Guide for the impactful digital engagement of citizens

Kristina Reinsalu
Senior Expert, e-Governance Academy

eGA
e-governance academy

Why use digital engagement?

Digital tools have great potential to support and strengthen democratic practices. They can improve interaction between governments, civil society organisations and citizens, increase transparency and trust, and create new ways to engage citizens in decision-making.

Citizen engagement and trust are the cornerstones of good governance. Societies in which citizens can initiate and discuss public issues, propose solutions to significant problems, and co-create policies that affect their lives are happier, wealthier and more innovative.

Therefore, whenever we in the e-Governance Academy provide training and consultancy to governments and civil society actors to support digital transformation, we highlight three things:

1. We advocate for a balanced approach where digital engagement and e-services are equally valued and important.
2. Digital transformation must be in the service of democracy, and we do not collaborate with non-democratic systems or pursue non-democratic goals. However, we do not exclude countries outright. Where possible, we remain open to collaboration with countries in which providing support to civil society can help to revive or reestablish democracy.
3. We are not just providers of new digital tools. We see ourselves as developers of a digital culture based on democratic values such as openness, transparency and an inclusive political culture.

Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing is a process in which people (the crowd) contribute their knowledge and skills through digital platforms.

However, people are only motivated to participate and contribute their time, energy, ideas, and experiences when they understand the outcome, are afforded sufficient time to properly engage with the process, when they understand the whole process and have proper skills, and when the digital platforms are well-explained and user-friendly.

Therefore, we support our clients in designing and delivering impactful crowdsourcing models and tools.

Goals of e-participation

The strategic goal of e-participation is to empower citizens and to ensure that public policymaking takes place through partnership between citizens and government.
The strategic vision cannot be achieved through any single project but requires an ongoing result-oriented process of implementation of e-participation.
Every e-participation project should have two strategic objectives:

Citizens — **Increased citizen readiness to use e-participation to take part in political processes**

Public authorities — **Increased motivation and improved capacity of public authorities to use e-participation to support citizen engagement in decision-making**

When is the digital engagement of citizens impactful?

Based on our current analysis and pilot projects, as well as previous digital engagement initiatives, any e-participation initiative should have the following outcomes:

- **Participants are satisfied that they have acquired new knowledge and skills**
- **Public authorities are satisfied that they have gained valuable input for their work**
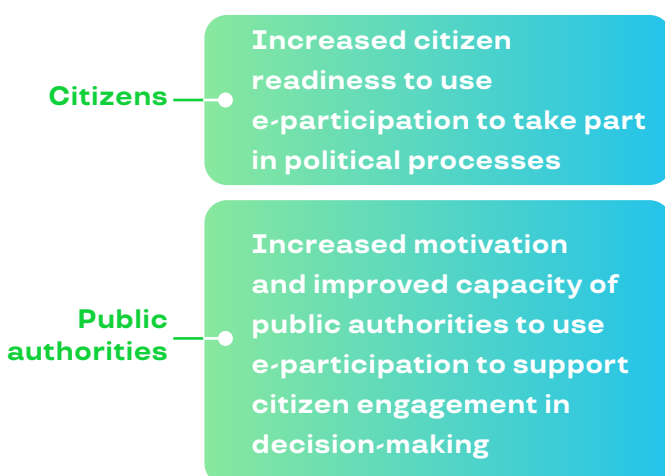- **The case has had a direct effect on political decision-making**

A primary function of impactful citizen digital engagement is the coordination of perspectives. This requires identifying stakeholders and sources of information and interest, engaging trusted sources of expertise and relevance, and facilitating productive, respectful, and idea-generating discussions and deliberations through the use of appropriate tools (platform, online meetings, etc.). To ensure inclusive and respectful behaviour and debate, social barriers and biases relating to gender, race and age must be removed. Finally, perspectives must be integrated by organizing information, mitigating concerns, and making connections between various opinions and expectations.

Success criteria

Evaluation of e-participation initiatives should be based on the following three **success criteria**:

1. Participants are satisfied that they have acquired new knowledge and skills
2. Public authorities are satisfied that they have gained valuable input for their work
3. The case has had a direct effect on political decision-making

Perspective of administration

- Gaining valuable input and/or relevant new information (e.g. new ideas)
- Increase in acceptance of proposed ideas

Perspective of participants

- Influence on decision-making
- Development of new skills
- Satisfaction with the process and results
- The case has had a direct effect on political decision-makin

Success factors

When planning e-participation, it is important to know what factors contribute to the success of the initiative. There are two kinds of factor:

1. Input factors

Input refers to the general conditions affecting the e-participation initiative and the resources needed to successfully carry out the initiative.

