Civil society’s digitized approach to environmental planning. The case of environmental associations’ e-participation platform in Berlin.

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Scope

- E-Participation “the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy, decision-making, and service design and delivery so as to make it participatory, inclusive and deliberative” [UN, 2014].

- In Germany approx. 230 recognized environmental and nature conservation associations use their participation rights in many administrative decisions (Aarhus Convention UN).

- We examine
  - how the civil society participates and communicates in environmental planning processes through a digital instrument.
  - the impact of these instruments on four dimensions.
The Umwelt-Beteiligung-Berlin.de platform was a joint project of 4 civil society partners and Zebralog GmbH & Ko KG, in 2013:

1. UfU,
2. State office of recognized nature conservation associations in Brandenburg,
3. Berlin State Working Group for Nature Conservation (BLN)
4. Lower Saxony State Office for Nature Conservation GbR (LABÜN).
Berlin State Working Group on Nature Conservation (BLN) is an umbrella organization of the 13 nature and environmental protection associations representing around 60,000 individual members. According to German legislation all the recognized environmental and nature conservation associations have the opportunity to inspect relevant expert reports in environmental planning processes. BLN coordinates knowledge & information sharing and the development of the joint statements environmental consultation processes.
The E-participation platform
Main Functions

- It aims to simplify the work of the associations providing members with planning documents, enabling them to write joint statements on environmental planning issues.
- It helps recruiting new volunteers facilitating integration of citizen knowledge and new expertise.
- It assists the associations digitizing and archiving all processes and creates a knowledge hub to support and train the newcomers based on a flat hierarchy model.
Opinion Statements

- Laws and regulations
- Protected areas, water protection areas
- Higher-level planning
- Landscape plans procedures
- Environmental approval procedures, environmental impact assessments
- Association actions, objection proceedings, others
- Building, project and development plans
- Interventions in nature and landscape
- Exemptions from nature conservation regulations
- Regional planning procedures, planning approval and licensing
- Water authority planning approval, authorization procedures
We used the questionnaire (Torkzadeh and Doll, 1999) in German (on-line) to measure the perceived impact of the platform on the work performed by the BLN association members and users.

The answers were acquired from a sample of 7 out of the 13 BLN member associations, a rather encouraging turnout percentage (53.84%).

We used the a Likert scale 1-5
- 1 - not at all
- 2 - a little
- 3 - to a moderate extent
- 4 - to a substantial extent
- 5 - to a great extent

The statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS statistical software version 27.0.
Questionnaire structure

"a tool for measuring the perceived impact of information technology on work" (Torkzadeh and Doll, 1999)

- **9 Questions**
  - Impact on task productivity

- **11 Questions**
  - Impact on task innovation

- **10 Questions**
  - Impact on internal/external user satisfaction

- **11 Questions**
  - Impact on management control
Dimensions I & II

**Impact on task productivity**
1. This platform improves the quality of my work.
2. This platform increases my productivity.
3. This platform saves me time.
4. This platform allows me to complete tasks faster.
5. This platform supports important aspects of my work.
6. This platform allows me to get more work done than would otherwise be possible.
7. This platform allows me to spend more time on productive activities.
8. My effectiveness at work is increased by this platform.
9. The quality of my work is improved by this platform.

**Impact on task innovation,**
1. This platform is useful for my work.
2. This platform helps me to do my work better.
3. The quality of my work depends on this platform.
4. This platform helps me find innovative ways to do my work.
5. This platform helps me find new solutions to task problems.
6. This platform helps me come up with new ideas.
7. This platform helps me find new ways to improve my work performance.
8. This platform helps me try innovative ideas.
9. This platform helps me find new ways to share my work results.
10. This platform helps me try out and share my ideas.
11. This platform helps me try out better collaboration with my colleagues.
Dimensions III & IV

- **Impact on internal/external user satisfaction**
  1. This platform improves employee satisfaction.
  2. This platform improves employee satisfaction.
  3. This platform improves member service.
  4. This platform makes me more user-friendly.
  5. This platform helps me add value to residents.
  6. This platform helps me meet the needs of residents.
  7. This platform helps me adapt to changing user needs.
  8. This platform allows me to respond to changing user needs.
  9. This platform helps me respond to individual employee demands.
 10. This platform enables me to deal more strategically with internal and/or external employees.

- **Impact on management control**
  1. This platform helps management control the work process.
  2. This platform improves management control.
  3. This platform helps management control performance.
  4. This platform enables management to compare work performance against standards.
  5. This platform helps management identify when corrective action is needed.
  6. This platform enables management to monitor and correct errors.
  7. This platform allows management to control work plans.
  8. This platform allows management to monitor work progress.
  9. This platform enables management to ensure timely completion of tasks.
 10. This platform enables management to control the allocation of resources.
 11. This platform enables management to control quality.
The platform improved more than a moderate extend the task productivity.
The platform improved more than a little the task innovation.
Internal/external user satisfaction

The platform improved a little the user satisfaction.
The platform improved a little the management control.
Summarizing

We created four new variables, one for each dimension comprised of the arithmetic mean of the answers given.
The BLN e.V employees and the association members have stated that the use of the platform has improved at least to some extent the work with regard to associations’ participation.

Selected associations’ representatives find all the material directly via the platform and each member is granted access to obtain the necessary information (task productivity).

The workload sharing is improved with online collaboration and the possibility of writing joint position statements has also been increased (task innovation).

The platform has a moderate positive impact on user satisfaction and the effect on users in the age group [40+].

The member Associations’ internal structure and the flat hierarchy operational mode is clearly depicted on the result of the fourth dimension (management control) were its impact is the least of all four dimensions.

A bigger sample would have contributed to a more extended and detailed analysis.

In future research should include users in Brandenburg and Lower Saxony.

Another research direction of interest may consider the identification (or not) of a difference in the assessment made for the platform between persons that characterize themselves as specialists and all the others, as well as the identification of a difference in the evaluation made by younger employees in comparison to the oldest.

Environmental and Nature Conservation associations in Europe and elsewhere would benefit from a similar digitized E-participation platform. We hope that this research will serve as an efficient evaluation tool for the existing platforms in Brandenburg and Lower Saxony federal states, with the aspiration to introduce in the future comparable platforms in all 16 German federal states.
Thank you

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