

Digital communication as a foundation of Smart communities in Morocco

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ABSTRACT

The era of new technologies in Morocco has seen the emergence of many digital initiatives to promote interaction with citizens and thus improve public services. Communication through digital channels between citizens and Government officials has led to the emergence of the concept of smart community which is part of the framework of smart city. This paper showcases some existing digital platforms launched by Moroccan institutions and civil society organisations, and highlights the aspects of citizen participation process and the role of each stakeholder to address the complexity to strengthen the relationship between Government and citizens. The following questions are discussed in the article: How to promote close links between government officials, non Governmental Organisations and Citizens? And how smart communities could help in revamping or renewing the relationship between citizens and government officials?

Key words: e-Governance, participatory democracy, e-participation, access to information, open data, smart community.

I. INTRODUCTION

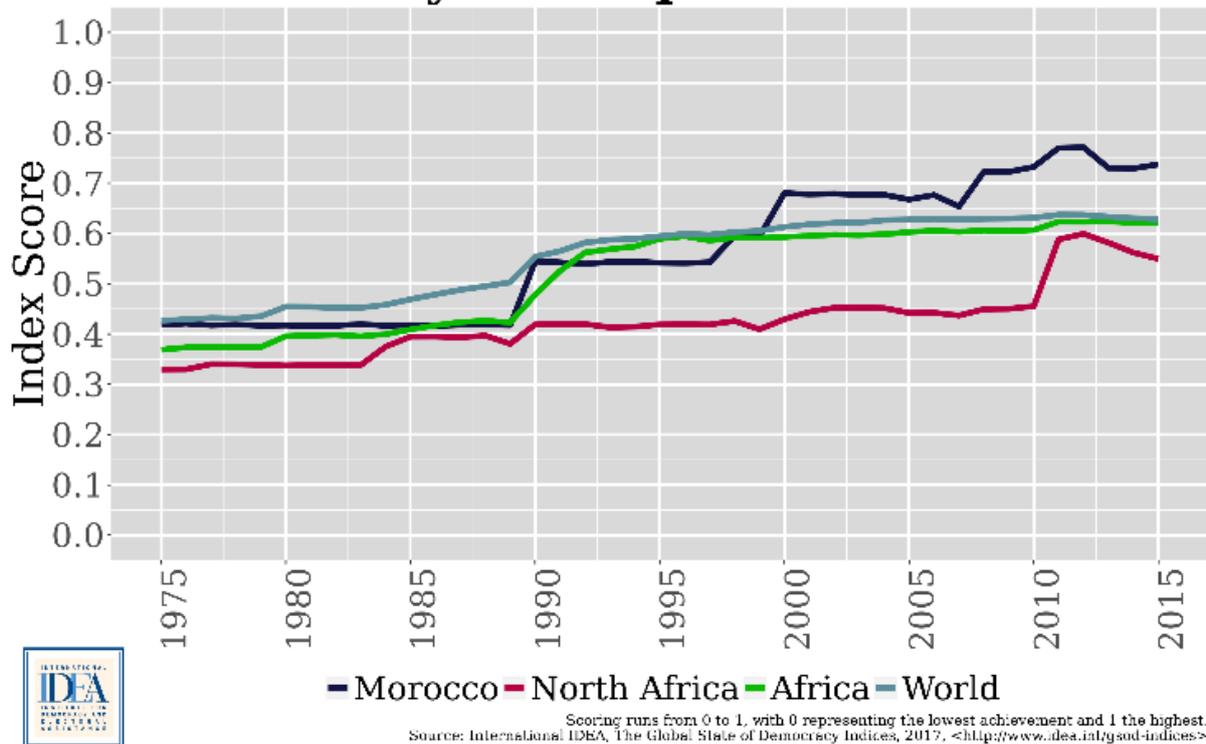
With the emergence of new technologies, interactions between citizens and government officials are likely to increase. The transition of a city to a smart city would require the collaboration of different stakeholders starting from citizens and civil society to the public and private sector at both the local, and national levels. However, public administrations are facing a challenging situation in offering the best living conditions for people in cities and better serve their needs. In addition, citizen participation could be considered as the backbone of smart city. This paper sheds light on how ICTs applied to public administration services can contribute in promoting a collaborative society. Section II of this paper provides an introduction about the legal framework of citizen participation and then exhibits an overview on digital initiatives launched by Moroccan institutions and civil society organisations. Section III presents a definition of a smart community and the paradigm of citizen participation approach in resolving public issues. Section IV summarizes some open issues that hinder the full citizen participation. Finally, section V draw some concluding remarks about promoting smart communities in digital era.

