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The Extent to Which E-Democracy Facilitates Citizen Participation in Burundi

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on examining the extent to which e-democracy facilitates citizen participation in Burundi. This study was guided by the citizen involvement theory and employed a qualitative approach. Using qualitative data derived from the target population, it was observed that it is true that e-democracy facilitates citizen participation. However, there are some limitations that were identified. For instance, in the Burundian government, despite the citizen participation in the online platforms and media, the country lacks freedom of expression and therefore most of the citizens do not provide genuine feedback. Moreover, even those that provide feedback to the government, their opinion is usually not considered during the decision-making process. Furthermore, it was observed that most of the ICT platforms in Burundi are used for disseminating information and not involving the citizens. This paper therefore concluded that the Burundian government requires to improve the way it uses ICTs to facilitate effective citizen participation through e-democracy as a result of various factors such as to guaranteed freedom of expression and consider online citizen contributions.

Keywords: E-democracy, citizen participation, E-government, ICT platforms

1. Introduction

Democracy can be understood as a form of government where the supreme power and authority are based on the people and the people either exercise the power directly or indirectly through a system of representation (Munck, 2016). Digitalization is an emerging issue in the global world and most of the economic, political, and social aspects are shifting to the digital world. Politically, e-democracy is a fruit of digitalization and some regions have implemented the system (Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy, 2010). E-democracy involves a variety of tools that collaboratively work together to foster public involvement in existing and emerging issues regarding issues that affect their lives (Dahlberg, 2011). E-democracy can be achieved using both old and new technologies. However, unlike the old technology such as television and radio, new technology enhances greater participation. Some of the new technologies include the internet, smart phones, and electronic polling systems among others. Arguably, e-democracy is believed to increase citizen participation because of the modernization and improvement of the existing electoral processes and development of online portals where public opinion can be obtained (Dahlberg, 2011). E-democracy, therefore, serves an alternative to traditional participation and it is believed that it is more effective. For instance, most of the countries under the European Union have implemented e-democracy in their political and legal system.

Information dissemination is critical when it comes to citizen participation because not only does it promote transparency and accountability, but it allows the opinion of the public to be gathered. Therefore, e-democracy is effective in developing platforms that can effectively and efficiently disseminate information to the public and public opinion can be obtained. Previous studies (which studies we shall name few, 2 or 3) indicate that the development of e-government not only increase performance accountability but it results in performance improvement. Therefore, e-democracy is not all about the technology but it focuses on the development of every aspect of the involved organization.

The paper will focus on examining the extent to which e-democracy facilitates citizen participation in Burundi. The study utilized qualitative data. The study will provide a critical outlook on the extent to which e-democracy facilitates citizen participation in Burundi.

2. Literature Review

This part of the study will focus on reviewing different literature on e-democracy and citizen participation. Citizen participation remains to be a contentious issue in the public sphere. For instance, whereas citizens may be involved in the political and social matter, their extent of participation is still debatable. A case in point is in Africa where most countries are democratic but issues such as corruption and extreme bureaucracy, continue to affect most governments. Therefore, different perspectives from various scholars will be discussed to develop a critical argument on the extent to which e-democracy facilitates citizen participation in Burundi. Several theories will be utilized and their relevance to the research will be discussed.

The main theory discussed is the theory of citizen involvement. The theory of citizen involvement will show the elements of public participation and the interception between e-democracy and citizen participation. The information gathered will then be utilized to further examine the extent to which e-democracy facilitates citizen participation.

2.1. The Citizen Involvement Theory

Citizen participation is associated with sustainable development. Citizen involvement was particularly institutionalized in the mid-1960s and is rooted in ancient Greece and Colonial New England, (Fagence, 2014). President Lyndon Johnson was the main public figure known for citizen involvement because his Great Society Programs rooted for public participation (Thapa, Niehaves, Seidel, & Plattfaut, 2015). The term citizen involvement can be understood as the process where certain individuals representing the people are used to influence public decisions as well as represent the people in democratic decision making (Beresford & Croft, 2016). Citizen participation is a means of ensuring that the citizens have a voice in public decisions. It mitigates issues such as social exclusion and marginalization. Notably, 'citizen' and 'public, as well as 'involvement' and participation', are usually used interchangeably but there is a slight difference between the phrases (Fagence, 2014). For instance, the citizen is limited to the legal residents of a country whereas the public is a general phrase that does not consider the legal residence of the individuals (Fagence, 2014). On the other hand, involvement refers to the level of impact that people have in the process of decision making whereas participation implies the active or actual activities members of the public undertake and have an influence on (Fagence, 2014). The theory of citizen involvement, it is proposed that public decisions are largely influenced by technology. Therefore two decision making structures have been developed to discuss the connection: the technocratic approach and the democratic approach.

