

11. *Decide Madrid*: A Spanish best practice on e-participation

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1 INTRODUCTION

Achieving engagement and meaningful collaboration through digital technology requires a better understanding of what hinders governments and citizens from being able to effectively collaborate both online and offline (Falco and Kleinhans, 2018). Barriers to effective citizen participation are produced by various factors, such as poor public knowledge of the issues addressed, poor provision of information, mistrust between the parties involved, low adoption, failure to influence the decision-making process, poor execution of participatory instruments, coordination difficulties and regulatory constraints (Falco and Kleinhans, 2018; Sæbø et al., 2008). Moreover, public administrations are often not clear about the objectives of certain citizen participation initiatives. All of this can give rise to tension, disappointment and reluctance to engage in future processes (Font and Navarro, 2013; Yetano and Royo, 2017).

This chapter examines the e-participation practices carried out in Madrid city council through the *Decide Madrid* platform (<https://decide.madrid.es/>). With this platform launched in 2015, the city council of Madrid aims to encourage citizens to participate in the management of the city, involving them in the generation of innovative and viable ideas and proposals in order to improve their quality of life. As of 2018, more than 400,000 users have been registered in the platform, with participatory budgeting being the option that has attracted the highest level of participation. The supporting software, Consul, has been adopted or is in the process of being implemented in around 100 institutions from 33 countries, most of which are in Europe (especially in Spain) and Latin America (Consul Project, <http://consulproject.org/en/>). Porto Alegre, the first city in the world to implement participatory budgeting in 1989, adopted Consul in August 2018 in order to implement its online participatory budgets and polls (OP Digital, <https://opdigital.prefeitura.poa.br/>). Furthermore, *Decide Madrid* received the 2018 United Nations Public Service Award in the category ‘Making institutions inclusive and ensuring participation in decision-making’. Therefore, this research focuses on an example that could be considered an international reference point in e-participation.

The use of information and communications technology (ICT) by citizens in Madrid exceeds the national average (INE, 2018). In 2017, 91.7 per cent of households in Madrid had broadband Internet connection and 91.3 per cent of inhabitants had connected to the Internet at least once in the last three months, with mobile devices being the most common type of connection

used (96.2 per cent). Madrid has traditionally ranked above average in e-government comparative studies (Pina et al., 2007). Madrid also has long experience in neighbourhood-based associations that collaborate with the municipality in the co-production of public services (Sánchez and Pastor, 2018) and in participating in networks that foster citizen participation at the local level (e.g. Sustainable Cities Platform, Local Governments for Sustainability and the Covenant of Mayors). *Decide Madrid* is the first e-participation practice involving direct citizen participation in Madrid where, traditionally, citizen participation has been carried out offline and mainly through associations. In 2016, Madrid joined the Subnational Government Pilot Program of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) and has been a formal member of this organization since 2017, promising to develop participatory budgets and collaborative and efficient legislative mechanisms and expand the policy of citizen participation (OGP, 2018).

2 ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

According to institutional theory, a primary determinant of organizational structure and behaviour is the pressure exerted on the organization to conform to a set of expectations to gain legitimacy and secure access to vital resources (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Following institutional theory, the adoption of citizen participation initiatives can be viewed as a process of formal compliance with the wishes and expectations of the external environment and stakeholders, although different levels of development depend on the real commitment of different organizations (Royo et al., 2011).

The main objective of e-participation initiatives should be to obtain stakeholders' input and include it in decision-making processes. Therefore, stakeholder theory can play a role in explaining the adoption and development of these initiatives (Royo et al., 2011; Sæbø et al., 2011). According to stakeholder theory, organizations should identify their stakeholders and fulfil their needs and expectations in order to succeed. However, the level of interest in e-participation initiatives differs among stakeholders and changes over time (Sæbø et al., 2011). Previous literature has found that most citizens do not use e-participation tools or mainly use them to access information, whereas those who seek to influence decision-making processes usually reduce their participation over time (Sæbø et al., 2011). Voluntary participants have high expectations of their participation and the same reasons that mobilized them can lead to disappointment (Font and Navarro, 2013). Citizens can also participate to a greater extent at specific moments when e-participation tools deal with policies that affect them more directly. The commitment to e-participation from other stakeholders usually depends on their role. For example, Sæbø et al. (2011) found that politicians show higher commitment to participation before elections.

