The Piemonte Assembly Towards E-Democracy: the SESAMO Interregional Project

Elena FENOGLIO[1], Gabriella BRAIATO[2,] Katia Elisa PRENCIPE[2]

[1]*Consiglio Regionale del Piemonte, Via Alfieri, 15, Torino, 10121, Torino*
Tel: +39 011 5757480, Fax: + 39 011 5757633
Email: elena.fenoglio@consiglioregionale.piemonte.it
[2]*CSI-Piemonte, corso Unione Sovietica 216, Torino, 10136, Italia*
Tel: +039 011 3169649, Fax: +039 011 3168474
Email: gabriella.braiato@csi.it, katiaelisa.prencipe@csi.it

Abstract: SESAMO is an e-democracy project launched to promote direct participation of citizens in legislative activities. The project sees the participation of the Regional Councils and the Regional Executive Councils of Piedmont, Liguria and Valle d'Aosta and some local Institutions with a co-funding of CNIPA [Italian National Centre for IT in the Public Administration]. The Piedmont Regional Council set up CRPNet, the section dedicated to citizen participation on its official site. This section makes it possible for all citizens, sector experts and Local PAs to use a set of tools (forum, comments to news, opinion polls) to follow its activities and to participate with comments and suggestions. These services are one of the steps adopted by the Regional Council to involve citizens, living more information on its role and peculiarities.

Keywords: e-democracy, participation, transparency, involvement, content management system, audio/video streaming platform, web conference

1. Introduction

Over the last decade Public Administration has started a huge renewal process, aimed at simplifying procedures, resulting in greater efficiency and effectiveness for the users (citizens and enterprises).

In this context, the web channel provided its contribution to such process: every administration initially created its own on-line information point that, at a later stage, was integrated with application services, on-line procedures, and discussion areas. A PA oriented towards the provision of effective communication to its users represents the suitable e-Government model.

From a chronological and technological point of view, the next step to take is E-Democracy, aiming at directly involving citizens in government activities. "SESAMO: la porta è aperta. Accesso al Palazzo Virtuale delle Pubbliche Amministrazioni" [Sesame: the door is open. Access to the PA Virtual Palace] is a project created within the e-democracy implementation framework.

SESAMO is an interregional project running for two years, involving the regional administrations based in North-Western Italy: Piedmont, Liguria and Valle d'Aosta. In particular, the project saw the participation of the Regional Councils and the Regional Executive Councils of the three regions, the Provinces of Turin and Imperia, the Municipalities of Genoa and Noli, with the co-funding of CNIPA (Italian National Centre for IT in the Public Administration).

The regions shared the project-design phase as well as, partially, the requirements data collection phase. Every regional authority then individually begun the development of new services and their integration with those already implemented.

The entire project aims at setting up a web system with functionalities that will enable citizens to participate in PA activities.

In particular, citizens will have the possibility of:

- Being immediately informed on relevant arguments;
- Presenting comments/proposals related to published documents;
- On-line participation to the regional council plenary council;
- Being involved in surveys related to relevant themes.

This is a proper participative method based on e-democracy principles: transparency in order to communicate with citizens; participation in order to consult citizens; and involvement in order to take into account citizens needs.

2.   Objectives

The objective of the present document/paper is that of presenting the activities carried out by the Piedmont Regional Council on the SESAMO project and to share the experiences gained over the two years of activity. In particular, the document presents the project developments and the activities carried out during the design, development and promotion phases of the project.

The document describes and details the general objectives of the project, the chosen methodology, the technological solution that has been adopted, as well as the products that have been developed and published.

Among the general objectives, the most important are the creation and the fine-tuning of mechanisms that make it possible to create dynamic and interactive flows between institutions and civil society.

In particular the will:

- Promote citizens participation in the government activities;
- Allow users to follow council activities in real time through systems easy to be used;
- Involve citizens in an on-going improvement process related to the quality of the administration activity through tools enabling collection of comments, indications and evaluations;
- Collect and harmonise the administrations proposals.

