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ELECTRONIC PARTICIPATION OFFERED BY CHILEAN MUNICIPALITIES. IS IT THAT WHAT CITIZENS REALLY WANT?

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Abstract

Information technology and the internet have an enormous potential for the development of government services at all levels. These technologies not only offer access to a wide range of electronic services to support the daily life of citizens, but they also could help citizens to participate in the governance of their communities. The term "electronic participation" has been coined to describe the use of these technologies with the goal of improving political participation. This article assesses and compares eParticipation services provided by Chilean municipalities with the level of satisfaction perceived by its citizens. The study ranks the level of e-participation offered by 324 municipalities in Chile and assesses the satisfaction of 198 citizens belonging to eight municipalities in the North of Chile. On one hand, the results suggest that the average e-participation offered by Chilean municipalities in the North of Chile is still low. On the other hand, municipalities providing a high level of eParticipation services are not always the ones getting better levels of citizen's satisfaction with their services. Another interesting finding suggests that the informal but permanent communication of some municipalities through twitter can improve citizen's satisfaction with eParticipation.

Keywords

E-participation; Electronic Government; Municipalities; Local Governments; Satisfaction

1. Introduction

Technologically mediated participation is a topic that has been gaining the attention of the governments and academic researchers around the world. The growing interest in this phenomenon can be explained by the advanced access that society has obtained to a variety of information technologies that connect governments to citizens, the social pressure of citizens to participate in government decisions, and the need of Governments to work with citizens to improve the accuracy and opportunity provided by public policies.

eParticipation is a novel field that can be initially traced to the research of Gregson (1997), Steyaert (2000), and Al-Kodmany (2001) who used the concepts of internet and online tools for political participation as precursors to the concept of e-participation. The term e-participation appears first the year 2002 when Kearns, Bend, and Stern (2002) defined e-participation as “ the use of tools such as e-mail discussion groups and web based discussion

spaces ,that may have real potential to connect citizens with the political process between elections by facilitating, broadening and deepening participation in a variety of ways” (p.13). These authors also argued that e-participation provided citizens with an effective way of obtaining useful information easier and simpler and could also become a political tool for the government because it supports and broadens the democratic process.

There are many challenges that governments are facing in terms of eParticipation. The European Parliament assessed the challenges associated with the lack of eParticipation in its states. Although Europe is the continent with the highest level of eParticipation according to the United Nations Survey (see figure 1), the major obstacles are associated with citizen’s disinterest in EU politics and people’s unawareness of the eParticipation tools (Lironi, 2016). Also, the United Nation (UN) has assessed eParticipation as part of its e-government index since 2003. At that time, Chile was ranked third place at the world level. However, by 2016 the country had descended to 32nd place.

Local governments have seen great potential in eParticipation initiatives so to meet the needs of their communities. This synergy, between the government and information technologies, has expanded greatly from an initial conception of automation of the internal processes of the government, towards a more integral scope of this term. This synergy use the potential of the internet and / or other digital media to improve government collaboration with external entities and citizens (Krishnan & Teo, 2012).

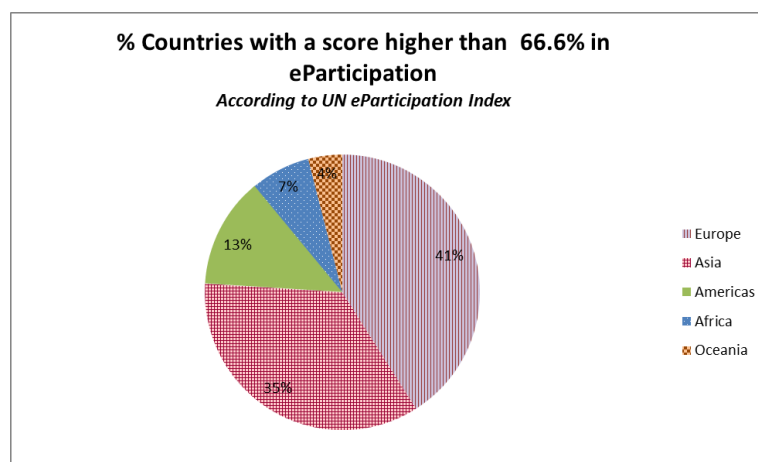


Figure 1: eParticipation index over 66.6% by country and continents

The relevance that eParticipation has achieved throughout all levels of government and the lack of studies that addresses eParticipation from the citizens perspective in Chile helped to raise the research question of this study: Is electronic participation offered by Chilean Municipalities really what citizens want?