The behaviour of citizens in e-participation can also be explained by networked individualism, which describes how people connect and communicate in the new social system of online relations (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Networked individualism describes a 'new pattern of sociability' whereby people build and manage multiple sets of personalized, mutable networks and identities to meet their needs (Castells, 2001). According to this theory, people tend to participate in many groups, but with reduced levels of commitment to any of them (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). The application of this theory to e-participation anticipates that citizens will be easily involved in various e-participation initiatives. However, sustaining citizen com-

mitment to long-term e-participation processes will be more difficult than in offline processes (Pina et al., 2017; Yetano and Royo, 2017).

Several authors have proposed evaluation criteria and theoretical models to analyse e-participation initiatives (Kubicek and Aichholzer, 2016; Nam, 2012; Porwol et al., 2016; Wirtz et al., 2018). They usually assess the following perspectives: democratic (transparency and objectives), project (organizational change and stakeholders) and sociotechnical (topics, tools and monitoring). The analytical model used in this case study (see Figure 2.1) covers these three perspectives and consists of five main elements of analysis: context, e-participation initiative, organizational factors, individual factors (actors) and evaluation of the initiative in terms of performance indicators, democratic legitimacy, transparency of the process, influence on policy design and external collaboration.

The methods used for this case study include desk research and semi-structured interviews. The former consists of content analyses of *Decide Madrid*, the website and open-data portal of Madrid municipality, and relevant legal documents, governmental reports, official statistics and other reports prepared by third parties. The latter is made up of nine in-depth semi-structured interviews with three senior managers (two politicians and one senior civil servant), two civil servants in charge of technical issues and four users of the platform. The interviews, carried out in December 2018, lasted for around 1.5 hours and were recorded for further analyses. The combination of data sources has allowed us to triangulate data and assess the success of the initiative according to varied points of view.

3 OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Spain belongs to the Napoleonic public administration tradition, characterized by its bureaucratic structures and legalistic philosophy grounded in administrative law. Municipalities are the third layer of the Spanish public administration, next to the central and regional governments. Municipalities manage around 14 per cent of the country's public expenditure (Eurostat 2019).

Citizens' right to participate in public affairs is enshrined in the Spanish Constitution of 1978. Law 57/2003 on Measures for the Modernization of Local Governments introduced specific ICT procedures to facilitate the effective participation of citizens at the local level and Law 40/2015 introduced the requirement for all Spanish public administrations to carry out online public consultations during drafting regulations.

The digitalization of administrative processes has been a priority in Spain since the 1990s (European Commission, 2015). The Spanish Certification Authority, created in 1996, has received numerous international prizes (CERES, www.cert.fnmt.es/en/que-es-ceres/premios) and is highly valued by citizens (8.2 out of 10 in 2017). In 2006, the electronic identity card was launched. Law 37/2007 on Citizens' Electronic Access to Public Services improved the development of e-government infrastructure and e-services for citizens and businesses (European Commission, 2015). Spain was ranked 16th in the e-government development index in 2001 and 17th in 2018 and it came 5th in e-participation in 2018 (UN and ASPA, 2001; UN, 2018). Furthermore, Spain has been a member of the OGP since its inception in 2011. Data from Transparency International España (TIE, 2017) shows very high transparency scores for the websites of the biggest 110 Spanish municipalities (89.7 per cent, on average). The average score in the area 'website, relationships with citizens and society and citizen participation' is

90.7 per cent; with 43 municipalities, including Madrid, scoring 100 per cent. Data for regional governments (TIE, 2016) are even higher: 94 per cent, on average, and 95.6 per cent in the website and citizen participation area (the highest score of the six areas analysed).

