

Is e-democracy more than democratic? - An examination of the implementation of socially sustainable values in e-democratic processes

Gustav Lidén

Department of Social Sciences, Mid Sweden University, 851 70 Sundsvall, Sweden

gustav.liden@miun.se

Abstract: A growing literature tries to contribute to a more balanced view of the concept of e-democracy. However, one seldom discussed aspect is the concept's inadequate dimension on what a desirable development of society consists of. By adding certain values, today most pronounced in the theory of social sustainability, this article examines the awareness of such in three e-democratic projects in Swedish municipalities. This is carried out through a qualitative inquiry that uses different types of data and that regards social sustainability as an ongoing process that is suitable to be analysed in relation to other structures in society. The empirical part reveals different important topics. First it shows that the consciousness of socially sustainable values varies between the examined cases. Second, this variation can be due to both the varying success of e-democracy and to conditions inside the political organizations. In conclusion, this paper reveals that the consequence of adding a socially sustainable perspective to e-democracy is that it provides adequate opportunities for analysing social development without missing out qualities that are desired in a democratic society.

Keywords: e-democracy, social sustainability, democratic theory, political participation, political equality, Sweden

1 Introduction

A buzz word since the 1990s, e-democracy has been embedded in a great variety of positive values. The use of information and communications technology (ICT) in democratic processes is said to provide the potential to strengthen participation (Clift, 2003) and deliberative processes (Barber, 2003) and even result in a total transformation of the balance of power in favour of a plebiscitary public (Coleman, 2007). Particular examples of e-democratic projects show how citizens can get involved in everything from budgetary processes (Miori and Russo, 2011) to how local communities work with an integrated strategy of concentrating administrative and business services with participatory features on the web (Komito, 2005). However, a growing literature is critical to the unbalanced view of the effects of e-democracy (e.g. Hindman, 2009; Kampen and Snijkers, 2003; Ward and Vedel, 2006), and out of this arises a field that states that the notion of e-democracy is insufficient for society in many ways. This description is in line with calls for e-democracy to be complemented with other values, founded on a normative idea of what a desirable development is. Building on this idea of a 'good society' (Dahl, 1989), this article argues that values other than those found in the theory of e-democracy must be searched for and emphasized in our understanding of this concept.

Theoretically this study is based on the idea of a required relationship between democratic theory and e-democracy. Although traditionally this connection is not necessarily assumed in e-democratic theory, it has begun to be called for in the literature (Macintosh et al., 2009). However, as has been argued above, more normative claims, neither emphasized in the general democratic theory nor in the e-democratic theory, also need to be initiated in an understanding of e-democracy. This is because of their ability to point out a desirable development. Today, such values are most stressed in the theory of social sustainability and when introduced they can give a wider understanding of such a development. To examine this, this article studies how socially sustainable values are reflected on in the work with e-democracy in three Swedish municipalities. The purpose is thereby to examine awareness of social sustainability in some examples of e-democratic projects by answering the following question: Has social sustainability contributed to the development of e-democracy in line with what can be said to be a desired development towards a 'good society', and if so how has it done so? Associated with this question is the importance of reflecting upon explanations to the potential variation in the awareness of social sustainability in such development processes.

There are several reasons for relating e-democracy to the perspective of social sustainability. In the extensive democratic theory several minimalistic perspectives are presented on democracy: democracy is the method for arriving at political decisions taken by representatives elected by the people (Schumpeter, 1994); democracy is a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials (Lipset, 1959); and democracy is a political system

where groups compete for power and where power holders are elected by the people (Vanhanen, 1997). These ideas are in accordance with the rather constricted view on democracy that is favoured in the liberal tradition. The essential weakness of such definitions is the exclusive focus on the institutional arrangement for distributing political power and the role of these power holders. Although these are core functions in a democratic society, such types of definitions, electoral ones, miss out crucial dimensions (Diamond, 1999; Tilly, 2007), for example the protection of human rights and the maintenance of civil liberties. The same is true of definitions of e-democracy, which are often just as minimalistic. Deriving from Dahl (1989), and even if the concept of a 'good society' is more than blurred, it seems reasonable to argue that e-democracy also needs to be complemented with additional values. If dimensions deduced from social sustainability are added to e-democracy we seem to get closer to the idea of an ideal society.

