

E-democracy at local level in Norway

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Introduction

This note will give a presentation of the aspects of e-democracy on local governmental level in Norway. There will also be presented a solution to give citizens a chance to promote citizens initiative on Internet.

The Norwegian local governmental system

The municipalities and regional authorities are important actors as part of the public welfare system. Altogether 428 municipalities and 18 regional authorities deliver a broad range of services.¹

Municipalities is close to their residents. Through their elected representatives should citizens have great indirect influence over municipal dispositions and how public services are produced. However, it is not only when the elections are held every 4th year that the residents are invited to come with their opinions. In Norway, the municipalities also facilitate the inhabitants' participation also between elections, but to a varying degree. The broadness in public services the local government delivers make the local government bodies important to the citizens' everyday life. Then it is important to facilitate dialog between the local and regional authorities and the citizens.

E-democracy the remedy?

When doing a search on Google on e-Democracy in Norwegian a relatively few hits will come up. Many are from the previous decade.

This does not mean that e-democracy is not present in Norwegian public administration. However, it was in the first decennium of this century it was largely focused on e-democracy. Problems the democracy faced, as lower turnout, difficulty in recruiting candidates for election, falling number of members of political parties etc. should be remedied with the use of e-democracy. The web should be used for political discussions, polls, electronic voting, etc.

For example, in 2004 a municipality with funding from the Ministry of Local Government established, a particular website where the residents could discuss, meet politicians, come up with proposals, present their community-organisation etc. The ministry thought this could be a model for other municipalities who wanted to use the net for democracy purposes. Anything that had to do with

¹ Primary and lower secondary school, Nurseries/kindergartens, Primary healthcare, Care for the elderly and disabled, social services, Local planning, agricultural issues, environmental issues, local roads, harbours, water supply, sanitation and sewage, culture and community development

involvement, participation and political processes were linked to this site. The problem was that the residents did not use this site.

Some municipalities thought they should mobilise the youth by using the technology by establishing special political arenas on the net. This was not the case. It looks like the youth preferred the old style of local politics to meet the politicians face to face and doing politics in physical social settings.

The main democratic values connected to municipal sites is that residents through municipal websites can find information about the municipality's activities and services delivered by the municipalities. Network solutions can also help to improve the municipal service. This is important in relation to citizens' satisfaction with what the municipality delivers.

The e-democracy projects that the ministry funded during last decade gave us some experiences (Seegård and Ødgård 2010).

First, the necessity to connect e-democracy-tools to local existing local institutions both political and administrative. There is a need to connect the physical and the digital room so digital participation is relevant to the physical room and the opposite.

Second, the technological platform and e-democracy methods used should be connected to other technological solutions in use by the municipality in their communication with their citizens. The technology is not an aim in itself but shall underpin the aim for democracy. Technology in this context is to help mobilise the inhabitants to express their view on local political matters.

A third experience is about the need to do the development of e-democracy inside the municipal framework. The development-process should not be carried out outside the municipal organisation but strongly be the responsibility of municipal actors. There is a need that the municipality put their own human resources into the project so the perspective of participation related to local government activities is taken care of.

What the people are most interested in is the services the municipalities produce and the community development and planning they do. Therefore, when you think of e-democracy, the tools for local democracy on net probably should be connected to what most strongly affect people's expectation of the municipalities. To give people a chance to find information about municipal services on net and where it is possible, make applications to give citizens opportunities to get their matters considered by the use of Internet, such as applications for building permits or applications for day care place.

A guide for e-democracy

The Ministry of Local Government has also in cooperation with a research institute published a guide for the use of e-democracy in the municipalities:

https://www.regjeringen.no/contentassets/0c0873573bab4bb3856e4e0190455c68/veileder_lokalt_edemokrati.pdf

Electronic voting

In Norway, we have also conducted an experiment with e-voting. The current government decided, however, that this experiment should not be continued. The main reason behind these decisions was the lack of secrecy the internet voting was leading to, e.g. family voting.