II. FOUNDATIONS OF DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

II-1- Brief evolution of civic participation

Morocco historically has a strong culture of citizen participation. Since 1975, Morocco has seen an increase in its Civil Society Participation scores, outperforming the regional and global averages [1].

Civil Society Participation



Evolution of civic participation indicators [2]

II-2- The new Legal Framework of participation

The 2011 constitutional reform has set the foundations of smart communities by establishing two important principles: Participatory democracy and advanced regionalization.

Participatory democracy : In the first article of the constitution [3], the constitutional regime of the Kingdom is founded on the separation, the balance and the collaboration of the powers, as well as on participative democracy of [the] citizen, and the principles of good governance and of the correlation between the responsibility for and the rendering of accounts. The associations interested in public matters and the non-governmental organizations, contribute [3], within the framework of participative democracy, in the creation, the implementation and the evaluation of the decisions and the initiatives [projets] of the elected institutions and of the public powers. It has also set new mechanisms of participation, and particularly, instances of dialogue (article 13), petitions (article 15) and legislative motions (article 14). The constitution also articulates the need of citizen participation at the territorial level (article 136).

The participation is strengthened with the founding right of access to information (Article 27).

These constitutional principles have been detailed with the elaboration with corresponding laws: (The organic law 44-14 related to petitions, the organic law 64-14 related to legislative motions, the law 31-13 related to the right to access to information).

Additionally, Morocco has recently joined an international initiative related to Open Government Partnership and has put in place an action plan with specific commitments related to transparency, integrity and citizen participation.

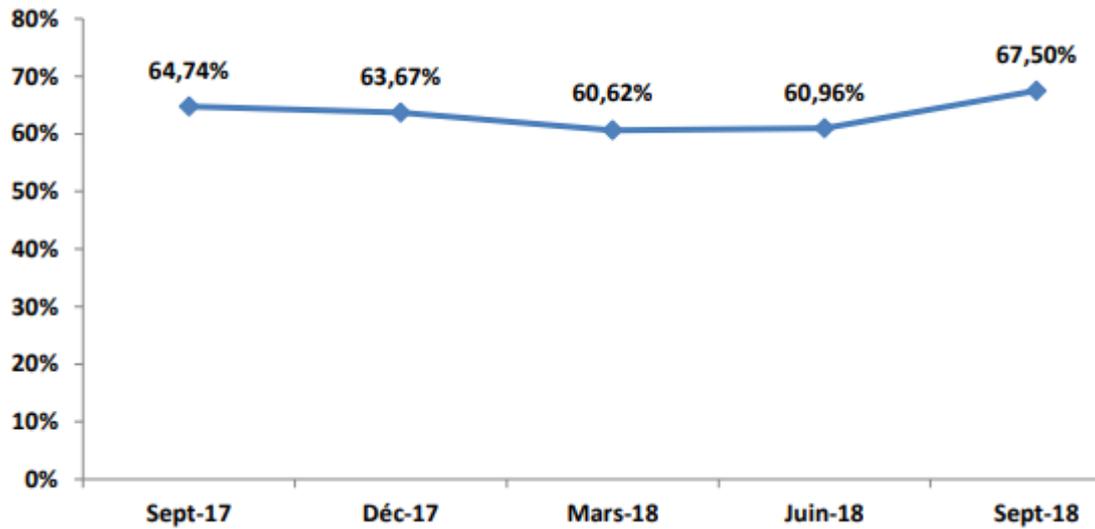
Advanced Regionalization: The first article of the constitution also states: “The territorial organization of the Kingdom is decentralized. It is founded on an advanced regionalization”. 3 new organic laws of regionalizations set the administrative and operational responsibilities of the regional authorities: Law 113-14 related to local communes, law 112-14 related to provinces and law 111-14 related to regions.

In each of these 3 organic laws, a dedicated chapter titled “Participatory mechanisms of dialogue and concertation” covers articles explaining the frame and the process of the territorial petitions as well as the consultative bodies.

This legal framework has set the foundation for digital institutional initiatives for citizen participation.