2 A theoretical framework

The theoretical framework will be divided into three parts. First, e-democracy is theoretically determined and defined. Second, social sustainability is described and related to democracy. Third, the approach in this article will be specified in relation to the two theories and their common denominator, creating a unified framework for the empirical research.

2.1 E-democracy

In retrospect, much of the research carried out on e-democracy must be characterized as quite empirical and case-orientated. Explicitly focusing on e-democracy, it should be noticed that the concept can be approached from several different perspectives: different e-democratic processes (van Dijk, 2000; Grönlund, 2009; Vedel, 2006); different variations of an e-democratic political system (van Dijk, 2000; Päivärinta and Sæbø, 2008; Åström, 2001); explanations of a successful e-democracy (Carrizales, 2008; Norris, 2001) and different features in e-democracy (Breindl and Franço, 2008; Oates, 2003). There are, though, some important contributions in particular that add theoretical leverage to the understanding of e-democracy. The point of departure in this article is based on an obvious relationship between a political system and its virtual variants (Macintosh et al., 2009; Norris, 2001) and sets the direction for how e-democracy should be analysed. As argued by Norris (2001: 107) an e-democratic system will mirror the traditional political system. A consequence of this fact is that an e-democracy cannot by itself be totally democratic if the political system in which it is embedded is not democratic either (Lidén, 2011). This idea has, however, been excluded in contemporary research and needs to be considered, resulting in distinct claims about e-democracy that underline the importance of civil and political rights.

Deriving from the aforementioned, an instrumental perspective of e-democracy provides the best possibilities both for a comprehensive theoretical understanding and for analytical purposes (Vedel, 2006). Choosing this approach, which is consistent with much of the earlier research literature, provides several advantages. First, it allows analysis of both the context and the consequences of e-democracy. This is due to the possibility of dividing the phenomenon into different processes as exemplified by Vedel (2006) and others (van Dijk, 2000; Grönlund, 2009). Second, it highlights the fact that besides sustaining democratic principles e-democracy is not about contents, but rather about procedures. Based on this the following definition will be applied in this article: *e-democracy is constituted from the possibility of the usage of ICT in political processes concerning information, discussion and decision-making and in addition includes these being permeated by the political and civil rights that are characterized as democratic.* I now turn to discuss social sustainability.

2.2 Social sustainability

Social sustainability must be understood in accordance with at least two influencing factors. First of all, it must be noticed that social sustainability is one part in the much discussed paradigm of sustainable development. Hence, if we want to understand social sustainability its relations with other aspects of a sustainable development cannot be ignored. Second, social sustainability is a concept that is a vital part in the contemporary discussion of a successful global development. That means a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987: 8).

Much of the initial conceptualization of sustainable development is related to the UN body *The World Commission on Environment and Development* (WCED), which in 1987 reported their work in the publication *Our Common Future*. The main point in the report was the statement about the

interconnection between ecological, economical and social dimensions. This approach was intensified with the following UN conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. An especially important outcome of the Rio summit was the action plan *Agenda 21* which stresses the importance of sustainable development being considered in relation to local actors (Olsson, ed., 2005).

Sustainable development has clearly become an important topic in the global political discussion (Sneddon et al., 2006). Elaborating on a scientific perspective on sustainable development is, however, more problematic. Several scholars (e.g. Lélé, 1991; Tikjoeb, 2004) have emphasized the obstacles that appear when an attempt is made to integrate the concepts into a scientific framework. Lélé states that: 'The absence of a clear theoretical and analytical framework, however, makes it difficult to determine whether the new policies will indeed foster an environmentally sound and socially meaningful form of development' (1991: 607).