A number of services to be used in order to support the participative process are available for every initiative aiming at involving citizens and associations in the PA decisional process.

The Piedmont Regional Council created an apposite section on its institutional web site to host and promote the participation services developed in the frame work of the project (http://www.consiglioregionale.piemonte.it/crpnet).

3.   Methodology

The Regional Council of the Piedmont Region, as Project Leader of SESAMO, carried out the design and development activities coordinating, through frequent periodical meeting, the other project partners. Considering the physical distance between the different institutions, the decision was adopted, from the beginning of the project, to use the Webconference service that makes it possible for people in different locations not only to meet, but also to share materials and a blackboard.

Moreover, the interregional work team set up the project web site (www.progettosesamo.it) that was used to share part of the documentation that was produced and to advertise the services carried out and offered to all the Institutions.

Thanks to fruitful meetings and to the exchange of ideas and material with other institutions, the work group of the Piedmont Regional Council was able to coordinate and carry out its activities sharing the process with the project partners, still maintaining a high degree of freedom in the planning of internal milestones. The work group collected and elaborated the requirements of the Regional Council and monitored the progress of the project during weekly meetings.

4.   Technology Description

The Piedmont Regional Council chose to customize Joomla, an open source groupware (http://www.joomla.org), based on PHP and MySQL.

The main features that led to the choice of Joomla include:

- Reply time: pages are to be immediately accessible to the users;
- Separation of structure and contents to favour the compliance with the law on accessibility;
- Immediacy in the use both of the back-office (editorial staff that enters the contents) and the front-end (citizens and enterprises) components;
- Optimum workflow management so as to make it possible for a distributed editorial team to work, taking care of the roles and the relative authorizations on the product;
- Respect of the WCAG of WAI-W3C that make it possible to comply with Law 4/2004 on accessibility.

The development team customised Joomla acting on the interface component and partially modifying the Content Management System (CMS), and adding new modules.

A graphical analysis was carried out to characterize the e-democracy section, so that it would be coherent with the presentation guidelines of the institutional Web site, still preserving its identity. Therefore, the layout of CMS was customised, to adapt it to the identified graphical project..

The Council Documents Procedure (Iter Atti del Consiglio - IAC) and Institutional Consultations (Consultazioni Istituzionali) services required a software improvement to integrate new functionalities in CMS and enable dialogue and exchange of information with the applications that have already been developed and are available on the Web site of the institution. In particular, the IAC service needed an integration with the Regional Laws Registry (Banca Regionale delle Leggi) – ARIANNA and with the Institutional Consulting services. Hence a new Joomla module was needed to be fully compliant with the service requirements and to adapt to the organization and management flows of the Institution.

The following image [Figure 1] highlights the architecture of the system including:

- The Regional Council Information System;
- CMS Joomla: SESAMO;
- Inter-exchange Database.

