

ICTs and sustainability of rural municipalities: village websites in the Czech Republic

Jaroslav Čmejrek, Prague

New information and communication technologies open the ways to bridge the traditional split between the centre and the periphery as well as between the town and the countryside. Opportunities provided by ICTs are very important especially for people in small rural municipalities. They allow citizens to get better public services and better access to authorities; they involve citizens in the local political process and broaden the basis of participative democracy.

There are two opposite directions in the development of the ICTs in the Czech rural municipalities. Public administration reform as well as information and communication policy of the state represent a top-down development of ICTs. Besides this, there is also a bottom-up process based on local and regional activities. Information and communication services in the democratic process are widely used particularly in larger cities but efforts towards making use of the Internet in support of local politics and development are also evident in smaller towns and even in small village communities, many of which have more than one website.

Village websites are registered by a number of portals; some of them came into existence through initiative from below, but, naturally, they cooperate with public administration on the central level. That is the case of the *ePUSA* portal of the regional self-government, which is now the joint project of the Association of Regions of the Czech Republic and the Czech Ministry of the Interior, but it first came into being as a regional initiative (<http://www.epusa.cz>). One of the most important portals to the registration of municipal websites is that of *Towns and Villages Online*, which has the ambition of becoming "the state-wide portal of teledemocracy" (<http://mool.cz>). Many of the village websites are grouped around the so called micro-regions, which are founded by groups of villages for the purpose of creating joint regional projects. These often incorporate those citizens who aspire for a wider use of information technology.

Websites of rural municipalities illustrate how rural dwellers wish to represent themselves and to overcome their local disadvantages. We can also describe it as a search for local responses to new (global) threats and opportunities. Websites of micro-regions and their member villages offer a quantity of information on regional development in different areas. We can meet different ideas there – tradition vs. innovation, local identity vs. interest identity, dependence (assisted) mentality vs. enterprise. However, the breadth and variety of the websites of villages and micro-regions are unable to remove some of the problems with the use of information technologies on local level, particularly the problems with updating information. From this point of view there are great differences between the websites of the individual communities, or regions.

This contribution is focusing on problems which occur in evaluation of village websites. Which ideas and identity patterns do the rural websites reflect? How they can be detected? Do ICTs and websites support citizens' participation in political process and public life in rural municipalities?