To answer this question, we first measured the level of eParticipation offered by all municipalities in Chile based on the definition provided by Macintosh (2004) and the UN framework for eParticipation in the E-government survey (UNDESA, 2014). Secondly, we measured the level of satisfaction with eParticipation by adapting the conceptual model proposed by Rai, Lang, and Welker (2002) so to measure satisfaction with aParticipation at a local level. This assessment included 198 citizens in six municipalities in the north of Chile.

The comparison between what eParticipation services Chilean municipalities are providing and the level of satisfaction of their citizens was analyzed using a four quadrant diagram that

classifies every municipality and identifies the gaps between what eParticipation services are provided and citizen’s satisfaction.

2. Literature Review

While there is no complete agreement on the definition of eParticipation, this issue has been an emerging topic on all levels of government (Lironi, 2016; UNDESA, 2014). Various researchers in academia and in government settings are working toward the improvement of electronic participation services provided for its citizens. This goal has not been easy to achieve because this is a multidisciplinary task that involves the participation of multiple agents among them government officials, citizens, social and political organizations. Additional challenges, to reach satisfactory e-participation levels, include the level of technological development of the particular government and the country, the resources available for this issue, and the level of government commitment with the citizens (Kim & Lee, 2012; Macintosh, 2004, 2006; Medaglia, 2012; UNDESA, 2014). Governments seek to encourage eParticipation in order to improve its efficiency, acceptance, and legitimacy of political processes among the people, but e-participation goes beyond simply asking people to provide their views about decisions and services proposed by the government, it should encourage active participation of citizens by shaping actions and improving the quality of life in their communities. Improving quality of life is the reason why more than ever governments at all levels have the responsibility of informing and allowing citizens to be part of the decision making process since technologies are capable and available to accomplish this goal. Sanford and Rose (2007) argued that stakeholders have the right to participate in decisions where their interest can be affected.

2.1 Conceptualizing e-Participation

As discussed above, the concept of eParticipation is still an elusive term and its definition has been emerging according to the development of new technologies and citizens requirements. Moreover Sæbø, Rose, and Flak (2008) described the field as immature and rapidly changing. Susha and Grönlund (2012) suggested that the concept of eParticipation was initially included in eGovernment and eDemocracy but through time it has been established as an independent field. Due to the multidisciplinary foundation of the field, many theories have supported its development. Sanford and Rose (2007) identified seven referent disciplines for eParticipation; Communication, Computer Science, Information Systems, Social and Political Philosophy, Political Science, Public Administration, and Sociology. Susha and Grönlund (2012) added to these theories eGovernment theories and also claimed that the building block in eParticipation is the Habermasian -Conception of the public sphere.

Various working definitions have been put forward and adopted by researchers and practitioners at government level. The term has evolved since the first author used it and table 1 summarizes the most used definitions of eParticipation in the literature.

Definition	Source
eParticipation involves the extension and transformation of participation in societal democratic and consultative processes mediated by information and communication technologies (ICT), primarily the Internet. It aims to support active citizenship with the latest technology developments, increasing access to and availability of participation in order to promote fair and efficient society and government	Sæbø et al. (2008)
eParticipation is the use of ICT to support democratic decision-making, drawing on the definition by Macintosh (2004), where eParticipation is related to the issues of enabling opportunities for consultation and dialogue between government and citizens by using a range of ICT tools	Medaglia (2012)
The growing body of knowledge on eParticipation has also confirmed the	Parvez and Ahmed

interdisciplinarity of the field. Contributions come from both the areas of social sciences and of information systems research. Perspectives from political science, sociology, management, psychology, and economics stand beside contributions that are more technical in nature.	(2006)
The use of ICT to support democratic decision making.	Macintosh (2004)
The use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives.	Macintosh (2006)

Table 1: Definitions of eParticipation

Medaglia (2012) also argues that the objective of e-participation is to provide opportunities for consultation and dialogue, between the government (local or central) and citizens, through the use of Information technology tools. In this sense, Macintosh (2004) states what the fundamental objectives of e-participation are: i) to reach a wider audience to allow greater participation; ii) to support participation through a series of technologies to achieve diversity iii) provide relevant information in a format that is both accessible and understandable to the target audience, so that more informed contributions can be made; (iv) engage with a wider public to allow deeper contributions and to support a deliberative debate.