The Joomla CMS dialogues through the Inter-exchange Database with the Regional Council Information System. Every night, an automatic procedure captures the data of interest for the IAC service of the Council Data Banks, it stores them temporarily on the Inter-exchange Database and it activates automatic procedure that copies the data from the Inter-exchange Database to the CMS. The ad hoc module set up for the service elaborates such data and sends an email to the subscribers of the service. At the end of the operation, the data on the Inter-exchange Database are erased.
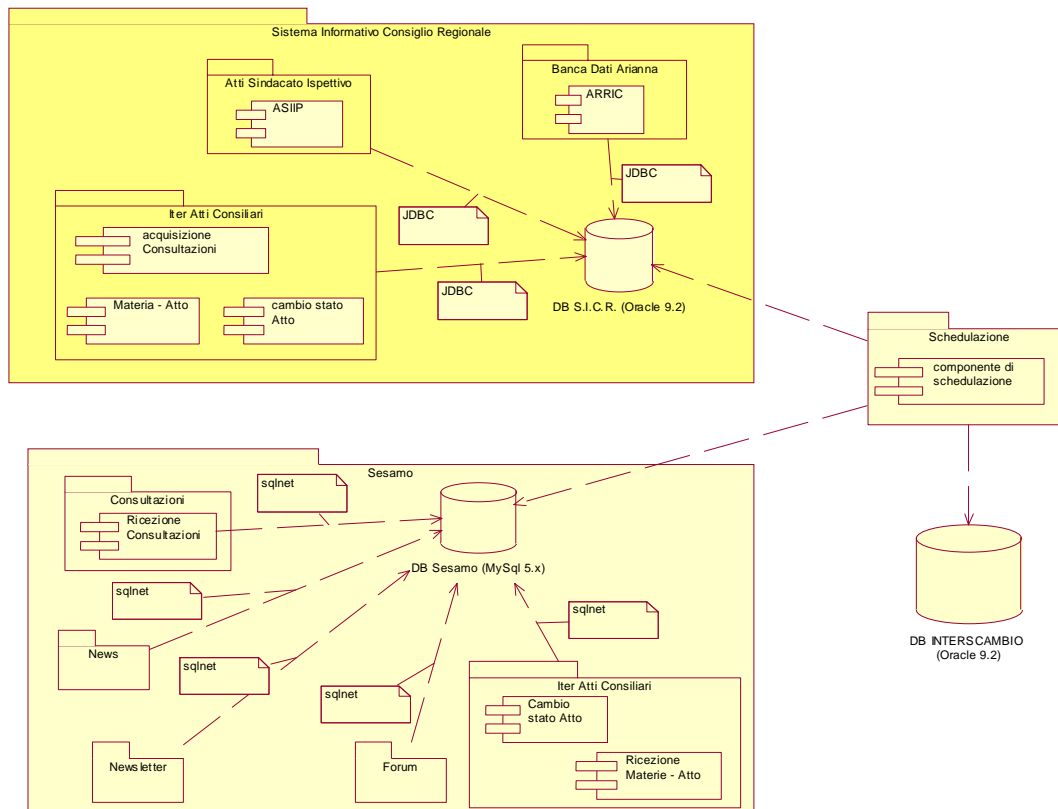
Figure 1: Architectural Diagram

5. Developments

The final version of SESAMO was named CRPNet, and it consists of the following services:

- Content Management System (CMS);
- Council Documents Procedure;
- Institutional Consultations;
- Webconference system;
- Audio/video streaming platform.

5.1 Content Management System

The CMS that was set up customising the Joomla open source product consists of a back-office component for CRPNet editorial staff content management and a public front-end component that offers the following modules:

- Registration: citizens can read and browse through the site contents, but they have to register (login and password) in order to participate and to make comments. The registration phase is deliberately very simple: compulsory data are user name and e-mail address. Citizens, if they wish to, can freely provide additional information (i.e. age, gender, qualification etc…) that the Regional Council may use for statistical analysis and/or to find user panels for focused polls. This strategy was adopted because the registration phase needs to be short and simple and with only a few compulsory data requested. The Regional Council controls and monitors citizen interventions, reserving the right to delete contents that violate the rules of participation that were subscribed at the registration. Furthermore, to avoid unwanted registrations, online registration needs

to be confirmed: users receive an email containing a link path for the registration to become effective.