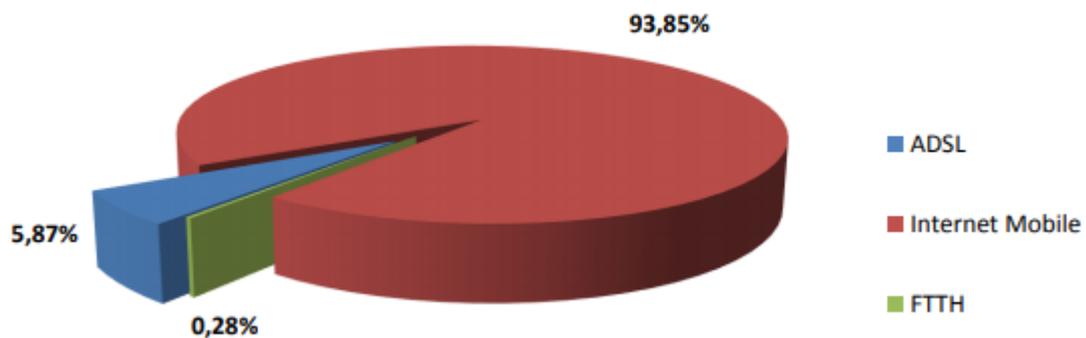
II-3- Growth of Internet usage

Based on the ANRT internet observatory [4], internet usage in Morocco goes through continuous growth reaching 68% by 2018.



Quarterly evolution of the penetration rate

This growth is mainly due to high phone penetration. In fact 93% of internet usage is coming from mobile connections.



Répartition du parc Internet par type d'accès

III- SURVEY OF INITIATIVES RELATED TO DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

This survey is indicative and not an exhaustif. It covers institutional initiatives as well as civil society initiatives to promote citizen participation.

III-1- Institutional digital initiatives for citizen participation

eParticipation.ma

The Delegated Ministry to the Head of Government, Responsible for Relations with Parliament and Civil Society has launched an electronic platform for citizen participation.to offer the opportunity for citizens to exercise their new right in submitting petitions and motions to the parliament, the Government or local authorities [5].

The Government is planning a communication campaign to raise awareness about this platform [6].

Data.gov.ma

As part of its E-Gov strategy, the Ministry of Industry, Investment, Trade and Digital Economy has launched the first African Open Data platform on March 2011, which positioned Morocco as a pioneer country in the data platforms. The data portal grouped data in a single access point to users, and all published data are in open usable format. However, the quantity and the quality of the datasets have not shown much improvement since the first launched back in 2011.

The Government is currently reviewing its Open Data strategy as part of its OGP engagements [7]. It is expected that the quantity and the quality of the dataset should improve.

fikra.gov.ma

The Ministry of Industry, Investment, Trade and Digital Economy launched a portal where citizens are invited to suggest ideas based on new technologies to improve public administrations. All ideas are publicly published with the possibility for other users to vote or comment each idea. The application first evaluates the popularity of all ideas and conduct a feasibility study with the aim to be implemented. It is not clear if the Ministry will continue using this platform specially as it is promoting alternative approaches of collecting crowd ideas, like #fikrainvest and #digitalfikra [8].

Chikaya.ma:

Chilaya.ma is the national portal of complaints, observations and proposals to the public institutions aiming to develop a single entry point to receive complaints, forward them to the appropriate administration, then enable to respond to the citizen concerns. This portal shall also be used to evaluate the administration performance and improve its services. As of April 2019, chikaya.ma has received 114.000 requests targeting 112 administrations with 67% response satisfaction rate [9].

Consultation on draft laws

The SGG (General Secretariat of Government) has a dedicated online space to collect and respond to comments on draft laws under <http://sgg.gov.ma>.

The author did not find a report assessing the usage of this legislative participatory functionality.

Transparency and Open Government portal

As per the OGP commitments [10], The Government is launching a transparency portal. The Open Government action plan is published on www.gouvernement-ouvert.ma which includes all commutments and corresponding progress of implementation.

It is expected as a new online space would enable submitting requests of access to information (as of law 31-13), as well as the proactive publication of information.

III-2- Civil Society initiatives

Constitutional crowdsourcing

Reforme.ma, a citizen initiative, was launched to crowdsource the drafting of the constitution back in 2011. The platform enabled citizens to read through the constitution and vote for or against items in every single article, and even to make proposals and comments about the articles. Quasi real-time statistics were published to highlight the demographics and the most prominent articles under discussion including the most popular articles, the most accepted articles, the most rejected and the most controversial ones. In a period of just two months, there were already 200,000 visitors and more than 10,000 comments [11]. The results of the discussions were submitted to the consultative committee.

