

Fostering Citizen Engagement with Digital Strategies

CONTEXT



According to the Global State of Democracy Initiative, roughly 58% of citizens worldwide engage in the voting process for legislative and executive national elections. When observing local democracy, the participation turnout decreases to 54%. This number continues to grow thinner when it measures how citizens can participate in direct popular decision-making; the global average is 11%.¹ Promoting participation at all levels remains challenging, but boosting the reciprocal relation between metropolitan authorities, Local and Regional Governments (LRGs), and citizens² should have special attention considering its impact on decision-making, accountability, and life quality standards.

The Internet and digital gadgets as 21st-century tools are vital allies to face the participation dilemmas between reach and impact while facilitating problem-solving mechanisms. The challenge is **how to use digital strategies to effectively co-create solutions to urban challenges, accounting for scale and diversity**. The co-creation process is a constant, adaptive and flexible interaction between citizens, stakeholders, and local, regional, or metropolitan authorities. Decisive and impactful participation increases the legitimacy of public policies and actions.

Scale, reach and purpose

As the world continues to urbanize, urban areas' growth exceed administrative boundaries and become metropolitan. This new typology brings coordination challenges because of the multiple government tiers in this new territorial scale. To take advantage of the agglomeration benefits and potential economies of scale metropolitan scale brings, it is vital to understand the extent of the issue (problem) that wants to be solved so that the participatory process has the most appropriate scale.

In promoting citizen engagement,³ LRGs will probably face two challenges:

-  **Legitimacy and efficiency.** This relates to the time and resources available to carry out a participatory process. These resources' availability will constrain the process's scope and deepness. In other words, will problem-solving methodologies be used on a case-by-case scenario, or will consensus be generated to validate general courses of action.
-  **Short term and long term result.** This relates to the expected timeline in which to see the results of the process. Let citizens know whether they are engaging in a process with short-term or long-term effects. Short-term results become relevant when managing expectations and also in the context of an emergency.

Two available tools, the [OECD Guidelines for Citizens Participations Process](#) and the International Association for Public Participation–iap2 [Spectrum of Public Participation](#), provide useful insight on different mechanisms to use and at the same time, correctly answer the dilemmas mentioned above. Now, when it comes to engagement and emergency management, rapid and radical action are key to avoid future disaster or catastrophe, in this context, engagement becomes more challenging. For this matter Metropolis published an [issue paper](#) that provides thorough advice on proceeding under emergency scenarios.

POLICY

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Define the purpose and reach of citizen engagement.** It is key to set the scale of the engagement process, whether at the metropolitan, municipal, neighborhood, or block level. Defining the objective and added value in having people actively participate is equally essential.
- 2. Promote data access and understanding at all levels.** To complement broader citizen engagement strategies, LRGs should ensure access to the internet and minimum common basis of digital literacy for their inhabitants. Digital strategies should be present across all public offices to foster citizen engagement and increase the legitimacy of local policies. Digital strategies are cross-sector vehicles that help empower and promote people's relations with their community, local and regional governments, and metropolitan authorities.
- 3. Data availability and privacy.** Implement clear strategies to ensure that all the data collected from an engagement process will be publicly available to ensure data circulation and transparency. Always in compliance with the privacy framework, guaranteeing personal information will be adequately stored and ethically managed. Furthermore, all digital resources and gadgets used should be auditable, and their process easy to replicate.
- 4. Ensure representativeness and diversity.** The engagement strategies need to pay particular attention to including the voices of under-represented communities. Considering an intersectional approach to calls and strategies can increase marginalized groups' participation. Also, it is critical to account for age to include the vision and needs of children and the elderly in the city. Beware of extractivism. Consider compensating participants in your engagement process to recognize the value of their time.

Digital literacy and digital divide

Digital literacy, together with digital infrastructure and data management, is key for reducing the digital divide. In previous policy briefs and issue papers, Metropolis has extensively explained the extent and challenges of digital literacy and the digital divide.⁴ The importance of designing interfaces for all public and digital services delivered by the government from an inclusive user-experience perspective⁵ is key to guaranteeing access and understanding at all levels. To reach engagement through digital strategies, it is necessary to build a trusting relationship with citizens by developing tools to spur information and consultation activities. Once a given digital gadget has become of general use –almost a habit for users– a more advanced two-way relationship can be developed.