The 2008 financial crisis and numerous cases of corruption lowered citizen trust in public institutions and politics. Issues related to politics (e.g. the behaviour of politicians or the activities of political parties) and corruption have been important problems perceived by Spanish citizens in the last ten years (CIS, 2018). One of the requests of the ‘15M’ movement that emerged in 2011 was the improvement of democratic procedures. New political parties emerged, Podemos being the most popular in Spain. In Madrid, Podemos was associated with other left-wing political parties through Ahora Madrid, which governed the city from May 2015 to May 2019, with citizen participation being one of the flagships of its electoral programme.

4 DESCRIPTION OF *DECIDE MADRID*: BACKGROUND, AIMS AND SCOPE

In September 2015, Madrid city council created *Decide Madrid* to fulfil the commitments to e-participation established in the electoral programme of Ahora Madrid. New local regulations for citizen participation and initiatives to reduce the digital divide were also developed. Lessons were learned from other citizen participation experiences, such as Iceland (Better Reykjavik), Brazil (Porto Alegre) and Switzerland.

Through *Decide Madrid*,

the City Council of Madrid aims to encourage citizens to participate in the management of the city, involving them in the generation of innovative and viable ideas and proposals in order to improve their quality of life. It is a strong commitment to bring management closer to citizens, which will allow the city council to receive their proposals and create direct communication channels with citizens, helping to make the most appropriate decisions for the general interest. (Translated from *Decide Madrid*)

Participation in *Decide Madrid* comprises five types of activities (or modules of the platform):

- *Debates*: Citizens express concerns, views and ideas. Citizens can post, comment or state their agreement or disagreement with the main idea of the debate and/or the comments made by participants.
- *Proposals*: Users make a request that can be complemented by supporting documents and/or audio-visual materials. Verified users can support these requests. Proposals with the support of 1 per cent of Madrid residents aged 16 and over (27,662 inhabitants in 2018) are voted on in the polls section.
- *Polls*: Polls are carried out when a proposal receives 1 per cent support or when the city council wants citizens to decide on an issue. They can be open to all citizens or to the citizens of a specific district.
- *Processes*: The city council obtains citizen input on a pre-defined topic (e.g. development or modification of local regulations, definition of strategies or priorities). *Processes* can take different forms depending on the information the city council needs (e.g. specific debates, surveys, requests for proposals).

- *Participatory budgeting*: Annually, citizens can decide directly on how a part of the next year's budget will be spent (100 million euros in the 2019 edition, representing 2 per cent of the municipal budget and around 30 euros per inhabitant). The projects can cover the whole city or specific districts and can affect current expenditures, subsidies or public investments.

The platform allows citizens to participate in three phases of the policy cycle: (1) agenda setting; (2) policy analysis and preparation; and (3) policy formulation and, to some extent, policy monitoring; in the participatory budgets, citizens can check the status of the approved projects (technically unfeasible, under study/analysis, processing, in execution, ended). In all cases, the topics eligible are only those under the competence of Madrid city council.

The platform is open to everyone without registration, but participation is limited according to the type of activity. In general terms, everyone, including associations, non-governmental organizations and companies, can be registered in the platform, create debates or proposals and make comments in all sections. However, only registered citizens of Madrid aged 16 and over can verify their accounts and therefore create proposals for participatory budgeting and support and vote proposals. Organizations can make proposals, but only individual citizens can vote.

Verification processes and almost all participation activities can also be carried out offline in any of the 26 citizen attention offices. Support for the projects can be collected using a printed signature form. However, the online platform must be used to participate in debates and almost all activities in the abovementioned *Processes* module.

4.1 Legal Framework and Technical Features

Citizen participation in Madrid is regulated by a local regulation approved in May 2004 with subsequent modifications. Some previous municipal regulations about citizen participation existed (adopted in 1988 and 1992) even before the legal requirement for participation was established by Law 57/2003. This regulation establishes the right of citizens, entities and collectives to participate in local governance, with no specific reference to e-participation. Therefore, the existence of *Decide Madrid* is not guaranteed by any law and depends on political will. The guidelines and procedures that support the functioning of *Decide Madrid* were approved by various agreements of the governing body of Madrid municipality since October 2015.