Turning to focus explicitly on social sustainability, it should be noted that this dimension is often described as the vaguest one of the three. There are several reasons as to why. First, social sustainability demands a different approach to the other two dimensions, mainly because it refers to different analytical levels and reflexivity (Lehtonen, 2004). Further, the sustainable development paradigm has been much ignored by social scientists and has not been fully developed (Becker et al., 1997). However, constructing a sound theoretical framework based on definitions of social sustainability can hopefully compensate for this blurry situation. In Lidén (2011) a typology is created that allows for a separation between different perspectives on social sustainability. Arguing that the concept can be divided both through a distinction between analytical and normative qualities and between a view upon it as a condition or a process, four alternative perspectives emerge:

- **A normative condition** is a perspective of social sustainability that indicates a desirable order for a society. One example of this is suggested by Littig and Grießler (2005) when they state that social sustainability is a quality of societies which satisfies an extended set of human needs and fulfils claims of justice, human dignity and participation.
- **A normative process** has a stronger focus upon the situation of societies as changeable. One significant example is given by Polèse and Stren (ed., 2000) who stress the ability of policies and institutions to integrate different groups and cultural practices in a just and equitable way. Such a normative claim is logically related to a procedural viewpoint, pointing to the possibility for societies to develop.
- **An analytical condition** moves a step away from normative claims of what social sustainability should lead to, to a focus on its relationship with structures in society and related concepts. From Bramley et al.'s (2006) two dimensions regarding social sustainability can be identified. First, the authors recognize both an individual and a collectivistic perspective on equality in the distribution of social justice. This can be related to their notion of a society's ability to be viable and functional. Second, and in a more operative sense, social sustainability is related to ideas about social capital, social cohesion and social exclusion.
- **An analytical process** develops this perspective by adding a progressive feature (Becker and Jahn ed. 1999; McKenzie, 2004), focusing on how development of societies can be socially sustainable. An example of how such a goal is met is given by McKenzie (2004) specified in nine goals. With a similar approach Becker and Jahn (ed., 1999) identify three analytical perspectives of social sustainability. Two of them are relevant here, regarding how social patterns and political dimensions are essential in shaping a sustainable society.

This typology is one way of increasing the clarity of the concept. Having pronounced this framework some clarification is needed. Studying the development of e-democracy in some of the Swedish municipalities, importance will be attached to the perspective of viewing social sustainability as a process, admitting that the scope of social sustainability in a social context can never be static. In addition, the analytical dimension of the concept is preferred, creating a focus on the phenomenon's relationship with structures in society and similar social concepts. As have been seen (Becker and Jahn ed., 1999; Bramley et al., 2006; Littig and Grießler, 2005; McKenzie, 2004; Polèse and Stren ed., 2000) social sustainability has been related to several positive values, e.g. cohesion, equality, justice, human dignity, fulfilment of needs, protection of culture and political participation. Of course, a selection of these sub-entities must be carried out. In the literature equality and participation seem to be two of the most frequently attached values. Based on this the operative definition of social

sustainability in this contribution will be the following: *A society which in its development process strengthens the elements of political equality and political participation.*

2.3 Using social sustainability to evaluate e-democracy

To be able to apply social sustainability to e-democracy the democratic relevance of the concept must be extracted. Beginning with official statements found in *Our Common Future* the WCED proclaims the importance of political decision-making based on the idea of the subsidiarity principle, which shapes the possibility of citizens' participation. An institutional landscape is necessary, though, to make sustainable changes possible (WCED, 1987). However, social sustainability and democracy can be related to each other in a more analytical way. One example is given by Sachs (1999: 27), who claims:

A strong definition of social sustainability must rest on the basic values of equity and democracy, the latter meant as the effective appropriation of all the human rights – political, civil, economic, social and cultural – by all the people.