2.2. The Technocratic Approach

Technocracy refers to the utilization of technical knowledge and procedures in problem-solving (Wilmsen, 2012, p. 28). However, the technocratic approach has not been employed in the political arena. Observably, the approach is utilized by most of the forest services (Wilmsen, 2012). The main argument on the approach is that trained or skilled experts are the most suitable and reliable people for making complex decision especially the technical ones (Hulbert & Gupta, 2015). With the growth of knowledge-based economies, the technocratic approach is rapidly becoming common because more experts are needed. Both the public and the private sector are using experts in the decision-making processes. However, Nelkin (1981) critiqued this approach as it not only failed to solve social problems but it contributed to them. The theory cannot be disregarded entirely because technology contributes to the development of alternative solutions to public policy issues. Despite the identified weakness, the technocratic approach is necessary because technical problems require an expert approach.

According to Kantrowitz (1975), there are three types of policy decision: technical decisions that apply scientific techniques only, value-based decisions that focus on addressing social issues and mixed decisions that employ both the value-based and technical decisions. Notably, the technocratic approach is difficult to utilize when addressing social issues because it mainly relies on scientific information and techniques whereas most social issues are often complex and conflicting, therefore flexibility is needed.

2.3. Democratic Approach

The approach proposes that every person affected by a particular activity or decision has the right to be involved in making that decision or activity. Unlike the technocratic approach, that considers the expertise of an individual, the democratic approach is open to all regardless of their skills and knowledge (Lafont, 2015).

Notably, Kweit and Kweit (1986) argue that citizen involvement is associated with policy analysis. The citizens should be involved in a rational policy-making and analysis which involves six steps: defining the problem, developing goals and objectives, developing alternatives, developing evaluation criteria, identifying the best alternative and conducting monitoring and evaluation respectively (Leonardo, 2012). However, the procedure has been critiqued as ineffective because of a lack of transparency and accountability and poor planning. Most of the policy-making procedures are usually theoretical and they are rarely implemented. As a result, Lang (1986) suggests the need for interactive planning rather than conventional planning.

2.4. Principles of Citizen Involvement

The main principle for citizen involvement is the perceptions of stakeholders and planners. Notably, public participation is a requirement for planners but it is usually optional for citizens. It is because citizens choose to participate since they require satisfying hope that they will eventually influence the decision-making process (Diamond, 2017). Amstein's ladder of participation can help to develop an understanding of the perceptions of planner and comparing them with the anticipated perceptions of the citizens. The ladder is as shown below:

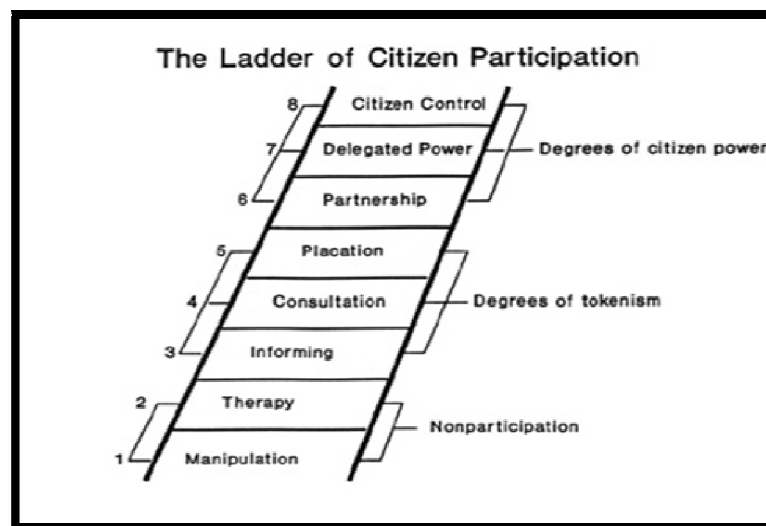


Figure 1: The Ladder of Citizen Participation

Citizen involvement involves certain techniques. The techniques vary from basic open meetings to other complex techniques. The following are other concepts associated with public participation: publicity, public education, public input, public interaction and public partnership (Kessy, 2013). Therefore, in e-democracy, the citizen involvement theory is instrumental as it presents the techniques and principles that need to be utilized for successful citizen participation. For instance, through understanding the ladder of citizen participation, leaders can understand the perceptions of the citizens and develop plans that will meet those expectations or perceptions.

