Inclusion in e-democracy

How to set up an inclusive & representative digital engagement project

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Introduction

Over the last decade, the rise of the digital age and the new digital democracy tools it's brought along have altered our more traditional notions about civic participation. For a long time, typical methods of (offline) civic participation, such as town hall meetings or community-led initiatives, required a significant time investment and a willingness to jump through many bureaucratic hoops.

Many people found it difficult to clear their calendars for community engagement initiatives, which often didn't account for varied work hours, caretaking responsibilities, language access, and a wide range of other barriers. This often meant that the perspectives of traditionally marginalized groups were left out of public debates, and thus policies were designed without them in mind. And so, the small group of residents dominated their local decision-making process.

However, recent innovations have shifted these paradigms. Now, there are a plethora of engagement methods that governments can use to meaningfully and transparently engage their residents in decision making. The digital revolution has significantly lowered the threshold for engagement and made it a lot easier to involve more community members in civic participation initiatives through accessible tools that residents can access on-the-go or from the comfort of their own homes. By enabling community members to share feedback and input in just a few clicks, digital participation platforms make it easier for everyone to get involved with local government initiatives.

But it's important to acknowledge that even with all of the progress that has been made, there is still work to be done to make digital civic engagement more inclusive. Inclusion is one of the main building blocks of our modern democracies, and can help governments make decisions that are representative, distribute resources more equitably, and build trust with and between residents.

In this guide, we'll explore different ways local governments can make their participation efforts more inclusive, from designing a platform to communicating about its launch.

Let's talk terminology

Even local governments with the best of intentions around diversity, equity, and inclusion often use the terms interchangeably. But words are important - after all, if we don't really understand these principles, then how can we come up with clear strategies to implement them? Let's break it down.

Diversity, put simply, is the presence of difference. In the context of civic engagement, diversity typically refers to the representation of different identities across traits such as race, gender identity, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and (dis)ability *(among many other characteristics).*

Equity puts people on an equal footing by recognizing the systemic barriers that continue to oppress traditionally marginalized groups, and by implementing a fairer distribution of resources. Equitable projects recognize that barriers and privileges mean not everyone comes to the table with the same resources, and they aim to **correct for those imbalances** by improving procedures & practices in ways that focus on the most marginalized communities .

Inclusion is about making people feel **welcomed and valued**. When people are intentionally included, it ensures more power sharing in decision making. While communities tend to be diverse, often not everyone feels as though they belong - particularly traditionally marginalized groups such as people of color, immigrants, and people with disabilities.

Cities that take the time to incorporate **DEI measures** in their initiatives often find that **decisions are more representative** of their diverse communities, resources are **more equitably distributed**, and community members **feel more understood** and therefore have more trust in their government.

In practice

Once we understand the difference between diversity, equity, and inclusion, the next step is to consider how to implement them in community engagement. While the possibilities are endless, here are some implementation measures to consider:

3 ways you could incorporate diversity in your initiatives:

+ Involving leaders from local community groups, such as neighborhood associations or faith groups, in your outreach to build relationships and trust.

+ Setting up a community-based advisory committee to co-lead your project with a fuller representation of the diversity in your city.

+ Meeting people where they are; for instance, by creating tangible youth and elderly engagement methods through specific outreach programs.

3 ways you could incorporate equity in your initiatives:

+ Recognizing that your community members have different engagement barriers, and offering multiple engagement methods: in-person, digitally, by phone.

+ Increasing your staff's capacity to provide equitable services by making sure more than one person is tasked with learning about and incorporating DEI.

+ Acknowledging how negative past experiences with the government have led to current levels of distrust.

3 ways you could incorporate inclusion in your initiatives:

+ Evaluating how accessible your programs are; for instance, are your physical and digital spaces welcoming to all, including elderly residents, new parents, and those with disabilities?

+ Increasing access to information and services by offering multilingual resources adjusted for your community's specific populations.

+ Reacting appropriately and in a timely manner to your residents main concerns, such as launching a community-led advisory committee or task force on policing.