Following Sachs, democracy seems to be necessary for the existence of social sustainability. Other scholars (Littig and Griebler, 2005; McKenzie, 2004) present similar arguments, stating that political participation is closely related to both social sustainability and democracy. More precisely, the qualities that democracy has potential to lead to, e.g. inclusiveness, participation and justice in political and civil rights, are though not described as sufficient for social sustainability. Scholars argue (Magis and Shinn, 2009; Schmitter and Karl, 1991) that not even democracies are societies where needs are always fulfilled, participation widespread and equality reached.

The e-democratic research in this area, with its focus on participation and equality, is nowadays quite vast. A suitable review of this literature starts with the meta-analysis carried out by Boulianne (2009). Deriving from 38 earlier studies, she implies that technology could stimulate political participation but at the same times raises questions concerning the mechanisms and magnitude of such effects. Contemporary research is divided when it comes to socially sustainable values of participation and equality. Norris (2003) and Dunne (2010) argue that if participation increases through e-democracy it will merely strengthen inequality through additionally stimulating participation among those who are already interested in political and societal questions. Others have argued (Barber, 2003) and empirically illustrated (Christensen & Bengtsson, 2011; Taewoo, 2012) that the lower barriers to access that ICTs bring can activate social groups of citizens that have previously been more or less excluded from politics. In the discourse of equality several other aspects are pronounced. Micro perspectives have shown that some resources, such as income and education, not only determine traditional political participation but also this type of engagement using ICT (Best & Krueger, 2005; di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006), creating an unequal participation. The important distinction between being able to speak and being heard (Fuchs 2010; Hindman 2010) has, moreover, been attached to this discussion.

Summing up to create theoretical foundations for the empirical analysis some concluding points should be made. Contemporary literature clearly shows that democracy and social sustainability can be related. Since I have argued previously that democracy and e-democracy are social phenomena that are theoretically and empirically linked to each other, an analytical approach relating social sustainability and e-democracy appears to be legitimate. In other words, an e-democratic society that, through its development, strengthens political participation and political equality is more closely related to the notion of a 'good society' and closer to the ideal of democracy. Additionally, previous research is inconsistent on the question of how e-democratic processes are permeated with socially sustainable values. Since it is hard to make any assumptions based on this, a more inductive approach will be used where the empirical results will take the lead.

3 Method

By examining the Swedish case, this article tries to address the weaknesses of previous research. Sweden is interesting since it is in the lead when it comes to characteristics related to information societies (Webster, 2006) and its local authorities have a mandate to work out their own local public e-democratic processes. Of the 290 Swedish municipalities, Ockelbo, Älvkarleby and Ovanåker have been chosen. Two principles have guided the selection of cases. First of all they reflect different levels of e-democracy as it has been measured in Lidén (2011). Deriving from this study, e-democracy was measured in accordance with the given definition from the 'supply-side', i.e. the occurrence of

functions concerning political information and discussion on municipalities' websites that made it possible to order municipalities according to their level of e-democracy. Ockelbo reflects a low level of e-democracy, Älvkarleby an intermediate level and Ovanåker a high level. As argued by Gerring (2007: 100), the variation in this aspect gives some advantages and for this study it will be crucial when it comes to analysing the awareness of values related to social sustainability. Second, in all other aspects the municipalities are selected on the precondition of having maximal similarities, resembling Mill's method on agreement (Mill, 2004). For example, the three municipalities all have a small number of inhabitants, are located in the same regional context and have a comparable history as industrial communities.

This study employs a qualitative methodology, specified through semi-structured interviews and analysis of official documents. Regarding the interviews, the local councillors have been interviewed to provide data that reflect the political will. Further, civil servants that are responsible for or associated with e-democratic work have also been interviewed, reflecting the local administration. During the ten interviews the relation between e-democracy and social sustainability has been addressed through several thematically ordered questions. In line with the definition of social sustainability, the guiding question has been: *have you consciously worked to ensure that the e-democratic functions of the municipality stimulate political participation and/or are characterized by political equality*. Each interview lasted between 35 and 60 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. Official documents have complemented the interviews, creating the possibility of triangulating both data and different perspectives, since interviews represent different positions in the organization (Yin, 2003).

