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inDialogue software for the good quality of public consultations. The model for action

Introduction

The inDialogue software is a result of the project "New Perspectives for Dialogue: A Model of Deliberation and ICT Tools for Social Inclusion in Decision-making Processes" conducted between the years 2014–2017 by the Centre for Deliberation at the Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw (leader); the Warsaw University of Technology; the Association of Polish Cities; the MIT, an ICT training company; the Foundation of Free and Open Software, replaced by the Association of "Cities in the Internet" (late 2015); and the Polish Forum of Disabled Persons, replaced by the Association for Deaf People in Łódź (2016). It received financial support from the National Centre for Research and Development within the framework of the "Social Innovations" Program. The grant from the University Technology Transfer Centre (UOTT UW) enabled the University of Warsaw to prepare the implementation version of the inDialogue software and the final version of the user instructions.

The inDialogue application has been developed (2014-2015), tested (2016) and used in pilot studies (2017) in all together ten municipalities in different regions of Poland. Tests were conducted in Nowa Dęba (Podkarpacie) and Olsztyn (Warmia i Mazury). Pilot studies were carried out in Brwinów, Mińsk Mazowiecki, Ożarów Mazowiecki, Ząbki (Mazowsze), Krosno Odrzańskie (Lubuskie), Słupsk (Pomorze), Toruń (Kujawsko-Pomorskie).

Conceptual Premises

The growing importance of the internet for public communication requires profound reflection on the tools. The quality of discussions on forums managed by public institutions usually do not meet the criteria of deliberation at all; meaning that they are not grounded in reliable information and participants rarely use arguments supported by facts during the exchange of posts. Another problem is the exclusion from these processes some social and economic groups that do not have an input into the consultation and decision-making processes. We are convinced that to increase the quality of public dialogue it is necessary to provide education about its standards.

In the In Dialogue project we have focused on public consultations due to the fact that it is an institutionalized, established channel of communication in local politics that should allow citizens to express their opinions on the directions in which their communities develop. The aim has been to diffuse the knowledge about deliberative public consultations and their methodology, through the use of the inDialogue software. The inDialogue software helps institutional organizers to understand the

methodology of public consultations and put it into practice. Our purpose has also been to ensure the openness and inclusiveness of the public consultations organized using the inDialogue platform, for example, by addressing the standards of WCAG 2.0, as well as drawing the attention of the consultation's organizers to the issue of the targeted selection of citizens who may not be in the habit of participating in politics.

The inDialogue software innovativeness can be explained, among other things, by its multiple functions. It offers a set of tools that can be used not only to conduct but also plan public consultations. It exemplifies an attempt to introduce some standards of deliberation into institutionalized politics and involve citizens in meaningful and task-oriented debate. The inDialogue application has been designed to be implemented in local governments, where the decision-making process is closest to the citizens and where politicians have responsibilities towards them regarding many public policy areas.

Building a Model for Action

An important characteristic of our project is that it has both analytical and applied aspects. Interdisciplinary applied research in the area of social informatics conducted in the tradition of action research, with its demand for developing practical knowledge in participation with social partners as well as for an ongoing circle of action and evaluation are rare as they require time, resources, and make researchers responsible for the results in a different way to primary research projects.

The model for the inDialogue software was based on research findings that involved potential beneficiaries. The survey on the methodology of public consultation with the involvement of about 270 city and town halls was followed by online group debates that offered explanations for identified problems. Then a series of case studies in which the role of academics was not only to observe but also to intervene in the procedures and practice of the public consultations were carried out. Local government administration partners were consulted about the model for software before coding started. The prototype was evaluated and amended before it was tested during public consultations. Tests, and then pilot studies brought about new amendments. The final result is the implementation version of the inDialogue software ready to be used by any municipality wishing to install it on its server.