1. Identify groups at risk of exclusion

Over the last few years, we've seen the power of digital democracy in reaching community members who were not previously engaged or even receptive to more traditional participation methods.

Nevertheless, it's important to acknowledge that digital community engagement is not without its faults. Many people find themselves excluded when initiatives are only digital. Let's take a look at some ways the digital divide affects communities.

We can't talk about increasing inclusion through digitial democracy platforms without also addressing the digital divide issue. Who does the digitial divide impact most?

1. Low income residents

Many low-income residents still have limited access to affordable, high-speed internet. In addition, they are often disproportionately impacted by access to technology and may not have home computers or smart phones, leaving them disconnected or underconnected.

2. Elderly residents

The digital revolution is not immune to ageism. Elderly residents - who often have lower access to broadband internet, the devices needed to stay connected, and the quality use-skills to navigate online platforms - are increasingly reliant on technology for everything from doctor's appointments to calls with family, oftentimes without alternative methods for engagement.

A lack of equity and inclusion can have very real consequences.

For instance, in Mexico's 2018 presidential elections, an indigenous woman, **María de Jesús "Marichuy" Patricio Martinez,** emerged as a potential presidential candidate for the very first time. In Mexico, to compete for office independent candidates must collect 866,000 votes via a mobile application which only works on relatively new smartphones - phones which cost almost three times the average monthly wage. In other words, a Mexican citizen needed three things to give their independent presidential candidate a digital boost: stable electricity, strong mobile data, and a (newer) smartphone.

Since a large part of Mexico's indigenous population doesn't have access to these resources, María couldn't participate in the elections. In this case, a lack of inclusion in the election process directly affected the representation of citizens in local government, limited people's choice of potential candidates, and left certain groups out of the debate altogether.

It's important to look at projects through a DEI lens.

In Budapest, the **redevelopment of Teleki Square** in one of the city's most disadvantaged neighborhood's was completed through a community-based, participatory process. Many community members, including elderly residents and high school students, actively participated in researching, mapping, and planning the square's remodel.

But in reality, not every group that uses this square was asked to participate. No efforts were made to include Roma or homeless people in the decision making process. As a result, **the solutions for this square ended up excluding them.** The results? The square is now fenced and closed off between 8 pm and 8 am, and its benches were designed to prevent those in need from sleeping on them.

In such cases, participation processes are used to **legitimize the exclusion of marginalized groups**, without any efforts to alleviate their situations.

3. Rural communities

Residents in rural communities or on tribal lands often have to navigate infrastructure issues that limit internet access and speeds. This leaves them out of opportunities for public participation, despite increased government services moving online.

## 4. Residents with disabilities

It's important to ensure that residents with disabilities are equally able to engage in your online and offline projects. For instance, are your digital platforms accessible for those with vision impairments? Can your city services be navigated in a wheelchair?

Removing barriers to participation is key to inclusion. Now, let's take a look at what it takes to **set up a fair, inclusive, and democratic participation process**. In the next section, we'll explore the steps to making your participation efforts as inclusive as possible.

2. Pay attention to your communication

Inclusion should be on your mind from the very beginning of your digital participation process. The way you shape your project will ultimately determine who wants to participate, and who is able to.
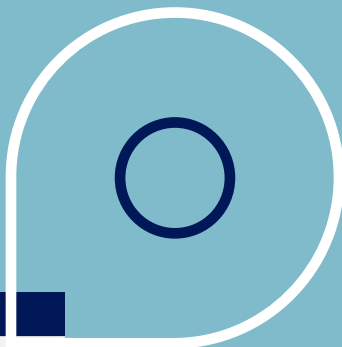
1. Use the right language

The importance of language is often underestimated. The way you speak to - or about - people defines how they think about certain topics and groups. Make sure you use inclusive language when communicating about your project.

A few tips on language:

- Avoid **stereotypes.** When governments use generic statements about groups based on identity (gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability, class, etc.), they can alienate residents and also perpetuate existing stereotypes. Avoid generalizations, mention demographics only when they're truly relevant, and craft data-backed statements.