The strategy for transferring the used theoretical framework into methods for analysis can be summarized in several steps that are outlined for answering the research question. As given by the presented concept of social sustainability, this article will define it as processes that strengthen political equality and political participation. The theoretical framework for this analysis will be based on a perspective where the work with social sustainability is an enduring matter and not static (Becker and Jahn ed., 1999; McKenzie, 2004). This needs a temporal variation where the chain of events can be reconstructed chronologically (Gerring 2007). Therefore the collection of data in the selected cases represents information collected over several years the analysis of it compounds different material. Moreover, social sustainability will be analysed in relation to other structures in society claiming that this work has to relate to established cultures and social hierarchies (Bramley et al. 2006; Becker and Jahn ed., 1999). Methodologically this will be assured by allowing a collection of a rich and thick empirical material through interviews and documents, but also by establishing a strong connection between theory and method. The latter has to do with the argumentation above, where democracy and social sustainability are presented as concepts that it is possible to relate to each other. All in all this not only provides triangulation of data but also create a cohesive model for analysis that includes different important perspectives.

4 Findings: three Swedish municipalities

A few earlier examples of in-depth studies exists concerning how Swedish municipalities use e-democratic processes in their relation with citizens (e.g. Grönlund, 2003; Ranerup, 1999; Öhrvall, 2002). Likewise a few studies examine the socially sustainable aspects of e-democratic projects (e.g. Bailey, 2009; Lombardi and Cooper, 2009; Maier-Rabler and Huber, 2010). The empirical part of this paper will try to contribute to this research by exploring how social sustainability has contributed to a desired development.

Some relevant variables for the three cases are presented in table 1. As argued above, the three municipalities reflect the whole range of the level of e-democracy, from the most undeveloped to the most successful. In accordance with the criteria for selection they are, though, similar when it comes to potential influencing variables. Their population size is in all three cases small, way below the national average of more than 30 000 inhabitants. Consistent with significant research in political science (Diamond and Morlino ed., 2005; Putnam 1992), political participation, in this example quantified through the measurement of voter turnout, could reflect the quality of both democracy and the local political culture. The national average for the latest parliamentary elections was 84.6 per cent, and it is shown that two of the municipalities are below this value. However, a cautious assumption could be made of this determinant influence for Ovanåker's level of e-democracy. The level of the average income is presented in the last column. All three municipalities are below the

national average of 264.7 thousand Swedish crowns annually per adult citizen. I will now discuss the findings from the three cases in turn.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of selected cases

| Case | Level of e-democracy | Population size (2011) | Voter turnout (2010) | Average income (2010) |
|------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Ockelbo | Low | 5907 | 81.7 | 243.5 |
| Älvkarleby | Intermediate | 9089 | 80.9 | 256.0 |
| Ovanåker | High | 11 404 | 84.8 | 239.6 |

Sources: Statistics Sweden (2012); Swedish Elections Authority (2012).

4.1 Ockelbo: low level of e-democracy

The small community of Ockelbo is situated in the middle of Sweden within a commutable distance north from the regional centre Gävle. Ockelbo has one of the lowest values of e-democracy found in Sweden.¹ The official website has few functions that provide citizens with relevant political information. The exceptions were that the budget and the calendar for the municipal council's meetings could be found on the website. No functions that involved citizens in discussion or decisions processes as described by Vedel (2006) were to be found on the website.

On the subject of social sustainability, Ockelbo has, in an explicit way, worked with these types of questions in the local development project 'Ett hållbart Ockelbo' (a, b) for several years. The social dimension has been important throughout this project and has been expressed partly by a focus on citizens' participation and a bottom-up perspective by involving citizens in the local development of the municipality. This is analogous with the relation between democracy and social sustainability that Sachs (1999) and Magis and Shinn (2009) have emphasized, though it seems quite unclear to what extent this has actually influenced the development process of the internal work with e-democracy. The local councillor even states that stimulating citizens' involvement in political matters so far has not been a priority area. The employers of the administration do, however, emphasize that the importance of a participatory perspective has been omnipresent during recent years when working with e-democracy. But more pragmatically the functions directly stimulating participation are more advanced and a phase further on (personal interview, 9 September 2010). However, it is quite obvious from interviewing the administration staff that a desirable e-democracy demands vital communication channels between the municipality and the citizens.

