E-PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC TECH TOOLS: WHAT ARE THEY AND HOW TO SELECT THE RIGHT ONE

TRAINING LEVEL: Beginner

TRAINING TOPIC

The increase in the use of digital tools such as apps and various software is reflected in all areas of our lives. The field of participatory planning is no exception, and many municipalities have started using digital tools to communicate and collect data from citizens and stakeholders. These tools are called civic tech, and participatory processes that involve the use of civic tech are called e-participation. In this training, you will learn about the different functions of civic tech with examples of different tools, and find out how to select the right civic tech tool according to what you need in your project.

TRAINING OBJECTIVES

In this document you will learn:

- How to think about tools for e-participation
- An overview of the basic functions of civic tech
- How to choose the right civic tech tool for your project or process

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1. KEY TERMS DEFINITION

Civic tech
Technology that connects citizens with government institutions. Civic technologies enable communication, informing, participation in decision-making processes, and two-way transfer of information between the institution and citizens.

E-participation
Participatory processes that involve the use of civic technologies. A process that allows citizens to connect with one another and the representatives of government.

2. TYPES OF CIVIC TECH BY FUNCTION

The basic functions of civic tech are as follows:

A. Data collection and analysis

Tools for data collection (questionnaires, mapping, etc.), data visualization and analysis.

B. Communication

Tools for information sharing and communication between the government institution and citizens as key players, e.g. online tools, telecommunication, information centers, and tools for acquiring and managing contacts.

C. Co-Creation

Tools enabling citizens and other target groups to participate more actively in the creation of solution proposals, documents or public policies.

Specifically, these are tools with the following functions:

- Gathering suggestions and proposals
- Crowdfunding
- Crowdsourcing

D. Decision making and evaluation of proposals

Tools that enable voting or prioritization of e.g. competition proposals.

3. TYPES OF CIVIC TECH BY IMPLEMENTATION AREA

The international definition distinguishes five main types of civic tech according to the areas of implementation:

A. Participatory democracy

Civic tech tools are used to collect information and opinions, conduct surveys and polls, and for voting and decision-making.

B. Data collection and analysis

Collecting, analyzing and processing open data (including data from crowdsourcing, mapping, etc.)

C. Campaign organization and transparency

This category includes online petitions, fundraising, mass emailing and messaging services. Furthermore, these are civic tech tools for promoting transparency, and for monitoring budgets, fulfillment of election promises, or social and financial ties.

D. Journalism and fight against disinformation

Tools in this category are used to combat disinformation by verifying factual information. Solutions journalism that focuses on responses to social problems and analyzing existing solutions is also part of this category. These are civic tech tools used for analyzing media and social networks, hyperlocal and citizen media, etc.

E. Advanced technology

- Algorithms
- Blockchain
- Automated sensors
- Artificial intelligence (AI)
- Virtual reality (VR)
- and others

4. TYPES OF SOFTWARE

When selecting civic tech tools, it is also important to consider the type of software. There are two basic types:

1. Proprietary software

In the case of proprietary software, the source code remains the property of its owner/creator, who sells access to use the platform to customers through a one-time

purchase or purchase of a license. This arrangement is usually simpler and more cost-effective than the open-source version, since the software is maintained by the proprietary company and the buyer does not need their own IT specialists.

When purchasing proprietary software, keep in mind that each company has a different pricing model (per time of use, per number of users, etc.). Also, check in advance if there will be any additional costs when using the software (e.g. SMS for informing or verification, etc.).

2. **Open-source software**

In the case of open-source software, the source code is publicly available to everyone. Each user can customize it according to their needs. In Europe, it is relatively commonly used, e.g. the CONSUL app developed by the Madrid City Hall for urban participatory projects. Open-source software requires in-house IT capacity and experience as it is going to be maintained by the institution itself. Open-source software must first be adapted to the needs of the institution, then maintained and, if necessary, updated according to changing circumstances.

`Open-source` does not mean that the software is for free. Its implementation, maintenance and modification can be more expensive than purchasing proprietary software. It is therefore crucial to first evaluate whether the institution has sufficient in-house IT skills and capacities. Moreover, open-source software is not subject to competition and the need to improve as in the case of proprietary software, which can negatively impact its long-term quality and sustainability.

5. HOW TO SELECT THE RIGHT CIVIC TECH TOOL

There is no single tool or platform that covers all functions. The key is to prioritize needs, make compromises or use multiple tools. At the same time, focus on continuously monitoring the needs of your institution and do not be afraid to replace the tool if it no longer meets your needs. However, when switching tools, it is important to ensure a smooth transition with as little impact on citizens' user experience as possible.

Steps to follow for selecting the right civic tech tool:

1. **Determine what you need/want the tool for**

The first step is to map out what functions you need the civic tech tool to perform. For specific projects (ongoing or planned), identify the project phases that would benefit

from the implementation of civic tech (data collection and analysis, communication, co-creation, decision-making) and define the specific functions required for each phase.

2. **Conduct market research and consult an expert**

The offer of civic tech tools is very broad and understanding the market requires a lot of experience and know-how. It is important to do your research first and compare what you need in terms of functionality with what is available on the market. Given the large number of options, it may be beneficial to seek advice from an independent specialist if you do not have sufficient capacity for extensive research within your institution.

Selecting and setting up a civic tech tool poorly can backfire, not only can you lose money purchasing a tool that does not meet your needs but a poor user experience can also reduce public interest and trust in participatory processes.

3. **Evaluate continuously**

After selecting and purchasing a civic tech tool, and after familiarizing yourself with it for some time, evaluate whether it still meets your needs or whether you need to replace or combine it with another one in the future - the civic tech market is constantly evolving and after a few years, the initial tool may be outdated or no longer sufficient.

For evaluation, it is advisable to set Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which will allow you to evaluate whether the tool fulfills the required functions. KPIs can be for example:

- Number of registered users
- Interaction rate (engagement)
- Amount of collected data

6. IMPORTANT THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

- It is important that the public or the target group use the tool actively and perceive it as a platform where they can get the necessary information and participate in the decision-making and activities of the municipality.

- A civic tech tool should not operate by itself in a vacuum. Ideally, it should be complemented or linked to a similar tool, be it a social network or an already used civic tech platform.

- The public is not a uniform entity but consists of communities. It is worthwhile to perceive them as such and think about how to communicate with each of these

communities and what tools and methods can be used for this purpose to achieve the desired results.

- It is important to clarify the following when working with the collected data:
    - Who manages the data collected using civic tech
    - Who has access to this data (e.g. other departments in the institution)
    - Who can request access to them
    - Where are the data stored and in what form
    - Whether and in what form will the relevant data be published (e.g. survey results, etc.)

- A common mistake is the belief that responses or information collected from citizens using civic tech tools are representative and reflect the opinions of the entire community. Civic tech tools are usually not used by the entire or absolute majority of the community but only by a certain percentage of respondents which must be taken into account when interpreting the collected data.

7. EXAMPLES OF CIVIC TECH TOOLS

- Munipolis
- Emotional Maps
- D21
- Hithit