Citizens-MP dialogue:

Nouabook.ma is a Moroccan initiative launched by Simsim participation citoyenne, a non Governmental organisation. It uses new technologies to facilitate communication and interaction between citizens and their elected representatives. This online tool allows citizens to express their concerns and priorities, and to question their representatives about their work in parliament through text and video [13].

Open Budget

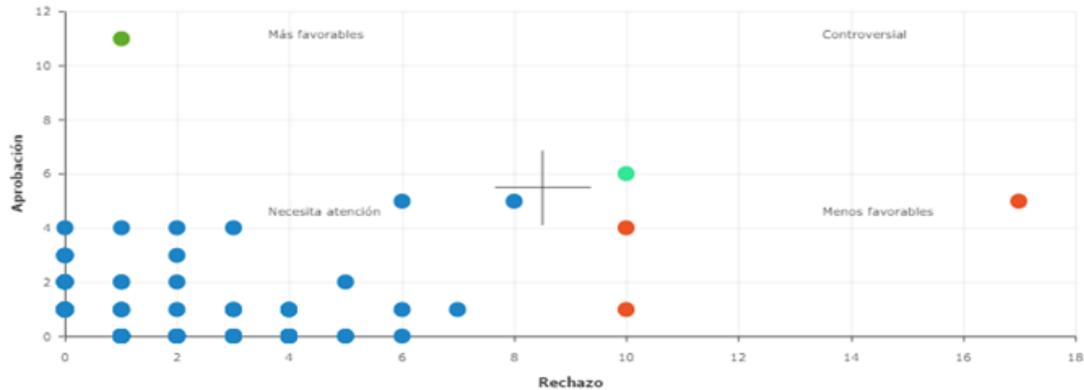
Floussna.ma is an online tool launched by ICT4Dev Research Center of Mundiapolis University in collaboration with Ministry of Finance, Open Knowledge Foundation, Transparency Morocco and the World Bank. The tool provides analysis and graphical visualization of financial data of the Moroccan state. It enables easy access to Government budget information, and facilitate the understanding of financial data through graphic visualization. The tool provides also an Interactive game that invites users to estimate the distribution of the budget state and understand how the tax money is spent. The application displays the difference between the real budget distribution and Citizen estimations.

Legislative consultation

[Legislation Lab](#), is a platform launched by GovRight, an international civic-tech organisation that promote citizen participation in the legislation process. It enables large online participation of any law in any country. It allows users to analyze each article of the law, vote up or down and provide a comment or a proposal related to every article. Statistical results are published in real time, as illustrated in Fig 1. At the national level, it was first launched in 2015 to promote public dialogue and participation about Moroccan draft laws. The platform catalyzed a vital online community including the largest Facebook presence related to Moroccan civil society, with more than 62,000 followers.



Contribuciones en Artículos



Demografía de las contribuciones



Fig.1. Statistical results of citizen participation in legislation process through legislationlab.org

Environmental priorities perception

The Ecocitizen World Map Project launched by Ecocity Builders in collaboration with ICT4Dev Research Center. It is based on the concept of Participatory Action Research, and aims to engage all stakeholders on the field of environment and sustainable development [14]. Citizens are invited to collect mapping information and observations on their mobile phones or via the web, and post them to the online crowdmap. Observations or reports posted to the map could include data measures, photos, written observations, comments, video or links.

participation.ma

Is an online platform launched recently by ICT4Dev Research Center, that supports non governmental organisations in encouraging online dialogue between citizens and representatives. Participation.ma is a tool conceived to strengthen citizen participation in local government. As a pilot phase, participation.ma is targeting three local areas: Sefrou, Tangier, and Tantan taking into consideration the variety of geographic distributions.

After the adoption of the law related to the right of petition (Law no. 44.14 related to national petitions, and Law no. 113.14 related to municipalities), participation.ma has been reshuffled to be aligned with these laws and to promote the exercise of the right to submit petitions. In addition, Participation.ma enables citizens to have a constructive dialogue with their elected representatives in issues that affect their environment. More specifically, it aims at promoting the role of citizen with a community by shifting the user centric approach into a citizen centric approach. In this way, service delivery made upon people needs will increase public satisfaction.

IV- CONCEPT OF SMART COMMUNITY

Smart community concept was first introduced as a community in which all sectors (Private sector, Government, Civil Society, Academia) use information and communication technologies to form alliances to work together in significant and positive ways [15] (See Fig. 2). Build smart communities requires taking advantage of all available data to solve important problems.