INPUT FACTORS include:
- Public interest in the topic of the initiative
- The political importance of the initiative
- The legal framework supporting the initiative
- Links to the formal decision-making process
- The resources available to the initiator of the case
- The user-friendliness of the platform
- The sustainability of the platform

2. Factors related to activities

Activities are actions taken on the e-platform and outside the platform to achieve the aim of the initiative. Activities represent the actual implementation of the e-participation project. Depending on the type of initiative, different e-platforms and activities can be envisaged.

FACTORS RELATED TO ACTIVITIES include:
- Clarity on the participation process and its aim
- Possibilities to interact with other participants
- Combinations of online and offline activities
- Feedback to participants about how their contributions and the results of the initiative are used
- Public outreach and engagement

Key recommendations for efficient digital engagement

By generalising from the lessons learned from the pilot projects, we can identify the following key recommendations:

Platform:

- Implement a core platform for the entire duration of the crowdsourcing initiative
- Prioritise thorough testing of the platform before launch to identify and rectify any technical issues
- Simplify the authentication process where possible

Activities:

- Keep campaigns concise
- Invest in hiring or collaborating with experienced campaigners
- Engage with activists and other key stakeholders early in the campaign design stage

The Checklist

Policy making

- ☐ Does the case concern a topic of significant public interest?
- ☐ Is there interest in the case at the political level?
- ☐ Is there sufficient public-sector capacity (knowledge and human resources) to manage the case?
- ☐ Are there any laws and/or regulations on which the case is based?

Platform

- ☐ Do the platform's functionalities correspond to the case goals?
- ☐ Is the platform user-friendly (visually appealing, easy to navigate)?
- ☐ Is the objective of the platform communicated clearly?
- ☐ Do content providers (users) need to register with the platform?
- ☐ Does the platform allow deliberation between the participants?
- ☐ Is it possible to provide feedback on the platform's performance?
- ☐ Will the platform be linked to other relevant platforms?

Promotion

- ☐ Is the case promoted to the target groups using various media channels?
- ☐ Will the media be interested in the case?
- ☐ Will there be any mechanisms (awards, bonuses, etc.) to stimulate interest in the case?
- ☐ Will the outcome of the case be communicated via the platform?
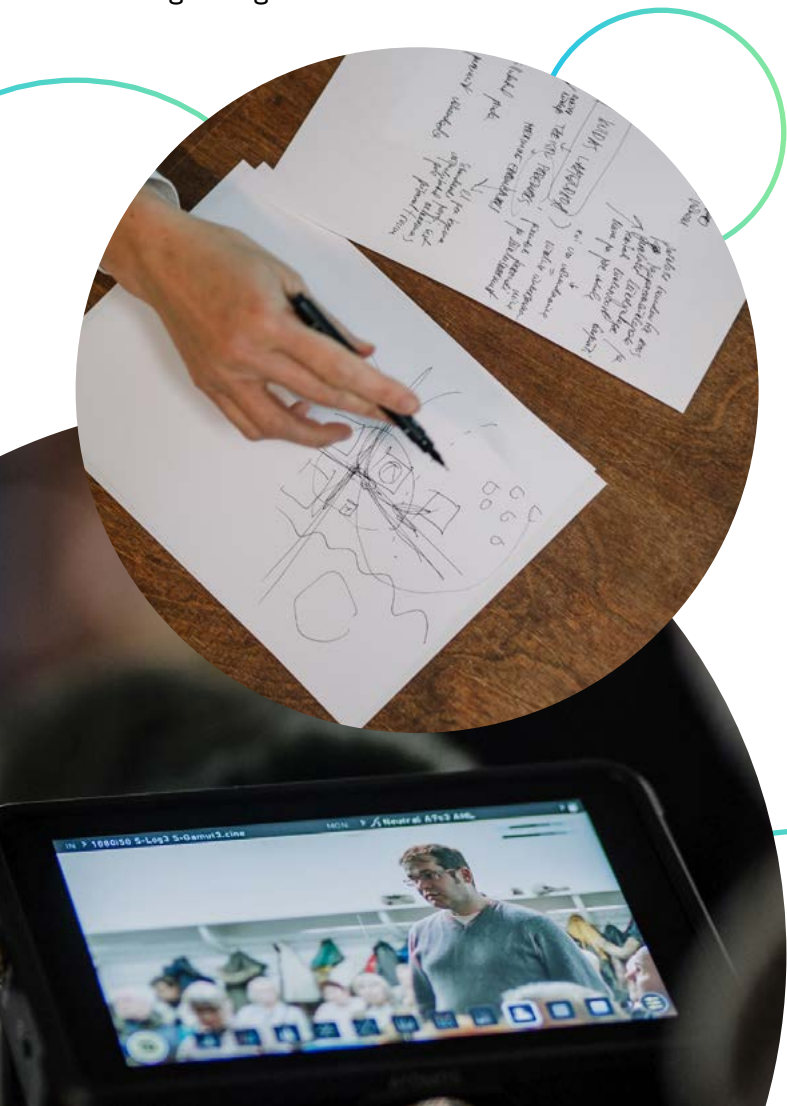
Example:
12 months to new policies on air quality