2.5. Levels of Public Participation

The levels of public participation can be categorized into three: informative public participation, consultative public participation, and cooperative public participation. According to Reinsalu (2010), the three levels of public participation have a different outcome because each of them has a certain limit in public participation. For instance, informative public participation is mainly focused on getting opinions and information from the public. Therefore, most of the citizens are not involved in the planning or decision-making process but their views and opinions are considered. On the contrary, consultative participation is where opinion leaders and community gatekeepers or representatives are consulted and they represent the needs and opinions of the people, therefore, the people are indirectly involved (Rayner, 2003). Finally, the cooperative approach is a transformational approach as it seeks to mitigate the gaps caused by inadequate representation or misrepresentation in the public sphere. Therefore, the people have a say and they play an active role when it comes to the decision making of matters that affect them.

2.6. The Success of E-Democracy

Notably, the success of e-democracy depends on certain factors. For instance e-democracy may be successful in one region but unsuccessful in another. Therefore, the section will examine some of the factors that affect the success of e-democracy especially when it comes to facilitating e-participation. Morath (2000) argues that the following factors need to be considered for the success of e-democracy. First, the penetration of technology is critical.

2.7. Penetration of Technology

The level of penetration of technology is different because some countries are more technologically savvy whereas others are still lagging behind. For example, in developed countries, the penetration of technology is diffused within the population and most of the people have access to technology (Smith, 2009). However, in developing countries, technology is still a struggle as it is spatially spread out. For example, in the developing countries, it is the people in the urban areas who have access to updated technology whereas those in the rural areas remain to be significantly marginalized (Diamond, 2017). As a result, using e-democracy may result in bias because the people in the rural areas will not be accessed or involved in the electronic process. Therefore, for most of the developing countries, it is recommended that they should consider the level of penetration of technology in their countries before implementing the electronic process (Diamond, 2017). It is because despite encouraging citizen participation, the participation may only be limited to those in the urban areas thus resulting in the unsustainability of the process.

2.8. Cost of Implementation

Notably, establishing e-democracy is a technologically-intensive process that not only requires skilled manpower but it requires the development and integration of online platforms that will be used for communicating to the masses (Dahlberg, 2011). All these processes require a huge investment in financial resources which may be a challenge to the third world countries. Most of the developing countries are still struggling to develop their economies and therefore when it comes to e-democracy, extra funds may be needed (Hulbert & Gupta, 2015). As a result, most of the governments resolve to take loans which may be difficult to repay. Moreover, on the issue of loans, corruption and embezzlement of

public funds is common in the third world countries which may affect the sustainability of the process (Kessy, 2013). Therefore, e-democracy needs thorough financial planning and budgeting to mitigate such cases and also to ensure that public resources are utilized equitably.

2.9. Administration

Administration involves the authority in place that oversees the implementation of e-democracy. In most cases, the type of administration will determine the success of e-democracy in facilitating citizen participation. For instance, enhancing digital access to documents or any other information is still a challenge to most governments especially those that are struggling with technology (Macintosh, 2004). Most of the governments have been critiqued for poor dissemination of information and involvement of the people. Most of the government administrations have failed to ensure equitable access to information and poor management of the online platforms contributes to low citizen involvement (Lafont, 2015). For instance, most of the digital platforms and portals for citizen engagement are not updated and some have low response rates which kill the morale of citizens engaging in the decision-making process.

2.10. Security

Most of the electronic processes face both internal and external threats. Internal threats emanate from insiders whereas external threats emerge from the surrounding environment or foreigners. Notably, most of the electronic processes are susceptible to threats such as hacking or malfunctioning caused by viruses (Dahlberg, 2011). As a result, the privacy of information may be jeopardized. For instance, in Kenya, the recent electoral process faced such malfunctioning where the servers had allegedly been exposed to external hacking which jeopardized the electoral votes. Such cases result in loss of trust and citizens may withdraw from the participation process. Furthermore, internal national security threats are caused by the citizens of the country whether knowingly or unknowingly. For instance, sharing information with outsiders can jeopardise national security (Dahlberg, 2011). On the other hand, external threats are caused by neighbouring countries or other countries. For instance, in East Africa, most countries especially Kenya, are affected by the instability in Somalia.

2.11. Research Objective

Based on the literature and the discussion above, this study examined the following objective. To investigate the extent to which e-democracy facilitates citizen participation in Burundi

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

The research methodology was rooted in the philosophical notion of pragmatism. Therefore, this chapter will identify the aspects covered in the methodology such as the research approach, research design, target population, sampling and sample size, target population, data collection, and analysis as well as the ethical considerations.