The emergence of new technologies, combined with crowdsourcing approaches is a key enabler for social change. A new form of dialogue enable citizens to be in direct contact from different angles with the government officials.

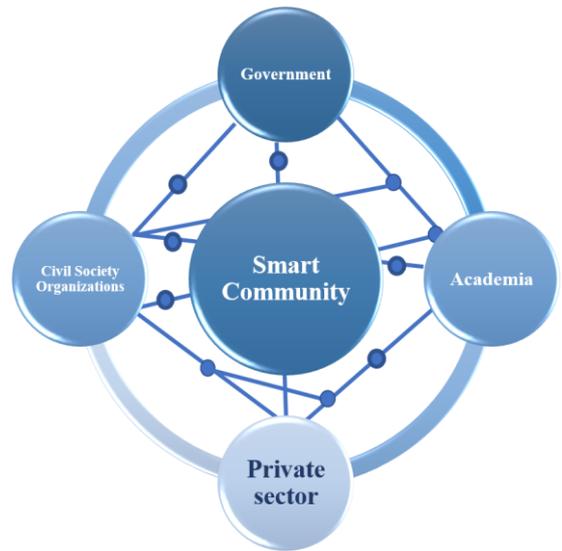


Fig.2. Smart community for effective citizen engagement [16]

The digital transformation of citizen participation, aims at shifting from the classical way of problem resolution operated only by Government to a participatory approach where citizen voices are incorporated to form a collaborative society.

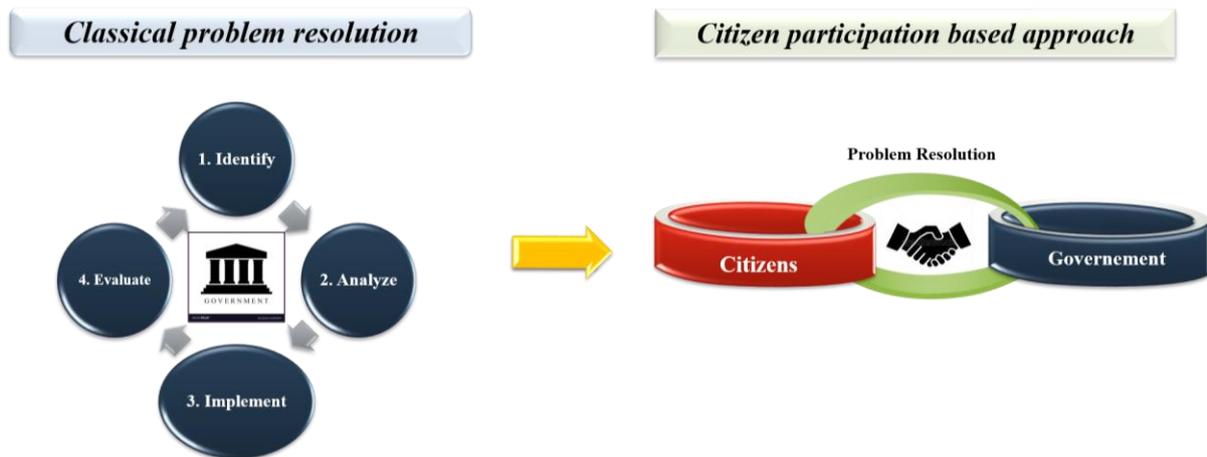


Fig 3. Digital Transformation for citizen participation

With new technologies we can have instant interaction between all stakeholders who form the collaborative society:

- **Access to information:** identification of the problem can only be performed if citizens have access to public information. This will allow the problem to be co-identified by all parties (Civil Society Organisations, and Government). In the same perspective, the law no. 113.14 related to municipalities stipulates that public information must be made available to citizens.
- **Public Consultation:** The Following step of problem resolution consists in collecting feedback from citizens which could be operated instantly through platforms and public consultation portals.

- **Collaboration:** Citizens are acting more dynamically and cooperating by submitting ideas related to the development of their environment. Citizens have to believe that their involvement will have a positive impact to their community to ensure effective engagement.
- **Empowerment:** Empowerment is when decision-making is placed between the hands of citizens. Moreover, digital channels and legal reform about participatory democracy, enable citizens to become Citizens Entrepreneurs who develop solutions and prototypes to be submitted to the Government.