The CODE Europe project piloted a collaborative method of crowdsourcing legislation on the topic of air quality. This specific topic was chosen because of its transnational nature and the problems associated with it — with poor air quality estimated to be responsible for more than 400,000 premature deaths each year. The crowdsourcing process was implemented from 1 January 2022 to 15 January 2023 in six cities across Europe: Athens (Greece), Riga (Latvia), Tallinn (Estonia), Lisbon (Portugal), Burgas (Bulgaria) and Budapest (Hungary).
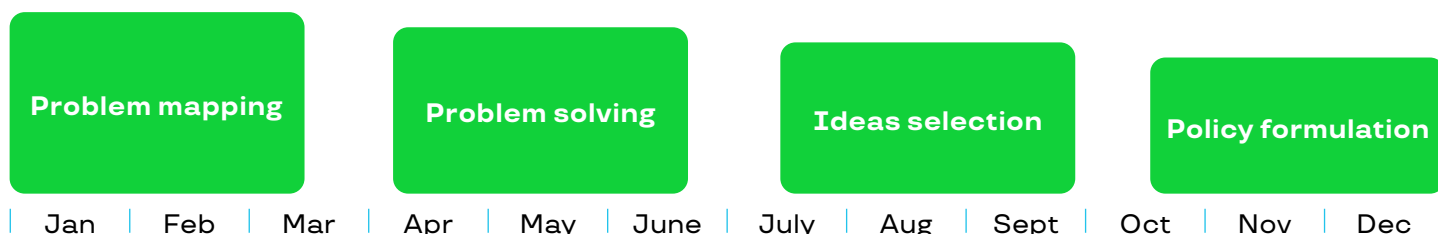
Project activities

The goal of the CODE Europe project was to implement crowdsourcing at different stages of the policy-making cycle as follows:

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CODECIDING EUROPE

E-Participation Assessment Framework	Crowdsourcing on Air Quality	1. European Union Policy Recommendations 2. Key success factors of e-participation

1. **Phase: Problem mapping.** Citizens identify problems related to air quality that they encounter in their daily lives
2. **Phase: Problem-solving.** Citizens propose solutions to the air quality problems that they have mapped in Phase 1
3. **Phase: Idea selection.** Citizens evaluate the solutions proposed in Phase 2 in order to identify the most popular ideas
4. **Phase: Policy formulation.** Based on the previous phases, citizens formulate policy proposals on air quality in collaboration with experts in the field and guided by the European Environmental Bureau.

For each phase, a separate online platform corresponding to the task was used. This provided the opportunity to analyse the role of online platforms in the success of the e-participation initiative. Altogether, around 50,000 people participated in the crowdsourcing process in the different phases of the exercise.

Problem mapping	Problem solving	Ideas selection	Policy formulation
Jan Feb Mar	Apr May June	July Aug Sept	Oct Nov Dec

Policy measures for the European Union level

Based on the problem mapping, problem-solving and idea selection phases, citizens formulated policy proposals on air quality in collaboration with experts in the field and guided by the European Environmental Bureau. The policy proposals were as follows:

- Establish a speed limit of 30 km/h in cities
- Electrification of buses
- Create air pollution and environmental awareness programs and workshops
- Establish rules to achieve zero emissions in industry
- Renovate buildings to reduce heat loss
- Strengthen the public transport network outside the cities
- Cities to become car-free and green
- Expand and improve the quality of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructures
- Support the development of renewable energy infrastructures
- Tax big polluters

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