In the realm of starting simple and becoming part of the daily life of citizens, significant progress has been reported by several LRGs. Two exercises are worth highlighting for their impact on easily digitising the people-government relationship and thereby increasing mutual trust and confidence. [BOTI](#), the chatbot of the city of Buenos Aires, to communicate with citizens is deployed through WhatsApp, a platform with a penetration rate of 80%. This means that 8 out of 10 mobile users can directly interact with their local government through conversations about current procedures that are regularly revised and updated in the onboarding message. [Citizens Wallet](#), an initiative to promote ethical data management practice while simplifying procedures by connecting citizens' centralized data with decentralized requirements by different public offices. This strategy has been used locally in cities such as Lyon (France), [Buenos Aires](#) (Argentina), and [Colombia's](#) national government. This saves citizens' time and simplifies procedures. These are examples that are easy to implement and incorporate into people's daily lives..

In parallel, developing actions to ensure representation and diversity is crucial to reducing the digital gap marginalized communities and vulnerable population experience more often than the average. When promoting engagement in participatory processes is essential to account for gender, income, age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation in the call processes regardless of the method (open call, closed calls, or lotteries).

Design a context-aware roadmap and use existing tools

The latest UN Habitat Report on Cities raises concerns about the risk of "public engagement initiatives being empty exercises, unless they are properly related to policy and decision processes, and are supported with relevant skills training to allow participants to engage properly".⁶ Then, the context's particularity, the process's purpose, and the tools used to support it become essential. To this date, there are several methodologies and tools to counteract these risks. There is a consensus that engagement strategies should be small-scale, localized approaches supported by technological innovations that are increasingly characterized by flexible and modular designs.⁷ One example is the City Challenge Model developed by the NYU GovLab to support LRGs.

The **City Challenge Model**. It is a model to identify highly complex public problems to which governments don't have specific answers or solutions at a given time, giving room for co-creation to find implementable solutions. This model has three phases. Phase I is about problem definition training; this means LRGs officials and citizens develop well-defined problem statements supported by data. Phase II is about open innovation challenges; there will be competitions

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Map all available digital resources and gadgets to create a tailor approach to support citizen engagement. Create a tailored strategy to achieve co-creation process to solve urban challenges where digital and non-digital tools collide to improve conditions. Understanding the potentialities and limitations technology offers as a supporting tool to prompt citizen engagement is critical. Also, it is essential to keep in mind that the right mixture of tools and gadgets is the one that allows for the highest reach and diversity while it remains easy to understand (user-friendly).

to source diverse and innovative solutions from all sectors and strategies to implement them. Finally, phase III is about coaching, which refers to guidance in detailing the best solution into implementable policies and services.⁸

A more extensive set of alternative and complementary tools and methods are available on several platforms. The OECD has selected relevant strategies and tools that support its suggested [ten steps](#) for successful citizen engagement. People Powered has developed an [interactive Guide to Digital Participation Platforms](#) to support public authorities in selecting the right tool. It includes a [matrix of the best digital tools](#) for participation which offers a quick overview of each platform's characteristics. The Inter-American Development Bank has put in place a [repository](#) of open-source tools that can be used in the context of participatory processes.⁹

An excellent example of more complex gadgets is [Decidim Barcelona](#). Initially, a digital participatory platform launched by Barcelona City Council to coordinate the participatory process for drafting the Municipal Action Plan (PAM) and other future participatory processes in the city. Then it quickly gained attention from other city councils in Spain, civil society organizations, and multilateral institutions due to its capacity to manage high volume of participants and engage them in different ways such as open meetings, public consultations, participatory budgeting, crowdsourcing, and representative deliberative process. Then the Barcelona City Council led an improvement of the open source platform and created [Decidim Project](#). A Free Open-Source participatory democracy platform for cities and organizations. Moreover Decidim is a common's free and open project and infrastructure involving code, documentation, design, training courses, a legal framework, collaborative interfaces, user and facilitation communities, and a common vision.¹⁰

The most crucial suggestion for LRGs is to combine digital, social, and public innovation in an aware-context strategy to solve urban challenges, recognizing the vast range of available tools that already exist and using those that better fit their purposes.

References

¹The Global State of Democracy Indices (GSoD Indices) by IDEA International. Available at idea.int/data-tools

²When citizens are given opportunity and necessary resources to collaborate during all phases of the policy-cycle and in service design delivery. OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation.

³OECD definition of citizen: Citizens: individuals, regardless of their age, gender,

sexual orientation, religious, and political affiliations. The term is meant in the larger sense of 'an inhabitant of a particular place', which can be in reference to a village, town, city, region, state, or country depending on the context. It is not meant in the more restrictive sense of 'a legally recognised national of a state'. In this larger sense, it is equivalent of people.

Source: [OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes](#)

^{4,5}Metropolitan Policies to Reduce the Digital Divide and Promote Digital Inclusion. Metropolis, 2022.

^{6,7}The World Cities Report 2022. UN Habitat.

⁸NYU The GobLaB. Citi Challenge Model.

⁹OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes.

¹⁰decidim.barcelona and decidim.org