PRACTITIONER'S NOTE

Exploring Insights from the Second Webinar on Civic Engagement in the Digital Age

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This note builds on presentations from Bjørn Bedsted, Niklas Bang Bädum and Sissel Ladegard (Democracy X), Jeremy Boy (UNDP) and Carlos Centeno (SOMOS Civic Lab)

PARTICIPATORY TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENTS FOR DEMOCRATIC AI GOVERNANCE

Introduction

UNDP's webinar series, 'Civic Engagement in the Digital Age', explores how digital technologies are transforming civic space and democratic participation. The second session in the series, organized in collaboration with Democracy x, focused on the role of participatory Technology Assessment (pTA) in strengthening democratic AI governance. This paper outlines pTA as a practical approach to fostering inclusive and democratic governance of artificial intelligence (AI).

The challenge

The present era of rapid digitalization is marked by the reshaping of public institutions, social services, and democratic life by AI. While this growth can create new opportunities for expression and collective action, it has the potential to deepen inequalities, erode trust, and poses threats to fundamental human rights including privacy and non-discrimination.

At the same time, the impacts that have materialized appear to be unevenly distributed, while those that will materialize in the future are highly uncertain, and perspectives differ widely. As a consequence, societal conversations about technology are characterized by diverging views. The contemporary challenge is, therefore, to bring communities and citizens into the debate surrounding the governance of AI.

The opportunity

There are several approaches to institutionalize public participation in AI governance. pTA is one of many plausible approaches that aims to raise knowledge and initiate plural action. Country programs indicate the importance of including citizens in the governance of AI, as they provide invaluable insights on values and worries among the public.

National dialogues held in multiple countries also suggest that perceptions of AI across distinct demographics are highly varied, underscoring the importance of including diverse affected communities, civil society organisations, youth, women, and persons with disabilities in shaping how AI is deployed and developed.

Defining the approach

What is participatory Technology Assessment (pTA)?

Technology Assessment entails a set of methods and practices that support democratic decision-making in policy fields where science and technology play important roles, addressing societal challenges such as energy transition, gene editing, and digitization, across ethical, economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

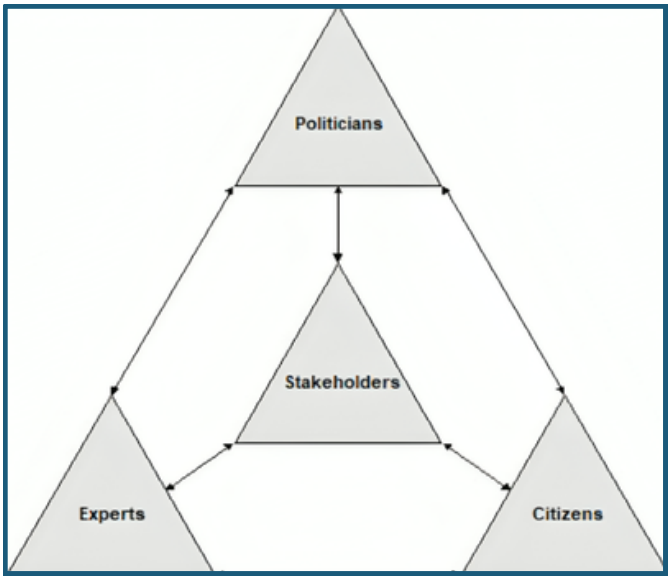
Participatory Technology Assessments are designed to make this process inherently inclusive. pTAs offer a structured methodology to bring citizens, affected groups, experts, and decision-makers into dialogue around complex technologies like AI, creating space for meaningful deliberation. It brings public values, local knowledge, and democratic principles into decision-making processes. The pTA framework understands participatory interventions as operating within the relationships between societal actors in a broader deliberative system. Its methods are designed specifically for the meaningful inclusion of both stakeholders and citizens, and its benefits are wide-ranging: better anticipation of technological impacts, greater public acceptance, enhanced legitimacy, and stronger trust in the outcomes produced.

The pTA framework in practice

pTA provides a structured approach for incorporating diverse societal perspectives into decisions about science, technology, and innovation. While pTA does not predict the future, it helps decision-makers develop a clearer understanding of the opportunities and risks associated with emerging technologies. By systematically engaging societal actors, pTA integrates divergent evaluative and normative perspectives into decision-making. As a result, it improves the quality of decision-making and contributes to outcomes that enjoy greater acceptance among affected stakeholders. The value of pTA rests on three complementary rationales:

- **Pragmatic.** Technological governance involves complex challenges that cannot be adequately understood from a single perspective. Plurality of views yields a better vantage point for making decisions.
- **Democratic.** Individuals and communities affected by technological developments should have opportunities to participate in shaping their governance.
- **Cognitive enhancement.** Societies possess a wide range of expertise and experiences, and pTA enables policymakers to draw on diverse competencies.