E-democracy tools in Norwegian municipalities

Even if e-democracy is not expressly thematised, the Internet is used in different ways for purposes that promote the local democracy. Each fourth years the ministry of Local Government collect data municipal organization and measures for communication and information in relation to the citizens and citizen involvement. Table 1 shows the use of various Internet-based information and communication forms used by the municipalities in relation to residents as a percentage of the municipalities. The table also shows the development from 2004 until 2012. There will be collected new data in 2016.

Almost all municipalities use some of the measures. This applies to information about and access to the municipal council's agenda on the Internet. Close to one hundred percent of the municipalities conveys the minutes of political meetings on the Internet. Most municipalities facilitate that citizens can contact the support staff by email. Some less, but the great majority of municipalities, make it possible to contact local politicians by email. All municipalities also publish news on the web.

What is less widespread is access to electronic records, use of e-dialogue, debate forums on the Internet or similar arrangements where residents can communicate directly with councillors online or use SMS to communicate with citizens? More common is that municipalities are using social media like Facebook and Twitter

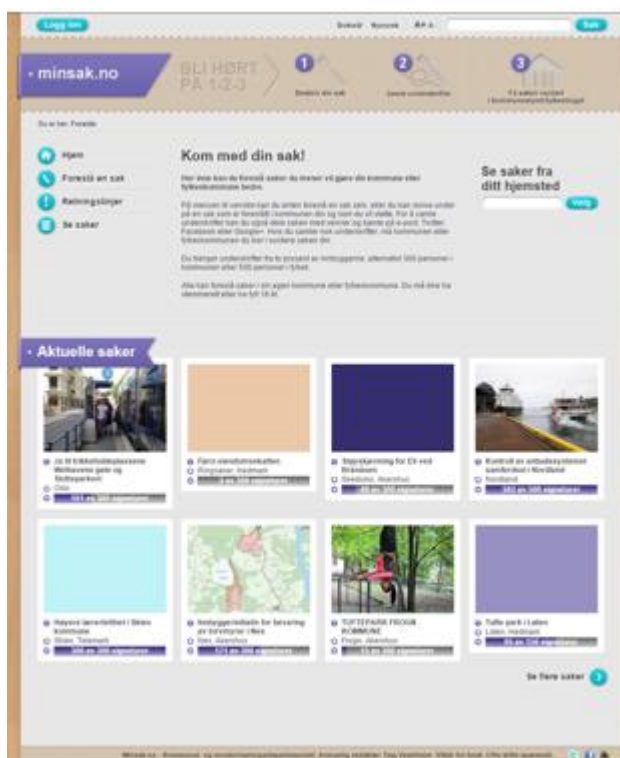
Table 1 *Different types of Internal Measures municipalities use to communicate with the population. Percentages*

	2004	2008	2012
Information about and access local political bodies on the net.	80,1 (274)	96,1 (302)	98,2 (330)
Information about the minutes from political meetings on the Internet		94,6 (297)	96,4 (324)
Access to electronic mail records online	60,7 (205)	86,6 (272)	94,0 (316)
Access to electronic records (i.e. access to systematized electronic material on the Internet)	16,1 (54)	31,2 (98)	31,9 (106)
E-mail connection to the administration staff	92,7 (316)	96,5 (302)	91,9 (307)
E-mail connection to Local politicians	54,9 (186)	76,4 (239)	84,1 (281)
News posted on the web		98,7 (311)	99,4 (334)
Application forms are made available electronically on the Internet	68,4 (106)	82,9 (261)	91,9 (308)
The municipality offers electronic processing / services on the Internet (for example, when it comes to building permits, kindergarten)	21,9 (264)	47,1 (148)	65,8 (221)
The municipality offers e-dialog/debate forum or similar arrangement where the residents can communicate directly with local politicians on the Internet	19,7 (273)	15,6 (49)	14,9 (50)
It is implemented electronic hearings among the residents	10,5 (35)	8,6 (27)	12,3 (41)
Residents are given access to the Internet, for example in libraries, schools, sports, shopping centre, bus terminal	78,4 (265)	90,4 (282)	92,5 (310)
The municipality has implemented training programs for groups of citizens regarding the use of ICT	23,8 (81)	34,3 (106)	38,6 (129)
The municipality uses SMS to communicate with citizens		14,5 (45)	30,1 (101)
The municipality uses social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube)			55,1 (185)

