

POLICYBRIEF

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Empowering Communities through e-Participation: Key Success Factors

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Highlights

Community Empowerment

The **process** by which individuals and communities gain control over their lives through **access to information, knowledge, and resources** that enable informed decision-making and action. This process involves **using technology, collaborative tools, and community engagement** to increase civic participation, build social networks, and foster ownership and responsibility toward community development and social justice.

Four Pillars of Success

- Societal and Cultural
- Economic and Financial
- Political and Legal
- Technological and Infrastructural

Success Factors

Success factors span different policy areas and assume different relevance depending on the area where the initiative is taking place. However, common factors are considered relevant to achieve community empowerment: **access to knowledge and digital technologies, addressing democratic deficits, bridging the digital divide, ensuring engagement quality, promoting co-creation, and strong political leadership.**

1. Introduction

Electronic participation (e-participation) has emerged as a critical mechanism for empowering communities and strengthening democratic governance through digital means. Digital governance strategies that prioritise civic engagement are familiar with e-Participation initiatives. In many ways, it is through e-Participation that meaningful citizen involvement in public decision-making processes is achieved. And when successful, it has lasting effects on communities [1], making them feel empowered and contributing to their social ecosystem sustainability [2].

The e-Participation approach significantly impacts the community empowerment potential, prioritising interactive and collaborative approaches and tools [3]. Empowerment has a multidimensional nature with individual, social, and structural influences reflected throughout the unfolding process of community empowerment [1]. This process involves using technology and access to information, inclusive strategies, collaborative tools, and community engagement to increase civic participation, build social networks, and foster ownership and responsibility toward community development and social justice.

Controlling information content and flow using information and communication technologies (ICTs) is vital for social transformation and justice promotion [4]. This control and information awareness facilitate engagement and social

activism in community planning activities [5] in the context of democratic decision-making [4]. Empowered communities are sure that political and social change is possible, allowing them to foster political efficacy, ownership, and purpose [1], co-creating socio-technical ecosystems that will enable communities to exert greater control over their choices.

Understanding what factors influence community empowerment through an e-Participation initiative is necessary to promote such characteristics and foster successful implementations.

Drawing from a systematic review of 30 peer-reviewed studies, this brief identifies four enabling pillars—societal and cultural, economic and financial, political and legal, and technological and infrastructural—that underpin successful e-participation initiatives. Success requires tailoring approaches to specific policy domains, ensuring universal access to technology and information, sustained political commitment to integrate citizen input, and bridging the digital divide through context-sensitive strategies. Effective community empowerment through e-participation requires a comprehensive assessment of local contexts, the selection of appropriate tools aligned with policy objectives, and the institutional capacity to translate citizen contributions into tangible policy outcomes.

2. Research & Findings

2.1. Methodology

A systematic literature review was followed to identify documented studies that analyse e-Participation, providing evidence of features that enable community empowerment. The activities followed Cooper & Hedges' (2009) suggested process, as represented in Figure 1, and led to 30 selected articles for analysis. Based on this article selection, it was possible to define community empowerment and identify what factors influence it while undergoing an e-Participation initiative.

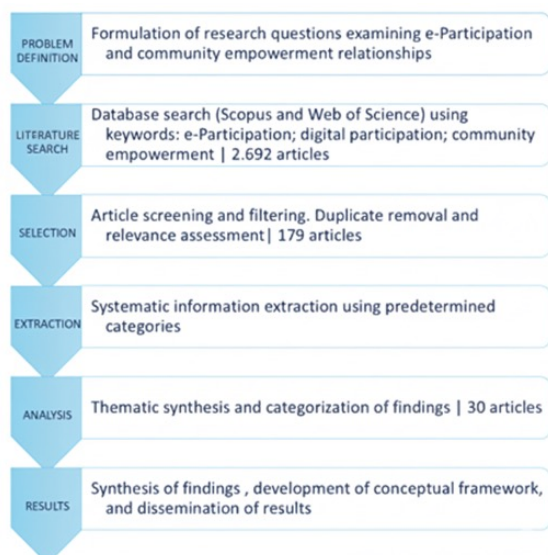


Figure 1. Adapted from Cooper and Hedges (2009)

The publication selection criteria included peer-reviewed journal articles published in English between 2000 and 2022. Articles were selected based on whether they addressed both e-participation and community empowerment and contributed empirically or conceptually to our understanding of their relationship. Following the best practices of systematic reviews, we evaluated the studies based on their methodological rigour, theoretical contributions, and alignment with research objectives.

2.2. Foundations of successful e-Participation

Transversal to the analysed documents, recurring themes for successful implementations were found and classified according to four enabling pillars with particular characteristics [6].