The phenomenon of participation in local governments has shown to be dependent on a multiplicity of factors including centralization, the rural level of the commune, organizational paradigm of the hierarchy (Blaug, 2002; Sanchez & Narea, 2016) . Also, Åström and Grönlund (2012) argues that the problem is that hierarchical paradigms assume that the effectiveness of participation is something that can be achieved only through leadership, bureaucracy and centralized control. Robinson (2007) also asserts that participation in local governments is in the hands of government policies that allow efficient processes of decentralization and that according to their evidence has not happened in most Latin American countries.

2.2 Citizens Satisfaction and eParticipation

According to the website of the RAE's, satisfaction can be defined as the "reason, action or manner in which a complaint, feeling or contrary reason is answered". If we see satisfaction in social terms, we can talk about the search for an answer to the needs that, in some cases, belong to a community.

Westbrook (1980) and Bolton and Drew (1991) argue that consumer satisfaction refers to the positive appraisal of the results associated with the consumption of a product or service and that, theoretically, consumer satisfaction is the result of transactions through which people can compare the gratification and costs of the expected result. Thus, it can be understood that satisfaction depends on the quality of the result provided by the service.

The topic of satisfaction has been widely investigated mostly because of its impact in the consumer's behavioral intentions and customer retention (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Bitner & Hubbert, 1994). Citizen's satisfaction then fall close to this definitions and it needs to be addressed by the government in order to design strategies to bring the municipality closer to its citizens. Previous studies in the MIS field have demonstrated the positive impact that user satisfaction has on net benefits. Veenhoven (1994) claimed that a high level of satisfaction suggests better quality of life in a community. Rai et al. (2002) proposed an instrument that assesses satisfaction with information technology in the context of the Information systems success model: They defined this satisfaction as the sum of feelings or attitude toward a variety of factors that affect a situation. They found out, based on an empirical analysis, that a

single item measure of user satisfaction can be used when an overall indication of user satisfaction is desired.

2.3 eParticipation in Chile

eParticipation has aroused the interest of government representatives who want to incorporate the opinions of citizens in decisions that affect them, however, progress in Chile is scarce and the country is still far from adopting best practices and successful initiatives in active participation. Alfaro, Bustos, González, and Loroño (2005) argue that the Chilean government has encouraged the automation of processes of institutions intensive in the use of central (national) government information, leaving unattended other areas such as the deepening of democracy, participation and local governments. Since 2003, the UN through the Department of Economic and Social Affairs has presented an eParticipation index where they rank all countries based on its framework. In this ranking, Chile has gone down significantly since 2003 (see Table 2). Although Chile’s place in the UN eParticipation index is good in average, compared with the rest of Latin America, the country has still room for improvement.

If we analyze in detail the components of the UN ranking of eParticipation(see Figure 2), we can see that the country as a whole has been improving in the “e-information” and “e-consultation” dimensions but e-decision making has been lagging behind since the beginning of the index.

Year	Position
2003	3
2004	11
2005	10
2008	71
2010	34
2012	8
2014	7
2016	32

Table 2: Chile’s eParticipation position in the eParticipation Index
Source : Elaborated by authors based on United Nations Reports

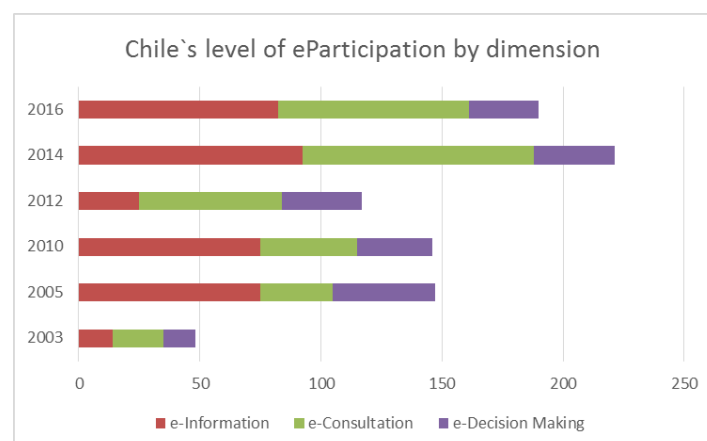


Figure 2: eParticipation index for Chile by dimension

Even though eParticipation at country level is not bad comparatively with the rest of the world, local government, mainly municipalities, need to improve tremendously. A study of the digitalization of the Chilean municipalities in the year 2015 found that greater proportions