Decide Madrid is based on Consul, an open-source software developed by the city council. It is also accessible to people with disabilities. The Consul code, freely available on the Internet, allows any organization to use and adapt the platform to its own needs, as long as it complies with the Affero GPL v3 license. This type of license protects developers' rights by securing the authorship and gives users and developers the opportunity to copy, modify and distribute the software. Moreover, this license encourages other developers to make subsequent software modifications available for reuse. This way, the improvements made by any organization using Consul can be exploited by others, fomenting collaboration between them. Even if later governments of Madrid decided to terminate *Decide Madrid*, it would be easy to implement it again. Madrid is the partner that is the most significant driver of Consul at the moment, but, according to the interviewees, the further development of Consul is expected to be more decentralized in the future.

5 ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

5.1 Organizational Characteristics and Human Resources

Madrid city council owns *Decide Madrid*. The creation and implementation of and operational costs associated with *Decide Madrid* are funded by the city council's budget. All of the interviewees state that financial sustainability is guaranteed. The platform was originally managed by the General Directorate of Citizen Participation (GDCP), whose competences included citizen participation and social innovation programmes. This directorate belonged to the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area, which was subordinate directly to the Mayor's Office.

The GDCP had 40 full-time civil servants at the time of the empirical research in December 2018, including administrative staff, lawyers, social workers, computer scientists and communications staff, together with three senior managers and advisors from different backgrounds (software companies, academia and public administration). Their performance is evaluated through annually defined targets. They have the typical restrictions of this type of employment, such as fixed schedules, but they adapt their schedules to citizen participation, diffusion and collaboration activities, sometimes doing overtime. There are 130 civil servants from other units who occasionally participate in the analysis and evaluation of proposals. In addition, there are approximately ten interim civil servants with various competences (depending on the projects in implementation phase) who work temporarily in the Participatory Budget Execution Office of the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area. The interviewees highlighted the importance of the knowledge of legal matters, advanced technology, languages and skills in dealing with citizens, indicating that the most lacking aspects were languages and advanced technology. Sometimes, occasional staff were contracted for specific aspects (e.g. platform development). Interviewees emphasized that the limited number of employees was one of their problems, along with restrictions in contracting out, which made it difficult to recruit staff with knowledge of the most advanced technology.

Staff came from other units because this area of government was new. In order to recruit them, an open selection process for the city council personnel was established, with individual interviews to ensure that the candidates were motivated and could adapt smoothly to the organizational culture the managers wanted to develop. The Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area organized training courses on citizen participation for their own and other staff areas. According to the interviewees, *Decide Madrid* has made progressive change in the perception of other staff areas on direct citizen participation and the use of open-source software.

The GDCP followed the regular organizational processes as part of the city council. However, it showed some differences in decision-making processes and generated a particular subculture within the city council, given the greater autonomy of its staff, the looser definition of jobs, the increased teamwork within this unit and staff commitment to citizen participation.

Decide Madrid is embedded in formal policy-making processes because other units use the platform to carry out public consultations and public audiences. In this sense, *Decide Madrid* acts as an intermediary between citizens and the other administrative units of the city council. The large quantity of proposals for participatory budgeting increases the workload of the other areas of government. Sometimes, citizens' proposals change the planning, priorities and ways

of working of other areas. Consequently, according to the interviewees, at the beginning of *Decide Madrid*, there was some resistance, as well as complaints, from the other units because they had to do extra work with the same resources and because citizen participation changed the way they worked. By December 2018, staff from other areas had adapted to the new organizational culture.

The Service of Inclusion, Neutrality and Privacy was particularly relevant to promote the participation of groups at risk of social exclusion. Medialab Prado, a citizens' laboratory that belongs to a city council-owned company (Medialab, www.medialab-prado.es/en/medialab) also plays a key role in the development of the initiative, as some innovation projects in citizen participation related to *Decide Madrid* are developed there. The city council also contracts external companies to comply with data protection regulations (e.g. encryption of votes to ensure anonymity).