- **Societal and cultural** - addresses community readiness and cultural acceptance of e-Participation. The effects of the digital divide and the lack of access to information must be addressed when conducting an e-Participation initiative.
- **Economic and Financial** - encompasses resource availability and economic incentives for participation. Equating the possibility of having financial and reputational benefits and facilitating affordable access to digital platforms and devices are crucial for engagement in e-Participation.
- **Political and Legal** - considers institutional support and regulatory frameworks. Continued political commitment that integrates citizens' contributions into development plans and in the construction of policies, supported by strong legal institutions, is a cornerstone to effectively empowering communities.
- **Technological and Infrastructural** - targets technology access and digital literacy. Relevant aspects include data availability, technical infrastructure, digital inclusion, and tools for data analytics that promote the effectiveness and impact of the e-Participation initiative.

2.3. Common Success Factors

The literature shows that there are six core success factors [6] that are instrumental in ensuring effectiveness in e-Participation initiatives for community empowerment.

Access to technology and information is a fundamental requirement to ensure the availability of tools and knowledge necessary for meaningful engagement. Such access should prioritise the **reduction of the digital divide**, giving everyone a voice for equitable and inclusive participation that **addresses democratic deficits**.

Political commitment is required to allocate resources, accommodate citizens' input, and promote citizen participation. As a result, if citizens feel heard and observe the impact of their contributions through **high-quality engagements** constructed based on co-creation, trust, and political interest may rise.

2.4. Success Factors Across Policy Areas

Across the analysed studies, it was possible to identify five key policy areas where e-Participation initiatives are typically undertaken: Well-being and Education, Public Policy and Governance, Urban Planning and Design, Environmental Sustainability, and Human Rights and Social Justice. A set of key success factors can be associated with each, as presented in Table 1.

Policy Area	Key Success Factors
Well-being and Education	Active citizen support, digitised community engagement, organisational transformation, contextual alignment, co-creation with citizen-led initiatives, and access to relevant information
Public Policy and Governance	Digital divide reduction, secure internet voting systems, offline and online engagement synergy, intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, technological access, and knowledge
Urban Planning and Design	Equitable knowledge and digital technology access, democratic engagement, early stakeholder engagement, digital cultural heritage co-creation, interpretation via digital tools, data importance, telecommunications infrastructure, citizen ICT skills empowerment, robust digital inclusion
Environmental Sustainability	Capacitation, community, technical knowledge, equipment
Human Rights and Social Justice	Affordable and easy access to platforms and digital devices, strong intergroup relationships, organizational resources, individual disparities, efficient access to previously intangible information, and internet usage for political empowerment

Table 1. Key success factors across policy domains

Different tools and design features should be applied according to the e-Participation initiative's policy domain [6]. There is no one-size-fits-all method, as the diversity of contextual needs demands tailored approaches that respect

the careful interplay between tool capabilities, community characteristics, and institutional capacity.

3. Conclusion

This systematic literature review examined how e-participation fosters community empowerment by analysing 30 publications across diverse policy domains. Figure 2 summarises all the key success factors for each policy area identified, topped by the common factors that must be addressed and supported by the four enabling pillars.

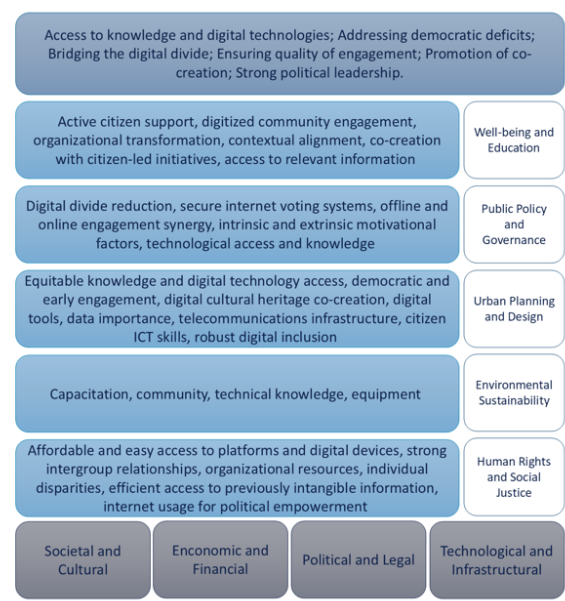


Figure 2. Key success factors and enabling pillars of community empowerment through e-Participation

This review provides evidence-based guidance emphasising that sustainable e-participation requires a comprehensive assessment of local contexts, the selection of appropriate tools, sustained resource commitment, and institutional capacity to incorporate citizen input into decision-making processes integrated into broader governance frameworks.

Recommendations

Conducting a comprehensive assessment of the societal, political, economic, and technological context before designing an e-Participation initiative is imperative to achieve community empowerment.

E-Participation tools should be chosen based on the specific policy context and community characteristics instead of technological trends.

Promoting community empowerment implies bridging the digital divide through access to technology, addressing economic barriers, enhancing digital literacy, and creating culturally appropriate engagement mechanisms that resonate with diverse community groups.

E-Participation initiatives must be incorporated into broader governance frameworks, considering citizens' input to influence decision-making processes.

Successful e-Participation implementations require sustained political commitment, technological resources availability, human resources for facilitation and ongoing support.

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