> pTA can be understood as an intervention within a broader deliberative governance system. Technological decisions are shaped by interactions among politicians, experts, and citizens. pTA creates structured opportunities for dialogue and deliberation between these groups, helping to bridge gaps between technical expertise and societal concerns.



Klüver, L: The four societal positions and the communication between them

pTA processes typically engage two broad categories of participants: stakeholders and citizens.

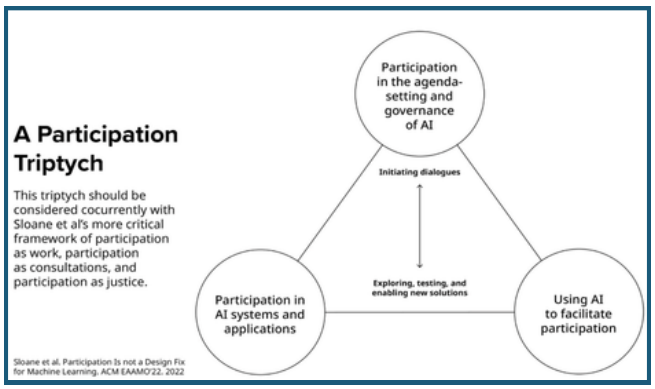
• **Stakeholders** are individuals, groups, or organizations with vested interests in the issue under consideration or who are likely to be affected by resulting decisions. These may include industry associations, civil society organisations, labor unions, and non-governmental organizations. Stakeholder participation methods include scenario workshops, future workshops, and other participatory foresight exercises that enable participants to explore desirable technological futures and their governance.

• **Citizens,** by contrast, are members of the public participating in their capacity as lay citizens rather than as representatives of organized interests. Citizen participation draws on everyday knowledge and lived experience. Many citizen-focused pTA methods rely on the concept of mini-publics—structured deliberative processes designed to include a group of citizens representative of diverse demographics. Participants are provided with balanced and accessible information, engage in structured dialogue, and develop recommendations that are connected to formal decision-making processes, ensuring that citizen input has meaningful pathways to influence policy.

- Common mini-public formats include: Citizens' Juries, Citizens' Assemblies, Citizens' Summits, Consensus Conferences, and the German Planungszelle (Planning Cell) model.

One of the most widely used pTA methods is the **Consensus Conference**. Typically, a group of citizens is recruited to discuss a complex technological issue. Supported by a planning group, participants undergo a preparation phase during which they identify the issues they would like to focus on and the questions they have for different societal actors. They meet for a day-long conference in Parliament where these societal actors give their answers and are interrogated by the citizens. Citizens then make their recommendations and present them some days later in Parliament to MPs and other societal actors. Between 1987 and 2020, this method was implemented more than 75 times across 21 countries.

From participation to innovation



Participatory approaches enable policymakers to collaborate with and learn directly from grassroots communities and

other societal actors. This bottom-up perspective can generate insights that might otherwise be missed by expert-driven processes alone.

The Participation Triptych illustrates how participation can be embedded across the AI lifecycle. The framework highlights three interconnected dimensions: participation in the agenda-setting and governance of AI, participation in AI systems and applications, and the use of AI to facilitate participation itself. Rather than viewing participation as a single intervention, the triptych emphasizes the mutually reinforcing relationship between these domains. Participatory governance processes can help shape the development of AI systems, but AI tools can also concurrently be used to expand participation, although this comes with a whole range of risks and it is still too early to tell if quality AI tools will emerge. Together, these dimensions create a continuous cycle of dialogue.

Credit: UNDP HLPF 2017

Selected experiences

Panama | Using AI to facilitate participation

Intergenerational workshops were organized in a neighborhood in Panama City, connecting university students with local senior community members. They used an innovative AI tool, UrbanistAI, to explore the potential of AI in urban planning, helping residents design and visualize what they wanted public spaces to look like. These sessions demonstrated AI as an enabler of participatory urban planning.

►See here for more information.

Bangladesh, Morocco, Paraguay | National Dialogues on AI Governance

UNDP Accelerator Labs in Morocco and Paraguay developed a framework for conducting national dialogues on frontier technologies. These pilot dialogues involved consultations that gathered perspectives on artificial intelligence (AI) as the frontier technology of examination. The primary objective was to collect perspectives from communities often underrepresented in global discussions, specifically about how they view the potential benefits and risks of AI. Following these pilots, focus group discussions and interviews were organized in Bangladesh by the UNDP Bangladesh Accelerator Lab to better understand how different demographic groups in the country experience and engage with AI.

