In their article, Sonia Royo, Ana Yetano, and Basilio Acerete attempt to measure local government commitment to sustainability goals by examining the existence and success of e-participation tools. Their dispiriting conclusion is that use of the Internet by municipalities—in this case, European municipalities—to engage the public on sustainability issues has been halting and largely unsuccessful, even for those local governments that have signed on to a larger, high-profile coalition effort. But, as the authors point out, we are still learning how the Internet can be used as a democratic tool, and it may well be that a municipal Web site is simply not a promising vehicle for the promotion of a local sustainability agenda.

The authors begin with a somewhat desperate premise that has also been embraced in the United States, which I will paraphrase this way: in the absence of focused national and international action on climate change, much rests on the willingness and ability of local governments to act on their own initiative to encourage sustainable practices. This assumes, fairly, that national leadership has shown neither the courage nor the vision to act in a responsible way on climate change, despite a capacity on the part of the citizenry to learn and act in pursuit of sustainability, leaving it to government officials who are in more direct touch with the public to harness that capacity.

This construct places an enormous burden on municipalities, and the authors choose e-participation as a surrogate to measure commitment to meeting that burden. Perhaps this is unfair.

Focusing first on the ability of a municipality to take on sustainability as a priority, it must be said that the economics of governing at the local level has been particularly fraught in the recent past. Most cities across the United States are struggling to meet their basic obligations. It is, therefore, more likely for a local government to incorporate sustainability practices when those practices are compatible with a tight budget or, better, make a dollar go further. There is also a requirement for expertise, which often goes beyond existing staff resources. It is not surprising that the authors found a lot of window dressing surrounding municipal initiatives that was not matched with actual community engagement.

To the extent that progress has been made, successes are attributable to a number of factors that feed into municipal capacity. The authors mention the greater likelihood of progress in communities with a highly educated citizenry. The cities in the United States most noted for environmentalism and a sustainability ethic, including a particularly famous handful in the Northwest, are characterized by a youthful, idealistic, and prosperous citizenry, which has certainly had a great influence on municipal policy independent of any administrative mechanisms for public involvement. These cities have variously adopted zero-waste goals, plastic bag bans, bike and car sharing, smart growth initiatives, and alternative energy incentives. All of these initiatives are points of pride for civic leaders and citizens alike.

Even in less well-to-do communities than Seattle, San Francisco, and Portland, the public often provides the inspiration for new initiatives, whether hike/bike opportunities or constraints on municipal pesticide applications, local government will try to be responsive. Needed expertise often comes from larger governmental units—in the United States, this would be either state or federal agencies—or from environmental organizations. Nonprofit organizations, in particular, also play a critical role in rallying the public in a way that local governments do not ordinarily do.

As for the issue of the Internet as a tool for progress, the results of the study are not surprising. With the range and amount of information available to almost every citizen, municipal governments are not in a
likely to come from an organized campaign of an environmental coalition.

Getting back to the role of local government in planning for a sustainable future, progress may be small and slow, but the authors are correct in seeing municipalities as a rare source of hope. In the end, it will be a combination of enlightened leadership; local wherewithal; interaction with the large network of national, state, and local environmental groups; and felt climate impacts that will inspire local sustainability measures and civic engagement. It is not a small thing if the public is inspired to live differently, but it will not be local government Web sites that provide the inspiration.

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