3.2. Research Approach

The research utilized the qualitative approach. The qualitative approach was mainly used because citizen participation is an opinionated concept and therefore the feelings and opinions of people are more readily expressed than quantified.

3.3. Data Collection Techniques

Since the research focused on getting the opinions and perspectives of individuals, qualitative method was the most suitable approach for the study. The main methods employed include: document analysis, interviews and focused group discussions. Document analysis is the process of evaluating both printed and electronic documents (Bowen, 2009 p. 27). The main document that will be analyzed for this study is the Burundi National Policy on the development of ICTs. The information collected in this document permit to understand the way Burundi government defines e-democracy; it helps to prepare interview guides, focus group and the questionnaire as well. There are some other documents that will be also considered such as the Burundi Constitution. This document provides also important information related to the political and civil rights.

On the other hand, focused group discussions will be conducted among selected youth political leaders and communication officers. With respect to the people targeted at this method, they are experienced as they have been voted by their peers as youth leaders and communication officers. In this study, the number of focus group participants is six as we expected to have two representatives (youth leader and communication officer) from each of the two political parties and the political coalition which form the government and parliament.

The other qualitative method is interview. Interviewing is the process of asking questions by a researcher and responded by a target person for his suitability to the study and capability to provide the information needed (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p.697). By its nature, interviews have "several advantages for gathering high-quality and in-depth data: Being face-to-face and bilateral in nature, interviews can create deep insights into the perspectives, experiences, and knowledge of the interviewee." (Kopsel, p.93). Researchers can use different forms of interviews, including a semi-structured interview. This study will use the semi-structured form which consists in the fact that "the researcher has a list of questions of fairly specific topics to be covered, often referred to as an interview guide, but the interviewee has a great deal of leeway

in how to reply" (Brayman, 2012, p.471). According to Cohen, Manion and Marrison (2007), "there is evidence that face-to-face encounters improve response rates" (p.218). To do so, interviews will be organized in the offices of the target personalities or another place of their preference.

3.4. Target Population

The target population for this study comprises of three major groups: Burundi citizens represented by the youth leaders and their communication officers from important political parties, the civil society, and Burundi government. The Government of Burundi is composed of 19 Ministries plus the offices of the President, and his two Deputy Presidents. However, this study targets two Ministries: The Interior Ministry, Patriotic Formation and Local Development on one hand. On the other, it is the Youth Ministry, Post and Information Technologies and Communication.

In terms of political parties, Burundi has 42 accredited political parties and one political coalition but only two political parties (CNDD-FDD and UPRONA) and the Coalition AMIZERO y'ABARUNDI are a member of Government and Parliament. Similarly, to some other African countries, among the 42 political parties registered in Burundi, the majority of them exist just by name. For instance, in the two previous elections in 2015 for presidential elections and 2018 referendum for the change of the constitution, only the two political parties, and the coalition have participated in the rally. The CNDD-FDD is the ruling party, the UPRONA is pro-government, and the Coalition Amizero y'Abarundi made of opposition political parties. Thus, this study will consider these three political formations for a focus group. Considering that it is the youth which uses ICTs more than other categories of the population, it is the youth leaders with communication officers of these two political parties and Coalition that will be targeted. In terms of numbers, the focus group will be formed by 6 people, 2 per political formation (1 youth leader and his communication officer per party).

As for civil society, this study will consider those involved in democracy and governance. In fact, civil society organizations play an important role because they are considered as one of the conditions to have so as to be regarded as an 'effective' and 'efficient' democracy as they can 'act as a channel of influence upon government and a check on its powers' (Holden, 1984; &Beetham, 1994). For this reason, the sample will be taken from Burundian civil society organizations involved in governance, democracy, and the youth.

4. Findings and Discussion

For ethical considerations, the participants of the study will not be referred to by their names. Participant A will represent the CNDD-FDD, B the UPRONA representative, and C the AMIZERO Y'ABARUNDI representative. Also, the findings from the interview with the representative of the civil society will also be discussed but the results will be limited to the extent to which e-democracy facilitates citizen participation in Burundi. The reviewed literature mainly examined the aspect of citizen involvement since previous studies have expounded on e-democracy but often neglect the concept of citizen involvement. From the literature review, it can be derived that citizen participation is a dynamic process that involves various techniques and principles. However, it is important to note that the issue of e-democracy and citizen participation has not been intensively researched in Africa since most of the studies focus on developed countries. Therefore, the reviewed literature will be applied in Burundi's context and the data collected and analyzed will be integrated into the literature.