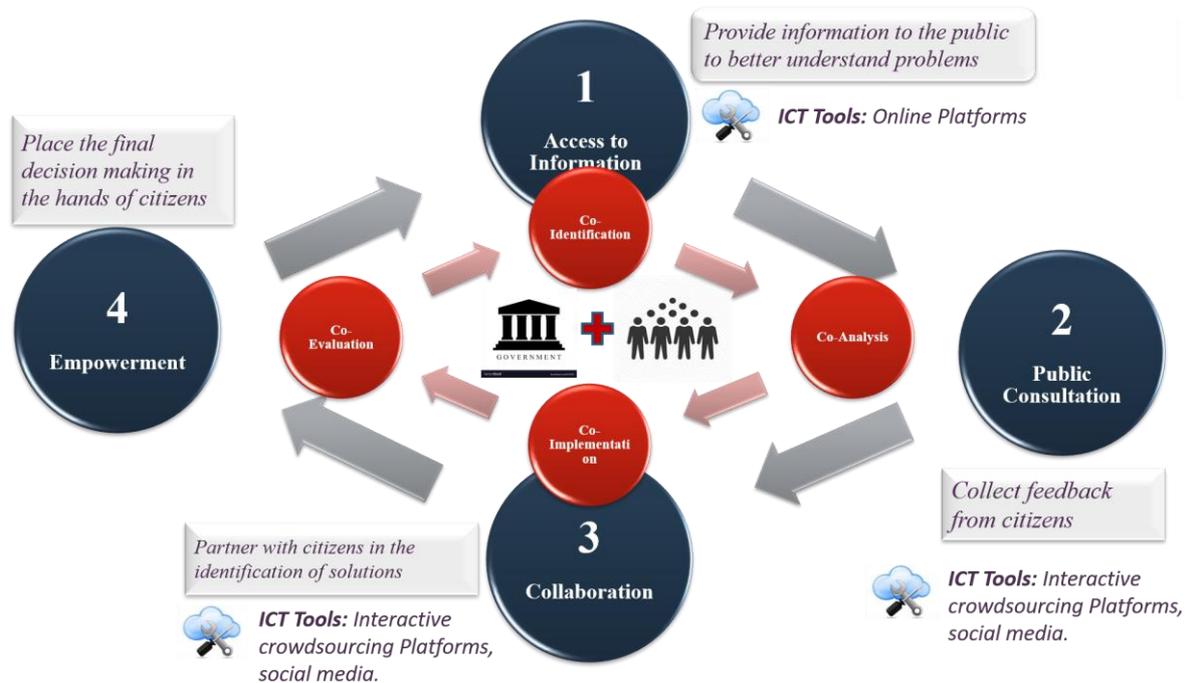


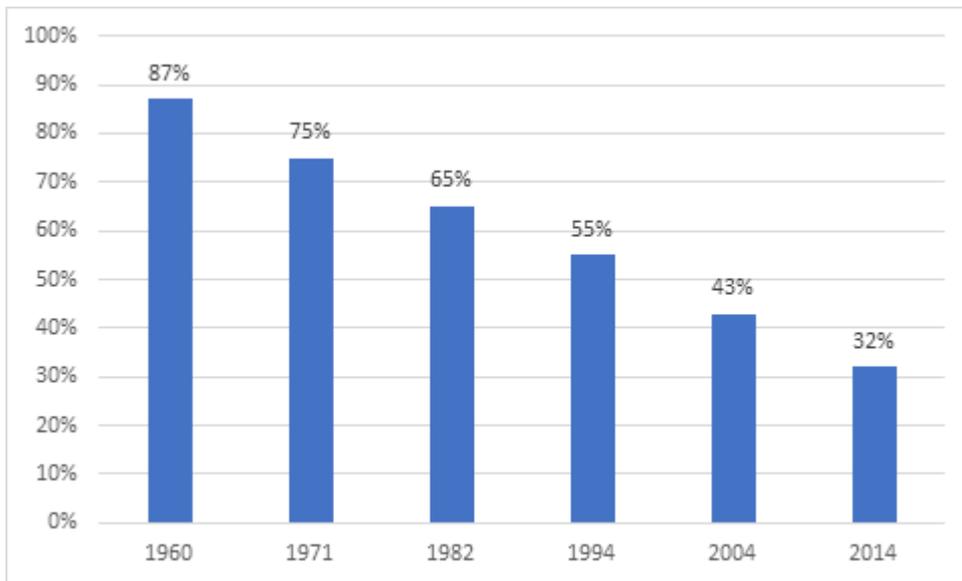
Fig 4. Citizen participation based approach

V OPEN ISSUES

Fig.5 illustrates the obstacles that may hinder citizen participation in local government.