►See here for more information on Morocco and Paraguay.

►See here for more information on Bangladesh.

Latin America | Community-led AI evaluation

Somos Civic Lab, supported by the UNDP AI Trust & Safety Re-imagination Program, has built a platform, Uno, for community-led AI evaluations. Through this platform, communities blindly test, flag, and deliberate on AI systems used in public services. This platform enables communities to engage directly with AI evaluation, raising concerns that technical audits may miss.

►See here for more information.

Denmark | Citizen Lab

The Citizen Lab in Denmark is initiated by The Digital Taskforce for Artificial Intelligence, The National Centre for AI in Society, and Democracy x. The objective of the lab is to collect insights from citizens to impact and inform the early phases of development of a digital assistant for public services in Denmark. The Citizen Lab features a weekend gathering, which will bring together a diverse group of 28 digitally abled Danish adults. Following the gathering, there will be a translation workshop with members of the taskforce, which will be validated in an online evaluation workshop with the 28 citizens, and finally, written accountability feedback will be published once the digital assistance has been launched.

► Contact Democracy x for more information.

Recommendations

» Ensure clear pathways for policy influence

It is essential to strengthen mechanisms that clearly link citizens' inputs to decision-making processes. Establishing parliamentary conferences and requiring transparent justification of how inputs are used can help ensure that participation translates into tangible influence.

» The importance of design

pTAs can be effective in including citizen perspectives in the governance of technologies, but it is important to design them very carefully. This includes decisions about how participants are chosen, what information is provided to them, which experts are brought in, and in what ways they engage with policymakers. It is therefore important, when designing pTAs, to carefully consider how different design choices influence both the inclusivity and the substantive impact of the process.

» The challenge of representation

It is important to convene groups that reflect a broad range of demographic backgrounds, but achieving full representativeness is inherently constrained in smaller groups. This makes intentional and transparent recruitment strategies a critical priority. Moreover, societal impacts of AI are still unclear and appear unevenly distributed across gender, geography, and social groups. It is, therefore, imperative to include perspectives from marginalized and underrepresented groups and avoid reinforcing existing asymmetries in voice and influence.

» Institutionalize participatory mechanisms

The key focus must be to institutionalize participatory processes in decision-making processes surrounding complex technologies. While pilot engagement exercises are beneficial in highlighting the benefits of citizen engagement, it is necessary to embed them at multiple stages of policy and technical development rather than treating them as one-off consultations.

» Look beyond pTAs

pTAs can advance public participation in the governance of AI and other emerging technologies. They make use of deliberative democracy methods such as citizens' assemblies, multi-stakeholder forums, and living labs. There are many participatory examples and practices that do not identify themselves as pTA but can easily be characterized as such.

Useful resources

► Participatory Technology Assessments for Democratic AI Governance

Recording of the webinar on pTAs jointly organized by UNDP and Democracy x

► A Framework for National Dialogues on Frontier Technologies

Guidelines for national consultations on frontier technologies

► AI For Democracy Democratic Commons

Initiative by Make.org and Sciences Po to leverage AI in strengthening democracy

► Participatory Technology Assessment

Participedia article on the methodology of pTAs

► Participatory Approaches in Digital Governance: Five Examples from the Field

OGP article citing examples of public participation in governing digital technologies

► Innovations in Digital Democracy

Recording of the webinar on participatory democracy organized by People Powered

► Reinventing Technology Assessment: A 21st Century Model

Report on the value of citizen engagement in decision-making on science & tech issues

► Informing NASA's Asteroid

Report on ECAST's pTA method for a NASA project

► Exploring Democratic Governance of Solar Geoengineering Research

CSPO program organizing and studying citizen engagement in geoengineering research

► What is citizen science and why should policymakers care?

OECD report on citizen science and its role in democratizing scientific research

► Reimagining Young People's Role in Governance through Civic Technology

UNDP & OGP Civic Tech Innovation Challenge to increase youth participation

► The Case for Local and Regional Public Engagement in Governing Artificial Intelligence

Paper on the importance of AI localism and a bottom-up approach to AI governance

► EU civic engagement: The use of digital tools and AI to promote citizen participation in EU policymaking

Study by Democracy x, DLR & IQUIB, commissioned by STOA on AI in policymaking

► Handbook of Technology Assessment

Collection of articles on participatory approaches to TA

► Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes for Public Decision Making

OECD report on best practices for developing and implementing deliberative processes

► Open Research Agenda Setting

OECD report on engaging citizens in the co-design of research agendas in science

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