- When referring to individuals, make sure to **use the right gender pronouns** (he/him, she/her, they); if you're not sure how someone would like to be identified, ask! It's a good rule of thumb to avoid the use of gender-specific language if it's not relevant to making your point.

- In addition to using the right kind of language, you'll also have to make sure that your materials are available in **different languages**. Define which languages are most common across in your community, and make sure to offer multilingual resources - such as translated materials or interpretation services - where relevant. Also consider whether your community would benefit from visual rather than written resources.

- Inclusive communication also means **keeping it simple.** Avoid jargon and make sure your message is easily understandable.

- If you're setting up a survey, it's important to think about the way you build your **questions.** Biased questions lead to biased and inaccurate answers, and that will have its effect on your participation efforts.

A few practical tips for building an inclusive survey:

• **Avoid questions that lead respondents' answers** by keeping your questions as neutral as possible.
Don't: "How bad is the traffic problem in our city ?"
Do: "Does traffic impact our city?"

• **Don't make assumptions about your residents and their lives,** and keep your questions as open and generic as possible.
Don't: "Which library do you use?"
Do: "Do you use library services? If so, which ones?"

• **Add a "prefer not to answer" option.** That way, residents won't completely disengage from your survey when they don't feel comfortable answering a specific question.

• **Be inclusive in the options you offer.** For instance, if selecting a gender is mandatory, make sure you include options besides "Mr." and "Mrs." for personal titles.

2. Think about privacy

We live in a digital age where privacy is becoming an increasingly difficult subject to navigate. Asking for too much personal data at the start of your participation process can scare people off. Here are some ways to avoid this:

• If residents fear that their real name could lead to discrimination or pose a threat to their livlihoods, giving them the option to **choose their own username** helps build trust in the process.

• State clearly, in simple terms, **why** you are asking for certain personal data, and **how** you're going to use it.

3. Make it visual

Many people are visual learners. In order to make everyone feel included in your participation project, you should reflect diversity and inclusion in your visual communication.

- When setting up your campaign, opt for **images** that represent the inclusive community you want to foster.

- Recognize that **representation matters** and include diversity of culture, ethnicity, gender, age, and ability in your visual communication.

4. Plan an inclusive launch

It's vital to think about the way your project will launch, and how this kick-off is communicated to your community members. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Where and how will the project be announced? Using multiple channels, both **offline and online**, ensures the widest reach.

- Are you launching **social media campaigns** and if so, who are they targeted at? Do these target groups represent the real-life residents that you want to include?

- Will there be **offline ads** and if so, where are they placed? Which newspapers will publish them and which audiences do they target? If there are posters or flyers, which neighborhoods will they be distributed in, and in which languages?

- Aim for **widespread communication** that reaches different community groups. Generalize your social media campaigns, target different neighborhoods, and make sure everyone hears about your project through a mix of online and offline communication.

To reach the most marginalized and excluded communities, **simply inviting them to participate is not sufficient**. You'll need to offer them the proper **means, tools, and knowledge** to participate.

Empowering vulnerable communities to participate in a meaningful way means they have to have access to the **right tools and the relevant information** to make well-informed decisions.

5. Work with community leaders

A great way to improve inclusion is by collaborating with **local community leaders** to spread the word about your project. For many community members - including minorities and traditionally underserved groups - a trusted middle person can make participation more accessible. **If residents feel that your project is supported by respected community leaders, they will be much more likely to participate.**

Consider how to build the buy-in of community leaders throughout your process, not just at the end. In addition to helping bridge divides between the local government and community members, these local leaders can also *bring fresh perspectives, new ideas, and a realistic view of your community's needs & assets.*

Consider what types of leadership are particularly valued in your community and consult leaders from multiple sectors, such as: education, community organizations, faith based institutions, service providers (healthcare, transporation, housing, etc.), businesses, and others.