5.2 Internal Collaboration

The other directorates of the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area participated in relevant processes of *Decide Madrid*, involving their continued collaboration (e.g. data protection, quality, evaluation and management of the official website of the city council and the citizen attention offices where citizens can participate offline). Specific collaboration with other units occurs, for example, when citizens verify their accounts, as the GDCP compares this information with the register of inhabitants in the Economy and Finance Area. Similarly, when run in parallel to *Decide Madrid*, offline activities were managed in collaboration with the Territorial Coordination and Public-Social Cooperation Area of Government. This area was in charge of city council management at the district level and coordinated and promoted sectoral councils, local forums and other participatory groups. However, *Decide Madrid* does not always include information about the offline citizen participation processes managed by other units.

Other types of collaboration depend on the will of each area, staff motivation and the accountability structure. All governmental areas and administrative units of the city council collaborate by proposing topics for consultation and evaluating the proposals made by citizens. According to the interviewees, this collaboration in the evaluation of proposals (e.g. costs, technical and legal issues) is critical since specialized units have the relevant knowledge. When *Decide Madrid* first started, the GDCP sent the information of the debates and processes to other units affected, but they got used to revising them directly.

The GDCP contacted the other areas quite often, as continuous communication is necessary in order to monitor projects and ensure that other areas implement the results of consultations carried out through *Decide Madrid*. In response to citizen concerns about delays in the execution of participatory projects, the city council set up a Participatory Budget Execution Office to improve the monitoring of the implementation of approved projects and, as a result, collaboration with other areas became more formal.

5.3 Leadership and Individual Characteristics

The political leaders who opted for the creation of *Decide Madrid* and the following selection of the relevant managers and staff were the mayor, the councillor responsible for the Citizen

Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area and the director of *Decide Madrid* (an executive advisor). Other leaders were the general director of Citizen Participation, who was responsible for the day-to-day operations as administrative leader, and the head of the institutional extension unit, who focused on the promotion of *Decide Madrid* among other organizations.

The city council decided that the results of polls and participatory budgeting were binding, so all areas were expected to adopt the proposals accepted and collaborate with the activities of *Decide Madrid*. However, this agreement had no legal basis, so the application of the results of citizen participation through *Decide Madrid* was only ensured because all areas were subordinated directly to the Mayor's Office, which acted in cases of disagreement.

The highest political leader of this initiative was Mayor Manuela Carmena, who has a long career in the judicial system as a judge. She played an important role in the promotion of the initiative and the coordination of the areas involved. The councillor responsible for this area of government has vast experience in programming and has previously created and managed software companies. The executive advisor and director of *Decide Madrid* holds a PhD in theoretical physics and is one of the creators of Incoma, a software programme that allows debates between many people. According to the interviewees, their role and leadership was crucial in ensuring resources, internal support, motivating staff and solving conflicts between different areas of government.

6 EVALUATION OF THE E-PARTICIPATION INITIATIVE

According to the managers interviewed, the concept of success varies depending on the type of activity. Successful debates and *processes* are those that generate ideas to improve regulations or services provided by the city council. Debates which evolve into specific proposals and projects, and proposals that receive enough support to go to vote, are also considered a success. In polls and participatory budgeting, success is achieved when the related projects are executed. Sometimes, the actions carried out can differ to some extent from those initially proposed by citizens, but the civil servants interviewed also consider these cases successful, as some projects need to be specifically defined, further developed or limited in order to fall under the competences and capabilities of the city council. In all cases, a high level of participation can be considered a success.

