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### **Summary of the governance lunch debate on *Consultations on line* held by Mr. Jamal Shahin, from the International Institute of Infonomics, The Netherlands, on Thursday, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2001**

The issue at stake on this debate was to know more about on-line consultations, the way they can be carried out and the possible challenges arising.

Governance - the « sharing of tasks and responsibilities between private and public actors as the guiding and steering efforts of social, political and administrative actors in a more or less continuous process of interaction »

- aims at , inter alia, including non-government actors into the policy-making process. Thus a way has to be found how to deal with an increased number of actors as well as how to channel their contributions in order to bring out their added value .

In the EU, governance is also linked to the notion of networks : It is characterised by the fact that nobody has complete imposition upon the other actors; that it works functionally; and that it transgresses borders. This is important to note, as we are not evolving towards a European superstate.

#### **The link between governance and ICTs (Information and Communication Technology)**

ICTs can improve governance in two ways: it can bring about

1. better information (dissemination), and
2. better communication (response)

through more channels.

The Canadian Law Commission, in 1998, responded to a decreasing trust and interest of Canadians in their institutions and law-making by the introduction of a new consultation policy (Consultation on-line, Canadian Law Commission, press release <http://www.lcc.gc.ca/en/ress/news/pr260298.html>, consultation policy <http://www.lcc.gc.ca/en/about/consult.html> ).

The tools developed include: large scale/ face to face consultation; small groups/ focus groups; questionnaire; internet discussions; public opinion polling.

Other tools commonly used in cyberspace are :

Surveys; one-way guestbooks (they give you details about who the people who visited a website are, and what they thought of their visit); FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions); quizzes; mailing lists; newsgroups; live discussions, and two-way guestbooks (where a question left by an internaut can be answered by another internaut visiting the website).

#### **Examples of consultation initiatives**

- ❖ ICANN( International Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) assigns domain names on the internet ( like .de, .com, etc.). It functions according to a principle of large membership. Accordingly, their director, Andy Müller, got elected by an “at-large” membership. As Germans represent the largest number of members, he was mainly elected because of German votes (but did require a certain proportion

of votes outside Germany too). One can of course question the representativity value of this election, and the global approach of ICANN in general.

- ❖ There are several examples in the UK of successful consultation websites: they are national initiatives commenting on a single issue. A few examples: COD- Citizen On-line Democracy; Uspeak: Parliament listens, where the issues dealt with are mainly social (child care, work incentives, etc...).
- ❖ The Finnish city of Tampere has a city website going on since 1997, which debates on the life of the city and issues which relate to the city in a broader context (such as Agenda 21 issues).
- ❖ The city of Bristol has the South Bristol Community network, which links citizens in part of the city together.
- ❖ The City of Bologna had launched a city website in 1995, called Iperbole. It worked well at the start, but then too many questions were asked and the website managers got completely overwhelmed. Whilst this was not the intention of the project organisers, the project seems to have lost some momentum, because a) it tried to do too much, and b) didn't properly determine the impact such a system could have.
- ❖ Eurvoice ([www.eurvoice.org](http://www.eurvoice.org)), had a very broad mandate. It catered for what European citizens wanted to know about the information society. But the website and the project have ceased to exist and the only mention of the project to be easily found is a press release on the LSE website.

**There are some questions that the initiators of an online consultation should ask themselves before attempting such an initiative:**

- Is the consultation sustainable? It is always better to favour issue-based or region-based interactions;
- Is it relevant? Is it useful or not?
- Is it effective? Does the user have the feeling that his/ her contribution is counting?

**As to the future development of online consultations, Mr. Shahin suggested the following :**

- Do not wait for universal access ("digital divide"), but anticipate it;
- Combine new and old methods of democratic activity;
- Educate people in use of new methods of communication and in use of the ability to use the technology.

The slides of the speaker can be obtained from

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**Addendum:** the Commission has launched the Interactive Policy Making initiative in order to "improve governance by using the Internet for collecting and analysing reactions in the marketplace for use in the EU's policy-making process". (IP/01/519). Further information on the initiative can be found on

[http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/internal\\_market/en/update/citizen/index.htm](http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/internal_market/en/update/citizen/index.htm).