- Forum: it is a moderated instrument with specific participation rules, which enables citizens discussion on topics relating to specific democratic participation projects and PA representative participation with a leading role in the decisional process. Discussion threads are public, but to participate actively it is necessary for the user to be registered to CRPNet.
- News: this instrument allows news introduction and publication through a simple and intuitive interface. Through the back-office system, the editorial staff inserts the news on Council activities, which user members can comment. As for the forum the comments are immediately posted. The CRPNet moderator verifies *a posteriori* if participants respected netiquette. If necessary he or she can delete the unallowed contents.
- Newsletter: this automatic instrument makes possible to disseminate news and information through email. Citizens, after having submitted a registration to the service, in which they have to specify their interest arguments, will receive updates via email.
- Mail-form: the form allows citizens to send information, comments and observations; to make questions and to require clarifications about news, documents, regulations, etc…
- FAQ (Frequently Asked Question): it is the section of the most common questions and answers. This section will be fed by the mail-form public instrument: the questions and the relative answers will be made public by the service manager.
- Surveys: this service makes possible to gather citizens opinions from the selected sample ("panel"), in order to represent faithfully a specific population segment (or the whole population).

5.2 Council Documents Procedure

The Council Documents Procedure service makes it possible for registered users members to select from an ad hoc list of documents (bills and laws, draft resolutions, agendas, motions, regulations) and/or domain of interest (i.e. agriculture, health, education, etc…) and to follow their progress through the Council with automatic email alerts.

Users can refer to the material attached to the selected documents clicking the link in the mail massage and accessing the "Arianna" and "Council Acts" databases. Thus, every citizen can read any Bill and follow step by step all the procedure that will transform it into a Regional Law.

5.3 Institutional Consultations

The service makes it possible to manage the institutional consultations called for by the Regional Council Committees. Whenever an act is entrusted to a Committee, the Committee consults some domain experts or interested professionals in different sectors (i.e. Institutions, freelances, associations, etc…) to collect suggestions and opinions that are useful to draw up the text that will be discussed in the Council.

The service aims at simplifying this procedure, helping both the Committees in calls for proposal and the collection of materials drawn up by the consulted experts, and the experts for documentation (memories) submission. Through CRPnet, the Committees automatically posts in an ad hoc restricted area the material to be examined and invite the experts to view it with an email that is generated automatically.

The experts, accessing CRPNet, may attach their memories and access a list of all the documents submitted in the past. When the documents are uploaded, an email is sent automatically to the Committee responsible for the consultation that will hence be able to search and download the received material.

5.4 Web Conference

The web conference system allows active participation of the subjects (experts and non experts) that are not physically presents.

Besides, the web conference system will make it easier to share remotely the working documents; this increases the integration among the different contributions.

5.5 Streaming

The audio/visual streaming platform makes it possible to watch meetings and conferences.

In particular, the streaming system gives the opportunity to search and download the recordings, to view that at a later stage**.**

6. Results

The e-democracy project is the result of a long development process of the Regional Council Information System (SICr), cantered on the legislative activity.

The theme of e-democracy has already been dealt with some years ago, drawing inspiration from an ambitious model (2001 OECD) that sees citizens as partners in policy-making activities, with three levels of involvement:

1. Information – activation of a one-way communication flow to disseminate information elements among citizens;
2. Consultation - activation of a two-way communication flow, to have some feedback from citizens;
3. Active participation - collaboration relationship with citizens to animate the political debate.

CRPNet is coherent with such model: a specific space to take part to the activity of the Piedmont Regional Council, in which diversified and complementary tools are available both for citizens and organizations. Citizens accessing the virtual palace have the possibility to easily find information on Council activities and to receive updates on topics of interest, and they can also comment the news and effectively take part to debates

It is almost impossible to evaluate to what degree these objectives have been reached in the short term. It will be necessary to wait for the completion of the dissemination activity to draw up a first balance of the results in terms of participation, as the activity will be followed by polls and surveys on the product.

Much activity is presently under way to make the general public know the services that are now available, and to promote them. So as to promote the project at best and increase participation, an ad hoc communication plan was set up, listing and detailing some initiatives to be implemented during the second semester of 2008. Some initiatives have already been launched according to the project communication plan, such as:

- Presentation of the project on the Internet
- Use of traditional media channels such as newspapers, TV and press releases
- Participation to technical workshops, seminars and specialist events
- Collaboration with institutions and associations
- Communications aimed at Municipalities and Local Institutions
- Preparation of a detailed project fiche with a view to its possible reuse, to describe the activities that have been carried out, share the experience and support, where possible, other PAs that are interested in involving telematically citizens in decision-taking processes.

