 out of the total are directed to people with disabling conditions. Finally, the Ministry of ICT has connected rural and remote areas by installing 1.055 kiosks, also equipped with Internet and computers that are located in population centers of over 100 inhabitants and national parks. In 2013, the number of kiosk operating will increase to 2.744.

3.3 Applications and content

From 2007 to 2012, the e-Government Strategy focused on promoting efficiency, transparency and citizen participation. Participation embraced that every public organization at central and local level had to enable electronic mechanisms for citizens to actively participate in making decisions. Thus, public agencies had to perform the following activities: a) Call citizens to participate, b) Make available to citizens online mechanisms such as forums, blogs, social networks, conversation rooms and distribution lists, c) Implement interactive platforms where citizens can track public policy outcomes, d) Release the

outcomes coming from public consultation and participation regarding policy construction and decision making.

As result, public agencies made significant progress in promoting participation in different government areas. One of the high-impact e-participation exercises carried out during this period was the consultation process led by the Ministry of Education in 2006 and 2007 that turned into the National Education Plan 2006-2016¹. It was constructed with the support of citizens, regional and local leaders, education institutions, the industry, research centers, private sector and parents, making use of ICT.

Looking for further progress in e-Government, a new Plan was set in 2012. Such plan, currently in effect, aims to boost the use of technology in public sector by developing actions with citizens, public agencies and private sector and following two initiatives: “Enhancing Good Government” which is oriented to promote a deeper use of technology in Public Administration and “Engaging citizen to participate and collaborate” aiming at strengthening citizen and business capacities to interact with public organizations and to create opportunities of collaboration, participation and social control.

In terms of e-participation, all public agencies are required to publish basic information, performance indicators and regulation, among others. In addition, they are compelled to release information in open formats and promote their use by third parties. On the other hand, agencies must develop an e-participation strategy involving the use of electronic means to discuss norms, regulation and strategic initiatives according to their goals and functions. Finally, they are required to run accountability exercises online and to implement open innovation initiatives in order to address policy issues.

Besides e-participation initiatives implemented by each agency at central and local level, the government supports particular projects. In terms of Open Data, for instance, the E-Government Office, under the initiative “Mobile Government” (Gobierno Móvil) has been running collaborative events to co-create apps from open datasets². Likewise, the “Crystal Ballot Box” initiative (Urna de Cristal)³ constitutes the main e-participation initiative currently happening in Colombia; it is a platform where citizens can track the course and results of policies and bring their concerns and proposals directly to official organizations, interacting and creating a binding relationship between active citizens and government.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that participation endeavors come from civic groups as well. Co-creation and crowdsourcing platforms are contributing to enhance citizen engagement. “Active Citizens” (Ciudadanos Activos)⁴, for instance, is a civic platform created by citizens concerned about community issues in the city of Cali. Here, citizens can report problems that observe (Streets that need to be repaired for instance); but they also are able to post proposals on transport, security, infrastructure and other topics. In addition, citizens join groups with similar interests and interact with local government.

¹ See <http://www.plandecenal.edu.co>. Viewed 13 July 2013

² See <http://moviles.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co/>. Viewed 13 July 2013

³ See <http://www.urnadecristal.gov.co>. Viewed 13 July 2013

⁴ See <http://www.ciudadanosactivos.com/>. Viewed 13 July 2013

3.4 Users' Capabilities

The "Digital Citizen"⁵ initiative (Ciudadano Digital) is oriented to encourage the use and adoption of ICT among public servants and in the public education sector. Every public servant and teacher in Colombia is to be trained and certified under the program by 2014. To date, there have been 300,000 people registered for the Digital Citizen initiative; by 2014, 700,000 are expected to have completed their Digital Citizenship training. Complementary, the e-Government Office has created training and education programs targeting public officials to build institutional capacities and promote cultural changes. In the last two years 120-hour courses were delivered and this year the Office will implement a graduate program that will be provided in conjunction with universities.

As part of the citizens' engagement activities the e-Government Office has also designed take-up and usage campaigns by taking advantage of mass media, social networking and other strategies to make citizens know the offering of e-participation. The first step is to communicate the offering of e-participation coming from public agencies; the second step seeks that citizen experiment with the mechanisms available online in order for them to gain confidence. Finally, a series of actions are developed to encourage collaboration, that is to say, promote that citizens can create contents that boost e-participation. In 2012 more than 62.000 citizens were reached by a take-up campaign promoting the use of e-services including those associated with participation.

4. E-PARTICIPATION EXPERIENCE: THE CRYSTAL BALLOT BOX

The "Crystal Ballot Box" initiative represents the best concrete experience on e-participation in Colombia. This is a platform for social inclusion as citizens, regardless of geographic location, are able to speak with the government and express their needs and opinions. Likewise, citizens can contribute to set public policy and meet, track and benefit from the government plans.

4.1 Structure

The Crystal Ballot Box works in three different but complementary dimensions: a) Information and transparency that promotes the visibility of progress in policy implementation, b) Consultation that seeks to generate greater interaction and a close relationship with citizens, c) Decision-making which is aimed at encouraging participation, problem-solving and advocacy in the decision-making process of public administration.