of metropolitan municipalities are among those which greater technological capacities and provision of electronic services. Then, centralization is an issue in a country where most of the government budget is decided at a central level. This centralization implies a great challenge for Chilean local governments and rural communities in Chile and it is also an element that affects eParticipation (Alcala, 2015; Inostroza Oyarzún, 2015; Sanchez & Narea, 2016). Pacheco, Sánchez, and Villena (2013) pointed out that greater distance to the regional capital in Chile and greater political concentration increase municipal efficiency in the provision of services to the citizens.

3. Methodology

The methods used in this study can be classified in two areas; the offer and satisfaction perspective. The study of eParticipation offered by municipalities to the citizens in their communities was performed throughout its website. It was conducted at national level and the assessment of satisfaction was performed in a sample of eight municipalities located in the north of Chile.

3.1 eParticipation offered by Chilean municipalities at national level

The assessment of eParticipation services offered by all municipalities in Chile included 324 municipalities (94% of the total number of Chilean municipalities according to the National Municipal Information System (SINIM) leaving only 21 municipalities excluded because of difficulties to access them or lack of an active web portal).

Based on previous research, an instrument was developed and piloted to evaluate and rank the level of eParticipation offered by each municipality through its website and social networks (Inostroza Oyarzún, 2015; Macintosh, 2004) (UNDESA, 2014, 2016) This instrument encompassed three types of relationships that may exist between the government and its citizens (e-information, e-consultation, and e-active Participation).

The instrument used a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 levels, where 1 is considered as the total absence of the item to be evaluated and 5 as the optimal level. Table 3 shows the dimensions used to evaluate e-participation in the Chilean municipalities.

Dimension	Measurement
e-information	Description of Municipal Units, Active municipal Transparency Schedule of Activities News Section, Newsletters and News
e-consultation	Frequent questions Opinion polls or citizens inquires Digital Contact Form
Active Participation	Social networks City Council Live Discussion Forums Online Voting Polls with Feedback

Table 3: Dimensions of eParticipation

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on (Macintosh, 2004; UNDESA, 2014)

The assessment was performed through the municipality's websites. We assigned a relative weight of 25% for e-Information, 35% for e-Consultation, and 40% for active participation. This distribution of weight was based on the literature that argued that e-consultation and active participation requires more sophisticated technologies and full institutional support and practices but e-information alone could be accomplished by outsourcing this information service (the first phase of the evolutionary model of e-government is linked to informational development, since they are the least complex to implement) (Inostroza Oyarzún, 2015) (Esteves, 2005) (Kaufman, 2006). This relative weight distinguished those municipalities that offer electronic participation with greater emphasis in a bidirectional relationship and collaboration from the rest. Next, the score was standardized according to the following formula:

$$eParticipation\ index\ Municipality\ x = \frac{(y-a)}{(b-a)}$$

"y" is the score obtained by municipality X, "a" is the lowest score obtained by the sample of municipalities and "b" is the highest score obtained by municipalities. With the application of the index, results between 0 and 1 were obtained. This score determines the level of e-participation offered by each municipality. Data was divided into quintiles, every one representing 20% of the population. Figure 3 shows the distribution of those quintiles.

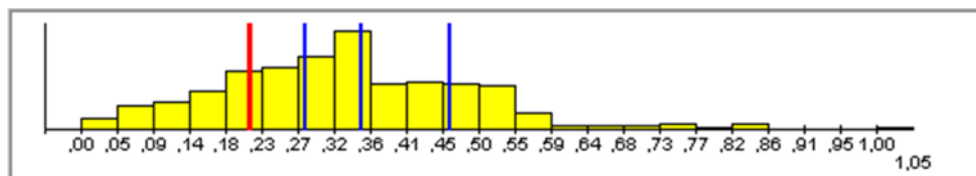


Figure 3: eParticipation index by Municipalities divided by quintile

Finals results are shown in table 4. It can be observed that there is a concentration at level 1 and 2 with 127 municipalities offering ample room for improvement of their eParticipation services provided to the citizens.