From the findings, it was evident that citizen participation in Burundi has increased especially among the youths. The main reason is because of the penetration of technology and ICT particularly. Observably, most of the youths are conversant with the technological process and most of them usually have Smartphone and therefore it is easier for them to engage in e-democracy. However, from the reviewed literature, there is still some bias in the level of citizen participation because most of the older citizens are often neglected when it comes to e-democracy because they do not have access to technology and also, they are not tech-gurus. For example, in Africa, most of the ordinary citizens are semi-literate or illiterate and therefore they face social exclusion as most of them are located in the rural or remote regions.

Moreover, from the findings, participant C said that, "despite the increase in youth participation, freedom of expression is not guaranteed." For instance, he revealed that, "at times people are forced to avoid listening to radio stations that oppose the government." A case in point is the Inzamba and Humura radio stations which are run by journalists who are in exile and they use the online platform to address their issues. Participant C also said that, "some citizens even get jailed for listening to such radio stations" which depict that freedom of expression is not common in Burundi. The finding portrays that despite the introduction of e-democracy, citizen participation is limited in the country because the citizens are not allowed to genuinely or freely critique the government processes. However, participant A justified that, "the government does not allow the citizens to listen to such stations run by people in exile for security reasons and also to avoid the spread of fake news." On the contrary, C refuted by saying, "limiting people's access to information and social media is not a solution because it depicts that the government does not respect the diversity of opinions." B also added that freedom of expression in Burundi significantly declined since the 2015 crisis. He said, "Most people are afraid to genuinely express themselves because of intimidation from the government through jail sentences." On the other hand, the representative of the civil society said that indeed e-democracy has facilitated citizen participation in Burundi in various ways. First, the people have been involved in the legislative process because frequently parliamentary debates are usually broadcasted in the ICT platforms, television and radio and therefore citizens get to understand what is going on in the country. Moreover, he argued that through lobbying and advocacy, people can be mobilized to participate in various decision-making processes for the projects being initiated. The representative of the civil society also emphasized that unlike the previous government that existed before 2015, the current government is also trying to implement the decisions and feedback from the citizens and also the people are being considered critical in the

democratic processes. However, he critiqued the government for using the ICT platforms often for information delivery rather than for communication with the people.

Notably, the participants agreed that e-democracy enhances citizen participation in Burundi. However, citizen participation in Burundi is not well facilitated and there is geographical bias. For instance, it is mostly the residents in the urban areas who seem to engage in e-democracy. Residents in the rural areas are usually in the dark when it comes to public decision making and they are often underrepresented in such matters. Lack of rural electrification is one of the barriers that contribute to the geographical bias in citizen participation. Therefore, it can be derived that citizen participation is associated with economic and technological development in a country. This is perhaps why most of the developed countries have positive levels of citizen participation in e-democracy.

Also, participant C revealed that, "most of the online platforms are used for providing government information and not communicating with the people." As a result, people do not have a say in formulating public policies or decision making. Moreover, most of the time the government only provides good or positive information and they neglect their weaknesses. Participant C added that the "comment section is usually open to the public but the people are usually afraid to make any negative comments because of fear of the government." Therefore, even if e-democracy is enhanced, full citizen participation is still limited because the people fear to criticize the government because of the lack of freedom of expression. However, participant A and B argued that the Burundian government has increased citizen participation through e-democracy. For instance, B revealed that "the government is increasing ICT users by signing agreements with telecommunication companies so as to increase internet coverage and diffusion." Participant C proposed that "the government needs to educate the people on how to use ICT and the importance of citizen participation in e-democracy." He critiqued that despite the increased levels of citizen participation, the government neglects the feedback from the citizens and most of their issues are not addressed.

5. Conclusion

From the findings, it is evident that citizen participation in e-democracy is still a contentious issue. Some people believe that e-democracy has indeed facilitated citizen participation but from the empirical study, there are still some significant issues that need to be addressed with regard to citizen involvement. For instance, based on the Burundian case, freedom of expression is an issue. Therefore, governments need to understand the principles of citizen involvement and concepts such as public education, public input, public interaction, and public partnership.

The Burundian government has failed to facilitate effective citizen participation through e-democracy because of various factors. For instance, the lack of penetration of technology in the area has resulted in geographical bias. Also, poor administration has resulted in a lack of freedom of expression in the country since most of the citizens are not allowed to critique the government. Therefore, the government works on a one-sided approach. From the literature review, the type of participation prevalent in Burundi is informative participation where the people are involved in disseminating information only. Therefore, for sustainability and effectiveness of e-democracy, the Burundian government needs to utilize cooperative participation where the citizens can be allowed to genuinely express their opinions and also be involved in the decision-making process.

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