

## Crowdsourcing government?

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**Governments could be described as the largest and longest running crowd-funding schemes in existence. Sadly, whereas crowd-funding is seen as innovative, flexible, responsive, bottom up, transparent, enabling – among other things; governments would be hard pushed to receive similar accolades. However, times are changing and governments are beginning to adopt some of the characteristics of crowd-funding and crowdsourcing. But there is a long way to go.**

### What is changing?

Governments are facing triple pressures – demands for greater transparency, the need to cut costs and the expectation to be more innovative. Crowdsourcing and crowd-funding could bring the solutions, and redefine the way in which we perceive and engage with government, but more importantly also how it functions locally and nationally.

In the wake of the financial crisis Iceland needed to rebuild its constitution and its economy. To do so, it developed a nationwide consultation process via Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites. The resulting initial draft constitution was presented to Parliament, and in October put to a referendum, which included 6 yes/no questions. It was approved by two thirds of those who voted. Parliament will now take the final decision.

In the Netherlands a new smart phone app, Nulpunt, is making government information not only accessible – there is already a requirement to release government information – but useable and navigable. It enables citizens to register, indicate their areas of interest and then receive information selected from the enormous amounts that emerge from the Dutch government. Not only that, but the app also helps by highlighting interesting bits to share with others.

In Boston, an adopt-a-fire-hydrant scheme is helping reduce the fire department's expenditure. Citizens sign up to adopt a fire hydrant and in doing so take on the responsibility for keeping it clear of snow in winter months. The same approach has been used in Honolulu - to keep track of tsunami sirens.

### Why is this important?

Governments are under pressure to save money, open up, engage and be more relevant and responsive to their citizens, who in many nations are walking away from the conventional form of interaction – elections – in droves. But, political engagement is not dead – the success of Occupy Wallstreet, Wikileaks, Anonymous and tax protests – as well as local campaigns on any number of issues, bear witness to that fact. It needs new outlets or rather inlets.

Governments can be described as the longest and most widespread form of crowd-sourced service and investment – in health, infrastructure, education etc. But they operate without the level of choice and interaction

that modern day crowdfunding and crowdsourced solutions generate. That appears to be changing as these few examples indicate.

Governments are moving from simply dumping data sets or reluctantly, and often slowly, responding to requests for public information, to pro-active dialogue and interaction. Scale is obviously an issue – numbers of citizens, the amount of information, even geographic proximity. So too is culture. Iceland is not only a small nation, but has an ethos that everyone is a friend till proven otherwise, which provides a powerful basis on which to build. But local communities and cities are beginning to innovate, so too are national governments in similar ways. A growing number of social media sites such as Neighborland and Neighbor.ly in the USA and Aloitekanava.fi Hukkatila.ry in Finland aim to create local engagement and change. Crowd- sourced solutions, as well as problems, are increasingly emerging.

Citizens will need to be seen as friends, openness more than just a word on a webpage, participation an on-going not occasional activity that is integrated into government processes not in some way a parallel universe from which attacks and angry words emerge.

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