6.1 Performance Indicators

Decide Madrid presents aggregated statistics (support and number of votes, percentage of participation by gender, age group, district and via web or offline, where appropriate) for both the first polls (up to 2017, inclusive) and the participatory budgets. Disaggregated information on debates, proposals, processes, participatory budgets and website statistics is not available on *Decide Madrid* but on the open-data platform, without any direct link or mention to *Decide Madrid*. These data are not contextualized and there are no references to the goals of the initiative. Interviewees said that the GDCP has more information as well as their own indicators, which are revised monthly for internal purposes.

All interviewees agree that there is a growing trend in terms of users, participation and the impact of participatory budgeting, although some citizens think that participation in proposals

has decreased. The first participatory budgets took place in 2016, where 60 million euros was assigned to 206 projects. There were 45,529 participants (including those that proposed, supported and/or voted); 5184 projects were initially proposed and 32,725 citizens voted in the final phase. In subsequent editions, the amount devoted to participatory budgeting was increased to 100 million euros, and 75,619 citizens participated in 2019.

Until the end of 2019, 27,309 proposals had been made, but only two obtained enough support to move forward to the voting phase. In total, 13 polls at the city level and 22 polls at the district level have been carried out in four voting periods. In the first voting period, 214,076 citizens participated and 963,887 votes were counted (one citizen could vote in more than one issue). There were more participants by post (54 per cent) than through *Decide Madrid* (35.1 per cent) and ballot boxes (10.9 per cent), but more votes were cast through the platform (49.3 per cent). In subsequent voting periods, participation has decreased: 92,829, 9854 and 275 votes, respectively. The third and fourth voting periods were only at the district level and not all districts had projects. Furthermore, the topics being decided on had less importance (e.g. the names of a kindergarten and a cultural centre in the last voting period) and, in the last voting period, offline voting was only allowed for a few hours.

According to data from the open-data platform (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2020), 5706 debates had been started by the end of 2019, with a decreasing trend in the number of debates started per day (37.8, 1.5, 1.1, 0.7 and 0.2 in the last four months of 2015 and the years 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019, respectively) and comments on debates (151.5, 21.9, 7.2, 6.5 and 0.5). Ninety processes have been initiated in *Decide Madrid* (6, 7, 36, 27 and 14, respectively). Information on the number of participants in debates and processes and the number of comments on processes is not available.

6.2 Democratic Legitimacy

The GDCP promoted *Decide Madrid* using advertising posters (on buses, bus stops and street lamps), press releases, e-mail, social media, informative sessions for districts and associations working with groups at risk of exclusion, local forums and, in some cases, letters to all citizens of Madrid. The GDCP had a communication unit that collaborated with the General Directorate of Communication for these tasks. The platform provides detailed information on how the different sections work and allows citizens to visualize the contents of each module, prioritizing the most active, highest rated or newest content.

A positive unexpected consequence of the platform that contributed to its legitimization was the high level of participation at the beginning of the initiative. The participatory budget of 2016 (held from February to June 2016) and the first poll (February 2017) saw more participation than expected and more resources for the organization of offline participation were needed according to the civil servants interviewed. As these were the first processes with visible results in the city, their high participation rates were critical in gaining the confidence of citizens in subsequent processes.

All of the citizens interviewed agree that the most important motivating factor is the possibility to see their contributions implemented or taken into consideration. However, the interviewed citizens note that they do not have enough information on the effect of their contributions and the progress of the projects approved and that, sometimes, it takes a long time to see the result of their participation. They indicate that they do not perceive any gratitude

for their participation and also express the difficulty of following the dialogue in the debates. Some of the citizens interviewed note that many of the debates and proposals are used by citizens to make punctual criticism without any real contribution or argumentation. In some cases, the low participation and the potential for external influence puts the legitimacy of the results into question and demotivates citizens' participation. Interviewees also have concerns about the security of the platform and the difficulties of the verification processes. One of the citizens interviewed thinks that the methodology of participation through the platform does not allow effective direct participation: 'It does not achieve its objectives ... because a lot of citizens get lost in the website'. Interviewees also express their concern about the high cost of some participation processes for the city council.