6. What's in it for them?

You're asking your residents to actively engage in your participation project, but what do they have to gain? Identify specifically what the goal of your project is, and **how the outcome will directly affect the very people** you're trying to engage. Then, continously put this message at the heart of your engagement and communication. People are much more likely to get involved if they can see how the outcomes directly impact their daily life.

Many people are reluctant to engage in participation projects due to something called **'free rider syndrome'**, which is the feeling that their input won't matter because the outcome is already decided-upon, or will not be influenced by their engagement. **Underscoring how your project will be fueled and shaped directly by community input is vital to convince more people to get involved.**
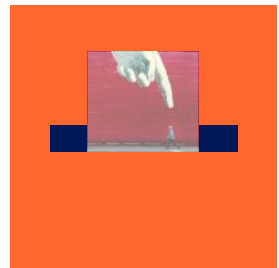
3. **Combine online & offline methods**
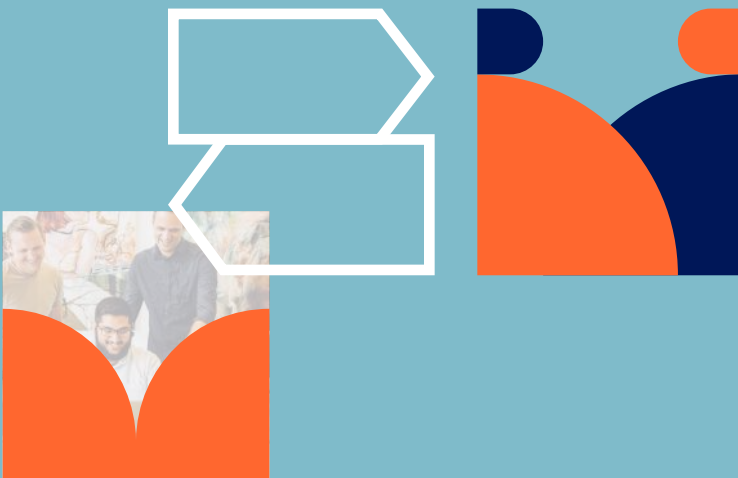
You've made it through the launch and communication phase of your participation project - congrats! But wait, the work doesn't end here. Even if everyone feels included in your communication efforts, you'll still have to enable them to actually participate.

Think of it this way: even if you've convinced all of your residents to participate, there will always be additional barriers to participation - such as a lack of in-home computers, smartphones, internet access, etc. As a local government, it's vital to make the participation process as smooth as possible, and to correct for barriers as much as possible. By combining different participation methods in both the online and offline spheres, you reach different sets of people. Debates, discussions, day and evening events, learning opportunities, collaborative online initiatives - the possibilites to engage your residents are almost endless.

Here are a few things you can do:

- **Provide public computers.** For example, two Belgian municipalities - Londerzeel and Marche-en-Famenne - placed computers in their libraries and town halls to create a physical space every resident could use to access their engagement platform. And because there was always a municipality representative present, people who needed it were able to get assistance navigating technology.

- **Include offline participation.** Some cities are careful not to place all their eggs in one (digital) basket. Paris placed around 100 ballot boxes on its streets for residents to vote on allocations for their participatory budgeting process. And in places like Mol and Temse, local government representatives collected all of the ideas and votes from offline sessions and took the time to upload them alongside the online entries on their participation platform for full transparency.

Mixing online and offline participation is key to really increasing **inclusive participation.**

4. **Customize your digital platform**

So far, you've done everything in your power to be as inclusive and equitable as possible in your outreach. But, there are a few more steps to take to ensure participation.
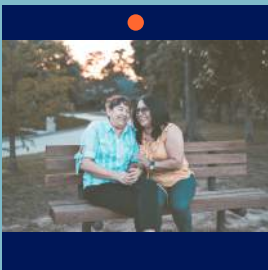
The digital platform you use should also follow a number of principles in order to be sufficiently inclusive. Here are two main things to keep in mind to make your platform inclusive:

1. Clarity over creativity

Keep an eye on the general user experience: people should be able to find and navigate your platform regardless of how digitally savvy they are. Extra bells and whistles may seem nice, but if the design distracts users from your platform's main purpose it can cause more harm than good. Simple designs and layouts are often the most user-friendly.