Level	Frequency	Percentage
1. Basic	71	21.9
2. Less than average	56	17.3
3. Average	56	17.3
4. Good	73	22.5
5. Very Good	68	21.0

Table 4: Dimensions of eParticipation

Municipalities ranked at the top and lowest level of the index are presented in table 5. This table shows that the best ranked municipalities were located in the center of the country (60% belongs to the Santiago metropolitan region) and the ones ranked at the lowest level were mainly rural with population levels below 10.000 inhabitants and located at a great distance from the capital.

Highest eParticipation Rank				Lowest eParticipation Rank			
Municipality	Score	ePart index	Level	Municipality	Score	ePart Index	Level
Ñuñoa	42	1	5	San rafael	16	0.06	1
Providencia	39	0.84	5	San pedro	16	0.06	1
Talcahuano	38	0.84	5	Putre	16	0.06	1
Recoleta	38	0.82	5	Nogales	17	0.06	1
Las condes	38	0.81	5	Pencahue	16	0.05	1
Vitacura	37	0.77	5	Trehuaco	16	0.04	1
Peñalolen	36	0.76	5	Yungay	16	0.03	1
Coyhaique	36	0.75	5	Ercilla	16	0.03	1
Antofagasta	34	0.7	5	Camarones	15	0.01	1
Osorno	34	0.68	5	Puqueldon	15	0	1

Table 5: Municipalities ranked at the top and bottom level of eParticipation offered

3.2 Citizens Satisfaction with eParticipation

Citizen's satisfaction with eParticipation services offered by their municipalities was assessed in a sample of 198 citizens belonging to eight municipalities located in the north of Chile. These municipalities are located in what is called the Chile's large North (from Arica to Copiapo). They were selected basically because the study intended to obtain information about an important zone where there is diversity in terms of size, financial resources, industries and population. The study used information from the 2012 census. Data was collected throughout personal interviews and with an online survey. Table 4 shows the municipalities selected for the study and the sample size finally obtained. We collected 575 surveys from citizens but only 198 of it have used the municipality website.

To measure citizens satisfaction with eParticipation, the authors adapted three question from the instrument developed by Rai et al. (2002) and Mudzana and Maharaj (2015) and it used a Likert scale to assess user satisfaction from 1 to 5 (1= Strongly disagree to 5= Strongly agree). The questions are presented in table 5.

Municipality	Population	Sample Obtained	Sample that have used the Municipality website
Arica	175.452	58	12
Iquique	186.033	61	16
Antofagasta	384.894	280	117
Mejillones	11.593	15	5
Taltal	10.418	19	5
Calama	149.229	54	17
Tocopilla	20.720	17	4
Copiapó	169.656	71	22
	1.107.995	575	198

Tabla 4: Municipalities by population and simple size

To measure citizens satisfaction with eParticipation, the authors adapted three question from the instrument developed by Rai et al. (2002) and Mudzana and Maharaj (2015) and it used a

Likert scale to assess user satisfaction from 1 to 5 (1= Strongly disagree to 5= Strongly agree). The questions are presented in table 5.

Citizen´s satisfaction with eParticipation	Questions
My municipality website meets my current needs and requirements as a citizen.	1. I think that the municipality website is a great help to solve my doubts.
	2. I consider myself satisfied with the efficiency of the Municipality website.
	3. Given all this, I am satisfied with the electronic participation offered by the website of my municipality?

Table 5 : Citizens satisfaction with eParticipation questions

When we ask the respondents if they knew their municipality´s web site, only 48% of them answered positively. The use of municipality´s websites was also low, only 34.4 % of the populations have used it (see table 6).

	Frecuency	Valid %
No, I haven´t use it	377	65,6
Yes, I have use it	198	34,4
Total	575	100,0

Table 6: Use of the Municipality website

4. Data analysis and results

Overall satisfaction with eParticipation offered by their municipalities were on the average positive reaching 50% combining agree and strongly agree. However these results differ considerable from one municipality to another. The highest levels of satisfaction were reached by Taltal and Tocopilla (agree and strongly agree).