The politicians and civil servants interviewed state that the platform has had three main detractors: major media outlets, which have systematically tried to delegitimize the platform, and two right-centre political parties. One of them was against 'direct democracy' and so opposed everything related to this platform, and the other criticized some of the methods of participation of *Decide Madrid*, e.g. the reliability of the method of obtaining support for proposals and the confidentiality of the postal vote (Europa Press, 2017).

6.3 Transparency of the Process

The users of *Decide Madrid* determine what is discussed on the platform in most cases, with the exception of public consultations and activities in the *Processes* module. The politicians and civil servants interviewed gave a lot of importance to free communication among users, so there was only slight moderation before the comments were published to avoid illegal comments (e.g. incitement to violence). Citizens can select other citizens' activities as inappropriate and moderators can revise them.

Citizens are provided with information in several formats (e.g. pdf documents, images or videos) to facilitate their participation (e.g. technical reports or related laws). In the *Processes* module, the text of the document open to consultation is very often embedded in the platform so that citizens can make their comments directly in the text and other citizens can see them easily. However, citizens indicate difficulties in supporting some proposals due to the lack of a detailed plan and estimated cost.

Citizens can only follow up their contributions in participatory budgets, as they have a monitoring section on the platform. In the other sections, citizens can only see other users' reactions (supports, assessments and votes). No summaries based on proposals or comments from participants are disclosed. The citizens interviewed complained that they lacked information about the outcome of public consultations, the impact of their contributions and the reason some debates, comments and proposals are excluded/cancelled or some winning projects are modified. Moreover, the citizens interviewed think that there is not enough information on the internal working of the city council (i.e. organization, procedures and competences) to give a correct evaluation on the impact of their contributions.

6.4 Influence on Policy Design and External Collaboration

According to the civil servants interviewed, more than 1000 actions have been decided by citizens. The proposals in the polls and participatory budgets that go to vote and win are carried

out by the city council if they pass the same controls and additional analyses as the rest of the projects of the city council. For debates and processes, the respective unit of the city council analyses citizens' comments and decides what to do.

According to the citizens interviewed, *Decide Madrid* has increased citizen participation in Madrid (both online and offline). The platform has channelled associations' initiatives to implement online participation in debates and processes, defend associations' values and present projects and proposals previously carried out offline. However, some citizens interviewed are concerned that they can put less pressure on the municipal government online than they can offline.

7 DISCUSSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The development of ICT and changes in the economic, political and social environment in the new millennium have increased interest in new methods for citizen participation. The commitment of Ahora Madrid to establish an online 'direct democracy' led to the implementation of *Decide Madrid* in 2015, creating new direct relationships between citizens and the city council, as in Madrid, citizen participation was traditionally carried out offline and mainly through associations. A high level of participation has been reached on some occasions, with participatory budgeting being the most successful participation option. The lesser role attributed to the traditional participation stakeholders in Madrid municipality (i.e., associations) may be the reason behind less continued participation, because online participants are usually less committed than offline participants, according to networked individualism theory (Rainie and Wellman 2012). Although most of the activities carried out through the platform can also be carried out offline, offline participation is not integrated in the online platform. Including information about activities carried out offline on the platform could also be a useful measure to ensure continued participation.

The stakeholder theory, with some modifications, helps to explain the adoption and evolution of *Decide Madrid*. The main objective of this platform is to obtain stakeholders' input and include it in decision-making processes. The adoption of the platform was motivated by political will rather than institutional pressure. The commitment of politicians and civil servants has been high after the elections and after implementation of the platform.

Spanish legislation requires that software developed by any public administration is made available on an official website of the central government to be used for free by all other Spanish public administrations. The decision to make *Decide Madrid* readily available as open-source software beyond Spanish public administrations and to create an active network of public-sector entities interested in online citizen participation has promoted international collaboration among various institutions and guarantees that improvements by other entities are easily shared. As a result of this, the platform's reputation has increased among governments around the world. This wide adoption of the software by other institutions seems more related to an informed and rational decision to adopt proven and freely available technology rather than an example of institutions imitating leading organizations' practices to achieve recognition, as only a limited number of entities have copied the full design of *Decide Madrid* (Royo et al., 2020).