> **Tip:** Make sure your platform is compatible across different devices, like phones, tablets, and computers. At CitizenLab, we've noticed that 47% of users access cities' engagement platforms on mobile devices.

2. Pay attention to visuals

An inclusive participation process enables people with visual impairments, such as the elderly or residents with disabilities, to participate digitally. There are a few things that help make the process smoother for these residents:

- Give images in your platform an **'alt attribute':** a verbatim description of the image that can be read by computers for the blind and partially sighted.

- In addition to a clear icon, you can also place a piece of text on each button and **label** your input field.

- Work with **pronounced color contrasts** to make text easy to read. For instance, our software offers cities the option of branding their engagement platform, but notifies them if the colors compromise the readability of the platform.

5. Measure your results
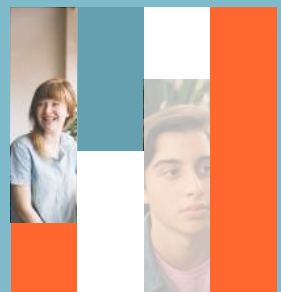
Finally, you'll want to measure how inclusive your participation process actually was.

It is absolutely vital to understand who took part in your project, and to measure how this sample of residents represents the general population. How does the sample of participating residents stack up against other data samples? How representative was your project, really?

Asking yourself these critical questions helps evaluate the diversity, equity, and inclusion of your participation process, and it can also be a starting point to focus even more on underrepresented groups. True inclusion will always require an iterative process of evaluation and adaptation that corrects for inequities, so be open to changes along the way.

Now that we've got the basics down, it's time to get to work! We know that putting inclusion into practice can be difficult for even the most well-intentioned local governments, so we've included a helpful check-list to simplify the process.

How do you measure impact?

Our practical guide has been designed to help local governments measure the impact of their community engagement projects.

Checklist: what you need to remember

1. Keep an eye on the **language** you use to communicate throughout the project. Make sure that it is neutral, doesn't perpetuate stereotypes, and doesn't make assumptions about your audience.

2. Make sure that your written communication reflects the **different languages** in your community, and that your visual communication reflects your community's **diversity.**

3. When launching your project, it's a good idea to **communicate as widely as possible.** Working with respected, local community leaders is a great way to reach more of your residents.

4. Protect your users' **privacy**. State clearly what you're going to do with their personal data, and offer options for them to participate anonymously.

5. Mix offline and online participation approaches to reach more of your community. Combining a digital platform and an offline strategy (posters, newspaper ads, postcards, phone options, etc.) will help you reach more community members of diverse backgrounds.

6. If you have a digital participation platform, make sure that it is as clear as possible, that it is compatible with different types of devices, and that its software is set up with attention to user experience.

7. **Measure your results** along the way, and adjust your strategy if needed.
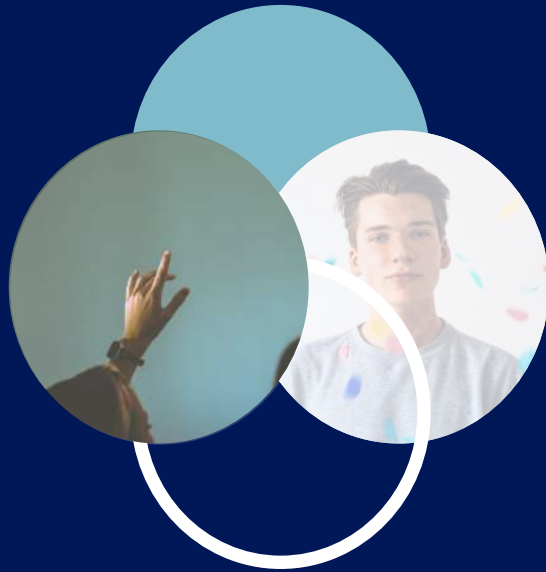
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