Due to the fact that the set of tools in the inDialogue software serve for public consultations' planning in the local government, the interface for the clerk is more complex than the interface for the citizen. The inDialogue software facilitates internal communication (within the city or town hall) to make the external communication (with citizens) efficient. It supports planning and reporting of both online and offline debates, as public consultations have to be socially inclusive and not all citizens use the internet or have adequate internet competences. The debates are threaded, and moderators can

intervene to make sure that the discussion focuses on the topic and sub-topics. The rating of posts in text debates is possible only after gathering all the proposals and arguments that can be automatically transformed into an argumentation map. In addition to these functions, the inDialogue software also archives consultations and makes it possible to use data gathered across multiple consultations as input to strategic documents in public policy development. The citizen using the inDialogue software can contribute to the information materials consulted before debates start, select a form of debate (face-to-face, online voice or text), comment on a report.

During pilot studies that took a form of real world public consultations, we collected information on errors in the software (rare) as well as recommendations for its implementation version. Each error report met with appropriate and immediate action. All recommendations for adjustments were considered, and the majority of them were accepted. Priority was given to the improvements requested by Częstochowa's City Hall regarding data protection and WCAG 2.0. These two issues were treated with special care in our project from the very beginning, but the remarks by clerks, especially a data protection officer, were invaluable.

Some recommendations were contradictory, in which case, wherever possible, we attempted to reconcile them by allowing the choice between different solutions, for example, the public anonymity of users or the lack of it. We were also flexible regarding the use of maps or an unfolding list to define the territorial boundaries of public consultations and the categories of information introduced into information materials etc. But, there were also preferences for solutions that we could not accept as they were inconsistent with the model of public consultation that we planned to apply in practice.

Partnerships with Municipalities

Establishing a partnership with a city or town hall is a key factor of success for the action research project as ours. Prior cooperation with local government administration, a database of city and town halls that participated in our survey, online voice debates and applied case studies before In Dialogue project; all facilitated the recruitment of municipalities to the project. But, it is worth mentioning that although we started our project with twelve partner city and town halls, in the first two years of the research phase two-thirds of our partner cities were replaced. The two cities who withdrew from the project sent us letters of explanation; the reasons presented in these letters did not refer to the model of public consultation planning and conducting that we support. We were informed that the city halls had developed their own methodology of public consultation and tools to conduct them. Participatory budgeting and polls, as well as the ICT applications supporting them, were given as examples. Some cities did not officially withdraw from the project, but before we lost working

contact with the clerks responsible for public consultations, we learnt that they had joined the In Dialogue project in search of inspiration to be able to set off on an independent initiative; or, alternatively, they had expressed concern for the proposed methodology (mainly the selection of participants). Obviously, there were also political issues involved (reorganization after local elections) that could have overlapped with other motives in two city halls.

None of the municipalities participating in the pilot study has abandoned it or informed us while replying to our a post-study evaluation questions, that they will not be implementing the inDialogue software. However, it is rather unlikely they will all utilize the platform, as some clerks made the implementation conditional on changes to the application that we cannot support due to their inconsistency with the model of deliberation. Now, as we can offer the inDialogue implementation version, we will be able to receive accurate feedback from the city and town halls on its further use.

Next step - implementation

The fact that the software has been developed in communication with potential institutional users facilitated the amendments to it. But, the R&D projects require the pilot phase to be followed by an implementation that is carefully prepared, monitored and evaluated. Even if the local governments were unanimously willing to accept our ICT solution for better planned and organized public consultations, they have to consider servicing and its potential development in line with changes within the legal and institutional environment. This task is easier for local government administrations with larger budgets and dedicated IT units for which the commercial sector, with its offer of stable ongoing support, is a better partner than a consortium with a project that will end at a certain point in time.

We addressed this problem by attempting to create strategic partnerships with regional and central administrations that could develop and amend the inDialogue software in the long run. The Marshall's Office of the Mazovia Region (one out of sixteen in Poland) was the first to sign a contract for the non-commercial use of the inDialogue software in at least several dozen of its municipalities. It will connect with the software already in use by the public administration. As the inDialogue application has an open license, it can be modified and adjusted to suit the special needs of particular institutions. Further three Marshall's Offices declared their readiness to conduct pilot studies in regions of Pomorze, Lubuskie, Opolskie.