Presently, the general response to this activity has not been satisfactory, even thug access and registration data show a growing trend. A correct dissemination campaign is essential to crate a general climate of trust for citizens that are not used to feel as an active

player of the public political life and who, almost always, approach PAs with caution, apprehension and a sort of diffidence.

7. Business Benefits

An overall evaluation of the effects of the project is still premature, as the application developments were completed at the beginning of 2008 and the testing phase is yet to be completed for some components. The first on line institutional consultation on a bill has been scheduled for the end of June.

However, in this phase, the following results have been reached:

- A rationalization of the Internet information channel: indie, the News service makes it possible to have a transversal overview of all the Council activities, without having to recur to different sources to have an overall picture. The IAC service is highly customisable, selecting and delivering information available on different data bases.

- The introduction of a CMS tool for the publication and management of information content, after an initial learning phase, made it possible to reduce the workload of the web editorial staff, that is responsible to enter content on the Regional Council web site.

- The Institutional Consultation service made the Council Committees autonomous as far as publishing materials is concerned (they were managed manually by the web editorial staff), and in the future the service will also streamline the internal workflows, as memories are stored automatically on a data base and they are hence easily accessible by other application services. Before the introduction of this service, the memories were transmitted by the experts and professionals through different channels (email, hand delivery of electronic supports and printed documents), while in the future all materials will be transmitted via CRPNet.

- The video streaming of Regional Council meetings proved to be very useful also for the Regional Council's offices, replacing the previous closed circuit TV transmission system TV, leading to considerable savings.

- The Webconference is a useful support for team work, making it easier to interact from a distance, thus reducing expensive travels and saving transfer times.

- More in general, advantages are expected of the reuse of the application and infrastructural components within the project, according to the following typologies:
  a. Extension of the application services to interested Institutions;
  b. Set up of a different dashboard for each Institution, according to their needs;
  c. Reuse of the technological infrastructure;
  d. Reuse of functional requirements and of the data logical model.

8. Conclusions

CRPNet does not have many members as of now (about 150), but it is worth remembering that as yet no advertising campaign for local Public Administrations and citizen associations has been launched. Those presently registered are both citizens and local PAs involved in the experimentation of the services.

Some themes proposed in the news area catch citizens attention, which is a proof of the citizens desire to be informed and involved. However their involvement needs to be continually encouraged, otherwise it gradually fades away.

The participation tools that are available make it possible, not only to inform citizens, but also to receive their comments and opinions. The next step to be made for the relationship between Public Administration and citizens to become a true virtuous circle, is for the Public Administrations to reply to citizens comments, demonstrating that they have understood and made use of the suggestions they received.

On the basis of the results, the dialogue tools will be further refined, so as to make them increasingly flexible and user-friendly. Meanwhile, discussions are under way to make other services available, such as video podcastings of Council meetings and multichannel applications.

The experience gained during the course of the project points out that, from the technical/technological point of view, it is not difficult to offer services to involve citizens and local PAs in the activities of the Regional Council. The difficulties that have been recorded were finding topics that would stimulate citizen participation on the one hand, and the will of the Institution to record suggestion, opinions and objections.

To promote citizen participation, experience is showing us that the constant update of the site and the presence of "facilitators" in the forums are essential. The suggestions of the Sesamo work group to other PAs that are interested in the project, is that of approaching the e-democracy creating a strong internal structure to manage contents and update information.

References

[1] CNIPA, www.cnipa.gov.it
[2] Regional Council of Piedmont, www.consiglioregionale.piemonte.it/crpnet
[3] Project website, www.progettosesamo.it