4.2 Operational Model

To ensure the quality and relevance of the initiative, the Crystal Ballot Box operates as a multi-platform, integrating web 2.0 and traditional media. It also has a request-and-response management system and protocols for quality of service to citizens, relevant content targeting particular groups and manuals of communication and media usage.

4.3 Channels

The Crystal Ballot Box makes use of seven integrated channels:

4.3.1 Website

⁵ See <http://www.ciudadanodigital.org.co/>. Viewed 14 July 2013

It offers communication tools and information about the development of specific central government initiatives. In addition, citizens can participate by leaving comments, asking questions and sharing them through social networks.

4.3.2 Call-center

The Citizen Contact Center is a central telephone line where citizens can get information and participate. It has a script that is modified weekly according to the topics launched through the website.

4.3.3 Text Message (SMS)

The platform sends an average of two posts per week with information and inviting people to participate and to access the contents promoted by the initiative.

4.3.4 Mobile (USSD)

This tool allows citizens to meet and vote on the most relevant issues of the week by making use of a text message interface.

4.3.5 TV

The Crystal Ballot Box TV Program is broadcasted every Sunday and here citizens get informed about current concerns in public administration, not in the form of news or magazine, but as a dialogue between the citizens and the agencies.

4.3.6 Radio

Similar to its TV counterpart, the objective of this program is to establish a two-way dialogue with citizens on the main achievements and evolution of the central government policies.

4.3.7 Social networks

By using Twitter, Facebook and Youtube, citizens can ask questions, send proposals, find out the Government initiatives development in a more didactic and easily manner, see government responses and participate in accountability exercises. One of the most relevant elements of transparency is the accountability reports which are posted permanently on the website and spread over social networks. These contain the reports on participation exercises, the responses to citizens and the progress of government actions.

4.4 Organizational structure

The Crystal Ballot Box team is composed by an interdisciplinary group of professionals. In addition, a response-to-citizen management network was created which is in charge of coordinating tasks with over 50 central agencies and of encouraging high-quality services from those public servants responsible for citizen attendance. The Crystal Ballot Box also has the support of the Presidency of the Republic. The specific instances involved are the High Council for Communications, which establishes the guidelines and editorial policy, the High Council for the Regions and Citizen Participation that supports the participation strategy at a regional level and the Secretariat of Transparency, which coordinates transparency and anti-corruption initiatives.

4.5 Main Achievements

During the first phase (2010 - 2013), the Crystal Ballot Box reached over 4 million Colombians, developed a new technology platform and the executed participation exercises involving 16

ministries and central agencies. In 2011 the government represented by the High Advisory Office for Good Governance and Administrative Efficiency decided to carry out an anti-procedure campaign to assure good faith, transparency and best practices in public administration. Here, a citizen consultation was run to identify those unnecessary procedures that often facilitate corruption and create inefficiency in the service delivery process.

Citizens were called to participate by making use of the whole range of channels available (Twitter, Facebook, SMS, website and call-center) in a two-week period. They were asked four simple questions and the campaign was accompanied by traditional media strategy⁶. As a result, nearly 70.000 people expressed their opinion and in January 2012, the President issued the Law 19 whose purpose is to facilitate the relationship between the government and the citizens. Over 400 procedures were eliminated in 2011 and 259 more during 2012, representing 40% of all the procedures of public agencies.

In 2012 the initiative ran the first public feedback exercise to identify the knowledge, understanding and public perception that different audiences had about the initiative and to hear citizens' expectations and recommendations. The results of such study constituted the basics to improve the citizen participation platform, the strategy and the communication codes.

Finally, in 2013, a new engagement exercise was executed, this time aimed to widely share the Anti-Corruption Policy and to be aware of citizens' concerns about such issue. It also pursued to centralize information on government initiatives to fight corruption and, finally, to open participation channels for collective construction. The information and conclusions were shared with the Secretary of Transparency who, in turn, will incorporate them into the Anti-Corruption Policy document. Similar to the above-mentioned, 10 more e-participation events will be performed this year involving diverse agencies at central and local level.

To summarize, Table 1 presents figures showing the impact of the Crystal Box during recent years, in terms of coverage and participation experiences.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Participation in Colombia in recent years has been enhanced thanks to the ICT policy whose digital ecosystem based on infrastructure, services, applications and users has led to accomplish a more open and inclusive environment for citizens. Experiences like the Crystal ballot Box reflects the possibility for citizens to be informed about the course of government policies, consulted on specific issues, most of them associated with service delivery, transparency, anticorruption and participation itself. Finally, the initiative allows citizens to influence the decision-making process by making uses of a wide range of electronic tools, according to citizens' needs.

Table 1. Crystal Ballot Box Impact

Indicator	2011	2012	2013
Number of citizens reached by messages	NA	5.520.483	7.121.315
Number of followers in social networks	11.739	46.456	82.111
Number of visitors to the webpage	222.970	640.411	490.384
Number of telephone calls received	NA	7.102	4.412
Number of national participation exercises and campaigns	1	10	10
Number of social network interactions	NA	57.015	56.835
Number of questions and claims processed	80	10.731	6.838
Number of public agencies linked	4	11	50

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⁶ Some samples may be found at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFDOwIujIM4>. Viewed 14 July 2013