The process of citizen participation through digital channels could be negatively impacted by several factors including:

- **Illiteracy:** People may feel marginalised because they are digitally illiterate and consequently they see themselves excluded from the participation process. Globally, illiteracy lowers the level of community involvement and civic participation. Illiteracy rates, while decreasing, are still very high (32% by 2014) [12].



Evolution of the rate of illiteracy in Morocco

- Internet access: Despite the technological advancements, some areas are still facing internet access barriers. A proportionality of the population is removed from the participation process. 33% of the population is not connected to internet [4].
- Expertise: The expertise barrier blocks citizens who lack specialized knowledge from full participation.

Taking into accounts all the obstacles mentioned above, the audience who is willing to take part to citizen participation process is very limited as illustrated on the figure below (Red Spot).

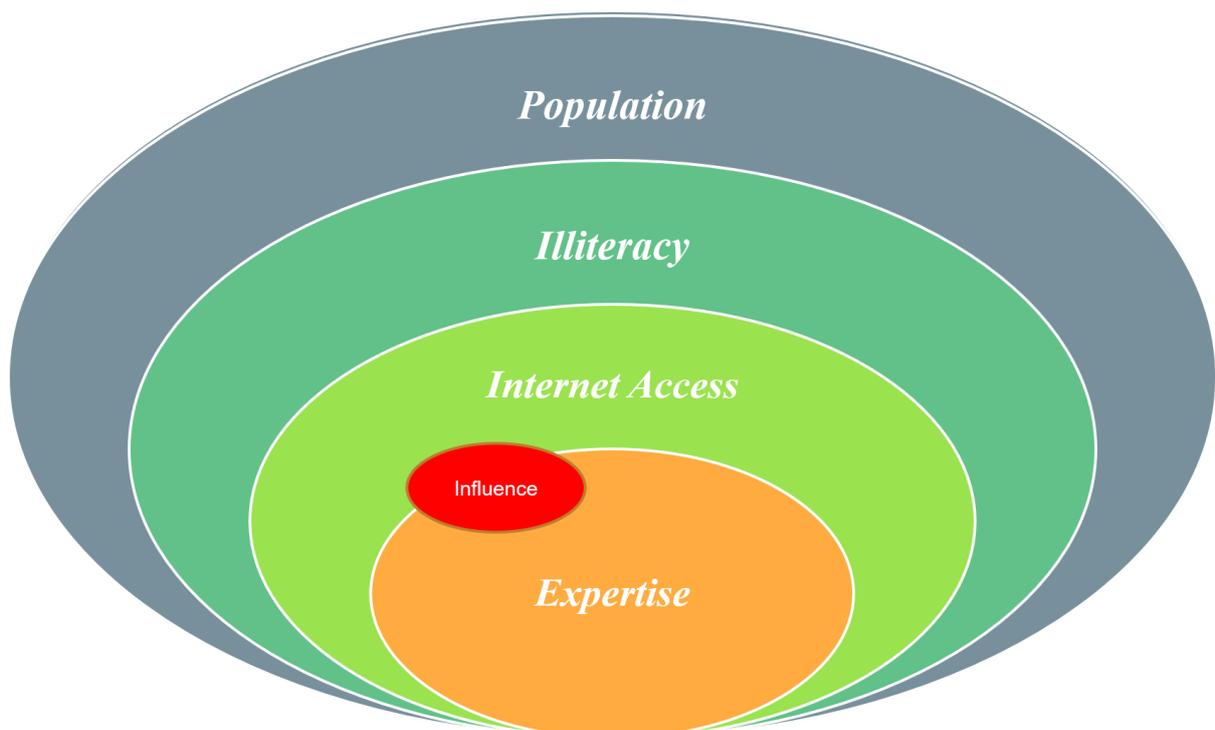


Fig 5. Barriers to citizen participation

VI CONCLUSION

The model of smart community is a win-win model where both from the citizen side as it strengthens transparency, social accountability and democratic governance, as well as from the government side as it provides elements to make field impact in the short and long terms using collective intelligence and scientific tools. The smart community model empowers citizens to make their voices heard and to better participate in political decision-making processes.

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