When comparing the level of satisfaction perceived by citizens in all municipalities in the north of Chile with the eParticipation index of its municipality, we could see that those municipalities with a high ranking of eParticipation services offered to their citizens are not the ones that received the favor of the citizens. The best levels of satisfaction are in small municipalities, Taltal and Tocopilla, with a low level of eParticipation offered. Meanwhile, Antofagasta, ranked in the top level of eParticipation offered, only received a 47% of average satisfaction (see Table 7). Finally, Figure 4 shows a diagram of the municipalities in the north of Chile that illustrates the gaps between the level of eParticipation services provided to the citizens, through their website, and the level of citizen´s satisfaction in those municipalities.

Municipality	ePart Index	Quintil	Average combined Satisfaction (Agree+Strongly Agree)
Arica	0.36	4	66.7
Iquique	0.35	3	50.0
Tocopilla	0.37	4	75.0
Calama	0.42	4	58.8
Mejillones	0.46	5	20.0
Antofagasta	0.7	5	47.0
Taltal	0.31	3	80.0
Copiapo	0.34	3	45.3

Table 7: eParticipation index and satisfaction of citizens with eParticipation offered

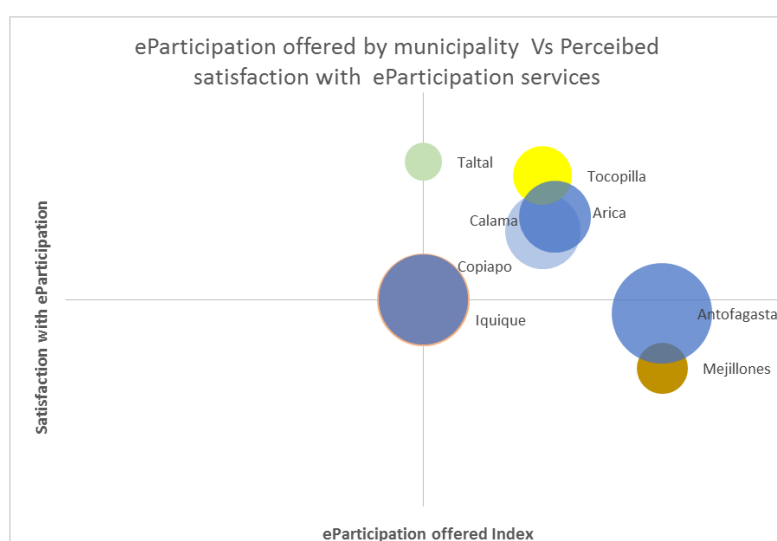


Figure 4: Diagram of eParticipation offered index and citizen's satisfaction.

5. Conclusions

The use of information and communication technologies with the purpose of informing and bringing citizens closer to the government decisions that affects them are one of the challenges that municipal governments in Chile are facing today. This study assesses comparatively the level of e-participation offered by the Chilean municipalities and the satisfaction perceived by their citizens with the eParticipation offered.

Results regarding the level of eParticipation of Chilean municipalities are not positive for communities distant from the capital and with small numbers of inhabitants. However, when looking at citizen's satisfaction with eParticipation services provided by their municipalities in the north of Chile, the picture was different. Satisfaction was not solely related to the size of the municipality, the number of services or the level of technological development. The only variable different that could help to understand was the use of social networks where those municipalities with current update of their networks achieved higher satisfactions rates from their citizens.

Therefore, it is imperative to design policies that improve access to the Internet in the rural communities of the country, by either directly subsidizing access to electronic

communication means or through private agreements to ensure this access. It is also necessary the provision of central government supported programs for the development of applications that would allow them to bring the citizens closer to the decision making process of their municipalities.

There are also other aspects that must be addressed by local governments to achieve higher levels of electronic participation starting by putting this topic on the municipal digital agenda, identifying the issues that require citizen participation, addressing areas like security and trust, and improve citizens' approach to municipal decisions through the use of social networks and other mechanisms that socializes decisions. It is important to appreciate that despite having achieved progress in central government services and having achieved high levels of internet use in the country, citizens are still very far away from being able to participate in the decisions of their communities, and work with their local governments on issues that affect their daily life. It is essential for local governments to establish efficient, secure, and decentralized electronic communication mechanisms that works mutually with their citizens to improve the quality of life for their citizens, independent of the size of the community in which they live.

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