Turning to political equality, the local council does not distinguish between what is done online and the regular democratic work in the municipality. At the same time it argues that political information and participation online should only be considered as a complement to the official website. In the words of the head of the municipalities' administration: 'publishing things on the website is not the same as then assuming that everyone is then aware of that information' (personal interview, 9 September 2010). The question of how inclusive this e-democracy is cannot be described as current in the local dialogue. A plausible reason for this is that Ockelbo, according to several of the respondents, is described as a municipality where the space between the ordinary citizen and the political leadership is small (personal interview, 9 September 2010). Although this says nothing much about the distance created by or the inclusiveness of the online channels, interpreting this as a situation where an awareness of political equality is salient seems distant.

Summing up, social sustainability has been a discussed topic over the years in Ockelbo. As reported, this perspective has been important in developing a plan for local development but has not evidently embedded the e-democratic development process in the same way. Undoubtedly, traces can be identified from the idea of social sustainability, mostly through a low level of awareness, but these cannot be described as dominating ideas. Most significant are the values of social sustainability found at the implementing level in the administration.

4.2 Älvkarleby: intermediate level of e-democracy

Älvkarleby is located in the middle of Sweden, about 20 kilometers south from the regional centre Gävle. The overall level of e-democracy in the municipality has been described as intermediate. More

¹ It should be added that this website was exchanged in January 2010. This strengthens the municipality's level of e-democracy somewhat. This study is however based on the earlier version.

exactly, several functions regarding political information are shown on the website. Among others, protocols from the city councils and general information about the political situation can be found. Citizens can interact with decision-makers via the website by accessing the contact information of some leading politicians, and there is a function enabling citizens to submit complaints and opinions. In other words, the website both provides information and facilitates discussion processes (Vedel, 2006).

Turning to the possible awareness of social sustainability when it comes to e-democracy, the interviews create solid material. Both representatives of the political leadership and the administration show awareness of how the website can contribute to a growing political participation. During the last few years effort has mainly been put into providing relevant and current information, with the aspiration that it will create a foundation for participation. One of the employers at the local administration has formulated this ambition as follows: 'Some information also encourages participation in a second stage' (personal interview, 9 June 2010). Concerning the quality and type of information, the person in charge of presenting political information has a clear viewpoint. The cost of publishing pre-existing written documents, e.g. protocols, on the website is negligible and therefore it is an inexpensive method that possibly strengthens participation. However, more explicit functions for increasing interactivity are often more expensive and time-consuming and can result in the need for legal considerations (personal interview, 24 May 2010), for example in web streaming of council meetings and in web based diaries. One can, though, reflect upon the need for specific efforts to strengthen participation that are both indirect, through information, and direct, through a participatory function and inexpensive solutions.

Regarding political equality as a way to achieve social sustainability, it must be interpreted that the municipality has a clear understanding of the importance of continuously reflecting upon these questions, as has been discussed in the literature (Becker and Jahn, 1999; McKenzie, 2004; Polèse and Stren, 2000). The local councillor and the people in the administration that are responsible for the practical questions about e-democracy show a clear consciousness of inequality of access to e-democratic functions but also a bias in the actual willingness to take part in the local political development (cf. Norris, 2003; Dunne, 2010). Linking the uneven distribution (based on age) in the local council to a similarly uneven distribution concerning usage of e-democratic functions, the secretary of the municipality emphasizes the importance of complementing online information with physical information (personal interview, 24 May 2010). This awareness represents an understanding of a general structural problem, but the reference to this as merely a generation gap is simplified (van Dijk, 2005). However, it is obvious that the question of political equality is on the agenda, acknowledged both by the political leadership and the administration, and access to the information society, not just alternatives to it, is facilitated by the municipality.