Measure introduced by the Ministry of Local Government

In the Norwegian local government act, there is a provision that give citizens a right to have a proposal considered by the council. You need the signature from 2 percent of the population or at least 300 signatures from the residents. When this arrangement was introduced in 2002, it was based on the use of paper to promote issues and it was named Citizens initiative. In 2013, the ministry introduced an application to come up with citizens proposals on Internet.

The background for introduction of the website was an evaluation of the system of citizens' initiative on the municipal level. The scheme was best known among the residents of the municipalities that previously had adopted an application to promote citizens' initiatives on-line, the evaluation showed. Unlike the previous version should the new version applies to all municipalities so that all residents of Norway should be able to promote a citizens' initiative on net in its municipality.



On this website, www.minsak.no, the individuals registered as a resident in the municipality can publish a proposal and the citizens can sign it. The citizens that sign to support the initiative have to register their street address and their postal code.

The site is also facilitated for debate on the proposals. In addition, the proposer can use Facebook, twitter and email to make the proposals known in the community. If the proposal gets sufficient valid signatures (2 percent of the population of the municipality, but it is not needed for more than 300 signatures in a municipality) will the proposer be able to click a button to send the proposal to the municipal e-mail. Before the proposer send the proposal he or she should edit the list of signatures to secure that the persons who has signed are real or are registered as residents of the municipality. When the

municipality has received the proposal it is obliged to consider the proposal and the council have to decide on the proposal within 6 months.

To avoid inappropriate content in the form of suggestions or commentaries the ministry monitors the website and remove content as personal insults and defamation, bad language, threatening behaviour, offensive statements related to gender, ethnic origin or political, religious or cultural standpoint, using others' intellectual property without permission and spam or advertising. However, this sort of utterance has not been a large problem during the lifetime of the site.

The number of users, according to Google Analytics, in the period of one year from 1 July 2014 until 1 July 2015 was 138 000 which had 188 000 sessions.

Local government reform

Currently the government is carrying out a local governmental reform. The goal of the reform is to reduce the number of municipalities through merging. Larger municipalities will give stronger municipalities with a stronger competence to take care of more tasks. With stronger municipalities, will also municipalities could be given more tasks and extended responsibility. This will also lead to a stronger local democracy where local politicians and the citizens are given greater opportunities to influence decisions that affect their community.

In this process, it is also important that the local authorities are working to develop methods and adopt tools to allow the citizens more directly participate in local decision-making.

In such a perspective, e-democracy tools are useful. In a guide Ministry has published, it is pointed out the opportunities the Web provides to strengthen inhabitants opportunities to communicate with the municipality (<https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/kommuner-og-regioner/kommunereform/Verktoy/lokaldemokrati/id2424152/>). The guide shows how important it is that the municipality has a website that is user friendly and in a good way appeals to the citizens, how social media can be used and how the Web is suitable to adopt methods for citizen participation.

Litterature:

Segaard, Signe Bock and Guro Ødegård: *Møte mellom moderne teknologi og lokaldemokrati og lokaldemokrati. Utredning og evaluering av seks e-demokratiprojekter i norske kommuner*. Report 2010:3. Institute for Social Research 2010.

Blåka, Sara, Trond Tjerbo og Hilde Zeiner: *Kommunal organisering 2012*. Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research. Report 2012:12

Kommunal- og regionaldepartementet og Institutt for samfunnsforskning: *Lokalt e-demokrati. Nye metoder på kjente mål*.