Three factors have been particularly relevant to the success of *Decide Madrid*: the high commitment of the city council to citizen participation, the use of individual interviews in the

recruitment of staff in charge of running the platform and the knowledge of senior managers on citizen participation and ICT. The role of the mayor has been crucial in launching *Decide Madrid*, improving coordination among council areas and ensuring sufficient financial, political and managerial support. Therefore, this initiative shows that continued political will is a key factor in introducing digital innovations that affect the way citizens participate in municipal life.

Although the local legislative framework does not define or promote e-participation, except for public consultations, several agreements adopted since the creation of *Decide Madrid* regulate participation in this platform. They assume the results of the polls and participatory budgeting are binding, provided that the proposals meet the general requirements for new projects approved by the city council.

Decide Madrid required the transformation of the organizational culture and structure of the city council in order to incorporate citizen participation in decision-making processes. All citizens interviewed agree that their most important motivating factor is the possibility to see their contributions implemented or taken into consideration, although they note that they do not have enough information on the effect of their contributions and the progress of the projects approved. Managers agree that the transformation of the organizational culture turned out to be a slow process. This has caused some delays in the implementation of winning projects and insufficient communication with citizens regarding the impact of their participation.

The high level of Internet use in Madrid and the possibility of offline participation in the most significant activities carried out through the platform foster the participation of various user groups and reduce the possible negative impacts of some factors that could discourage participants, such as the digital divide, lack of trust in the security of online systems or perceived complexity of online verification processes.

However, the analysis carried out shows that even in successful e-participation initiatives, there seems to be substantial room for improvement in terms of transparency and due process (in this case, in the *Proposals* module). The citizens and some civil servants interviewed state that there is a problem with proposals: only two of them have obtained enough support to move on to the voting phase and many of them expire after receiving a lot of support (e.g. 'Massive planting of trees in Madrid' with 20,602 supporters). Furthermore, some citizens seem to be using participatory budgets to present unsuccessful proposals in order to avoid the minimum support requirement.

Previous research shows that most of the barriers to effective citizen participation are directly linked to poor provision of information and failure to influence the decision-making process (Sæbø et al., 2008; Font and Navarro, 2013; Yetano and Royo, 2017; Falco and Kleinhans, 2018). These concerns cause limited legitimacy among citizens and could also negatively influence e-participation levels. Public administrations should provide citizens with the necessary information at each point (before, during and after participation). Feedback is key for citizens to perceive the value of their contributions and encourage their continued participation. However, in *Decide Madrid*, citizens can only monitor participatory budgets. A system should be put in place to summarize and give visibility to the comments made by citizens on the different modules, with indications on whether they have been taken into consideration or the reasons the input provided has not been incorporated. In addition, the lack of moderators or other ways to organize debates, proposals and comments seems to have had some negative

effects in the debates and processes modules of *Decide Madrid*. This pushes many citizens to participate on an ad hoc basis when polls and participatory budgets are carried out.

The economic, social and political context that caused the ‘15M’ movement also increased the interest of many citizens in new opportunities of participation in public life, which explains the high levels of participation in the initial stages of *Decide Madrid*. The high expectations of citizens combined with the lack of transparency they perceive in some e-participation processes contribute to explaining the decreased citizen interest in some of the sections of *Decide Madrid* after their first participatory experiences.

In conclusion, although citizens have some complaints and proposals for improvement, and they sometimes question the levels of participation and effectiveness of *Decide Madrid*, both citizens and the staff of the city council consider *Decide Madrid* necessary. This agreement shows the motivation for e-participation and direct citizen participation of both the city council and the citizens. Improvements to *Decide Madrid* based on the feedback from the initial experiences could help increase citizen trust, participation levels and the legitimacy of this platform among citizens. Maintaining the level of commitment to e-participation of the present and future government of the municipality will also be crucial to assure the long-term sustainability of this initiative.

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