In conclusion, socially sustainable values have been reflected upon in the work on the e-democratic process in Älvkarleby. The interviews must be interpreted as political participation, and equality is a dimension that has been considered in this work. This is partly to do with the respondents' natural way of discussing social sustainability and similar concepts.

4.3 Ovanåker: high level of e-democracy

The municipality of Ovanåker is located in the interior part of the middle of Sweden. In relation to Ockelbo, Ovanåker is situated about 50 kilometers further north. The overall level of e-democracy in Ovanåker is high. Of the examined functions, a majority can be found on the official website. Functions that are lacking concerning access to the municipality's diary through the website and information about incoming complaints and opinions.

In relation to the other two municipalities, in one way, Ovanåker has a more elaborated perspective on political participation. The local councillor claims that participation is essential; however, without the relevant information participation will not be stimulated (personal interview, 15 April 2010). The representatives of the administration develop this argumentation, referring to the fact that democratic functions and more administrative tasks can be coped with more efficiently online. Regarding this ambition to date, the head of the administration states the objective is: '... to make this communication into the municipality more effective and to make routines more effective so that we will have more time to meet the local citizens' (personal interview, 15 April 2010). In other words, the goal of e-democracy is not only to stimulate participation through online channels but also to create resources to be used in the ordinary way of maintaining a dialogue with the inhabitants. This view of e-

democracy as a way of achieving efficiency has not been found elsewhere. According to the literature (Becker and Jahn ed., 1999; McKenzie, 2004), a more genuine wish for participation should be interpreted as more socially sustainable.

The reflection about political equality is somewhat blurred in the case of Ovanåker. The interviews give different descriptions of the awareness of political equality in the process of e-democracy. One of the respondents representing the administrations says, however, that this question has been up for discussion. The topic discussed was that participation in the information society can reinforce a class barrier and can exclude significant sections of the citizenships (personal interview, 15 April 2010). This understanding results in a view of e-democracy as a complement to the traditional opportunities for citizens to take part in the political process and it can also be associated with the analytical dimension of social sustainability that includes the importance of social hierarchies (Becker and Jahn, 1999). Moreover, this should not be regarded as the same as coping with the digital divide, but merely a way to create an alternative to the information society. An empirical investigation that verifies the importance of this working method is the result of an online survey that Ovanåker carried out in 2009 aimed at its youth. Concerning political equality this survey shows that a majority of the respondents feel that they have few or no possibilities to influence the decision-makers. Further, few of the respondents use the municipality's website as a channel to present their opinions (Ovanåkers kommun, 11 June 2009). In other words, Ovanåker has examined the topic of political equality in the municipality. Even if the results among the youth are discouraging the problem has at least partly been identified.

To sum up, in many ways, over time Ovanåker presents a pragmatic view on social sustainability. The use of e-democracy is not only based on its one intrinsic value but also in accordance with the practical effects it can have on the administration. The ideas of strengthening political participation and equality are also to be found in the discussion regarding the e-democratic processes in Ovanåker.

4.4 Discussion: three cases of e-democracy

The three examined cases highlight important similarities but also crucial differences in the awareness of social sustainability in relation to e-democracy. Answering the research question will be facilitated if there is a discussion first about those aspects that in some way indicate similar patterns among the cases. The ambition of supplying citizens with adequate political information seems to be evident in all three cases. In Ockelbo, this has been described as the initiating stage, and representatives from the other two municipalities, even if they have a more developed e-democracy, also stress this dimension. This stage of development is verified by the applied theoretical foundation (Vedel, 2006) where more explicit forms of participation, i.e. discussion and decision-making, follow. In accordance with their higher value of e-democracy, Älvkarleby and Ovanåker have some functions of strengthening participation. The interviews do, however, show that to a certain degree these are strongly related to economic costs, where the implementation of such functions often has expensive consequences (Andersen, Henriksen and Secher, 2007; Carrizales, 2008). In short, not just democracy but also a socially sustainable e-democracy is costly. The lack of interest in these questions that has been identified in research from a British context can, however, not be verified (Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley, 2009). Rather, civil servants give an enthusiastic impression and have contributed to the work of strengthening participation and thereby letting e-democracy be influenced by socially sustainable values. Also when it comes to the issue of political equality similar tendencies can be found. All the municipalities have representatives that are quite clear about the fact that online information needs to be complemented with physical alternatives. In addition, the three examined municipalities provide the view that questions of equality need to be addressed in the whole political system and that the understanding of it in an e-democratic context is constituted of a spillover from the democratic system, as argued earlier by Sachs (1999).

Turning to aspects where apparent differences can be found, some points can be listed. Ockelbo has evidently worked with socially sustainable questions in other areas. The fact that its e-democracy is not especially characterized by such values can, however, most reasonably be related to its development of e-democracy. In other words, it seems irrational to attach socially sustainable values to something that almost does not exist. However, just an awareness of social sustainability is a strong advantage since the emphasis of continuous implementation of such values is exactly what the theory stipulates (Becker and Jahn, 1999; McKenzie, 2004). In both Älvkarleby and Ovanåker, socially sustainable values have contributed to the development of e-democracy. On the topic of

political equality they, analysed together, display a desirable development. Representatives of the administration of Älvkarleby mainly address this as a question of willingness and age, saying that access to the internet and participation in the information society are strongly related to these variables. This contradicts the positive statement proposed by Barber (2003) that expects a positive outcome from new technology. One of the respondent employed at the municipality of Ovanåker discusses this in relation to a more traditional explanation of political exclusion, namely social position. Integrating these perspectives would have given the best possibility of addressing political equality. Differences between age groups clearly exist but they are complemented with influences from social indicators such as education, income and occupation (van Dijk, 2005; Norris, 2001, 2003). The actual status of the willingness to participate is more complex and can be understood both as influenced by other explanations and as an important factor influencing them. The relationship is probably reciprocal. To sum up, Älvkarleby and Ovanåker have some analytical dimensions in the understanding of political equality in e-democracy, but seem to lack important ones.

5 Concluding remarks

This article has clarified that the awareness of social sustainability varies between e-democratic projects. The research question can thereby be answered. However, the potential explanations of the variation in the awareness of social sustainability should also be discussed.

First of all we can see a variation between the three municipalities where Ockelbo has let socially sustainable values have an impact of the development on e-democracy to a lesser extent than the other two cases. As argued above, the municipalities of Älvkarleby and Ovanåker have articulated an awareness that can clearly be traced. The empirical examination shows that the level of e-democracy is not a necessary condition for considerations of social sustainability, since the emphasis on political participation and equality in democratic processes through ICT are at least as high in Älvkarleby as in Ovanåker. One must therefore search for other explanatory variables. Earlier research has implied that socioeconomic variables (Medaglia, 2007), population size (Lidén, 2011) and civic engagement (Norris, 2001) can have a positive relationship with e-democracy, and contemporary theorizing (Maier-Rabler and Huber, 2010) argues that a sustainable e-democracy requires educated and skilled citizens that can be a part of such a society. With a focus on political organization, research has shown the importance of economic resources (Andersen, Henriksen and Secher, 2007; Carrizales, 2008) and commitment (Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley, 2009) for e-democracy. Several structural factors could be of importance. With citizens that are well educated and interested in politics, they are likely to participate more and so there is an increasing in the chances of them influencing the e-democratic processes and simultaneously social sustainability in regard to participation. When it comes to equality in such processes, the answer is harder to find since none of the discussed determinants takes into account the distribution of resources. Awareness and a strategy for neutralization of political inequality, as found among some of the municipalities, must be regarded as crucial. To conclude, the consequence of adding a socially sustainable perspective to e-democracy is that it provides better opportunities to evaluate social development without the risk of ignoring qualities that are essential for a desirable direction when it comes to the use of ICT in democratic processes.

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