

**Overview**

The turn from 'governments for the people' towards 'governments by the people' is linked with technological innovations. Digital tools are expected to create stronger connections between citizens, governments and their governing institutions. Since technology can help overcome traditional practical barriers to communication such as distance and time, e-platforms for participation are being developed to improve citizen engagement. E-participation is high on the agenda of governments. For the [United Nations](#), engagement through e-participation is expected to inform better government decision-making and enhance democratic processes. By contributing to the values of openness, innovation and collaboration, more effective e-participation can enable access to information and remove barriers to co-creation of public services. The aim of engaging citizens in decision-making through information communication technologies (ICTs) is to make public administration participatory, inclusive, collaborative and deliberative.

With European Commission funding, an international multidisciplinary team of academic researchers collaborated to assess the effectiveness of the organisation and administration of governmental e-platform initiatives. The research team was composed of specialists from cognate social science disciplines in public administration, finance, management, political science and sociology, all with experience in studying digital technologies. They were drawn from nine European countries – Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and the UK – that have recently introduced citizen participation through e-platforms. The central research question addressed by the [TROPICO](#) project team was: How can governments improve their organisation and administration to enable e-participation to transform into become more open, innovative, and collaborative?

**Key evidence**

The international team focused on the institutional factors encouraging or inhibiting greater public engagement in e-participation. They selected [examples of e-platforms](#) in the study countries that were:

- designed for long-term or permanent collaboration
- in operation for at least one year
- (co-)administered by a branch of government
- included a deliberative element informing and influencing the policymaking process, rather than service delivery.

The researchers combined conceptual analyses, literature reviews, examinations of legislative codes and strategy documents. Their desk research identified and classified the different levels of participatory governance. They applied a protocol based on a common conceptual framework to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews and surveys with administrators, policymakers and other stakeholders across the study countries who had been using existing platforms. The case studies investigated how policies are designed and services are created in collaboration with non-governmental actors.

At lower levels of citizen participation, the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process is often superficial. The government's ambition is limited to keeping the public informed rather than empowering them. Higher levels of participation provide for collaboration with, and empowerment of, citizens, by ensuring that their preferences, ideas, and recommendations are incorporated into decisions. A high level of involvement is found to encourage an increase in trust and accountability ultimately resulting in better policies and services.

Structures and processes designed to ensure feedback from government are often lacking, attention was devoted to obtaining feedback from different stateholders when trying to create a climate of inclusion, transparency, trust, and creative interaction in the government-citizen relationship. Citizens were found

to be stimulated to take part in collaborative arrangements when they could see that their efforts are recognised and taken into account.

### **Policy context**

Empirical analysis indicates that a complex array of contextual institutional variables contribute to explaining the performance of e-participation initiatives. For example, the Spanish e-participation platform 'Decide Madrid' allows citizens, associations, NGOs and companies to participate in the policy cycle in the Madrid municipality at the collaborate level. It also includes the possibility for participatory budgeting as an empowering feature. Although the success of e-participation is contingent on specific contextual factors and situations, the case studies also provided insights into general patterns across contexts and issues.

The main success factors identified by the project team spanned: ownership, cross-boundary collaboration, accountability, level of participation, feedback, formalisation, leadership, top management support, marketing, monitoring, resources, competition, sustainability.

### **Recommendations**

The overall recommendation from the project is that **the level of participation must be clearly specified from the start of the e-participation initiative**, to ensure that the technical solution of the platform and the entire organisational and process are designed to support the achievement of higher levels of citizen participation. The targeted level and the actual contribution of citizens in the decision-making processes go hand in hand. For as long as the target of new or existing e-platforms is generic, participation is likely to remain on the lower levels (to inform or consult). To fully benefit from e-participation initiatives, **higher levels of participation need be targeted**. By fostering collaboration between governments and citizens government decision-making can be better informed, thus strengthening democratic processes in the digital era.

Accordingly, the project's [Guide for Action](#) makes detailed recommendations to governments on:

#### **How to lead collaborations**

- building a shared vision and managing relational capital
- adopting a leadership style that works for the context and stage of collaboration

#### **How to collaborate for public service innovations**

- ensuring the diversity of actors
- building a shared understanding
- exploring new ideas and knowledge
- actively seeking and securing internal and external support

#### **How to involve citizens**

- encouraging open and transparent two-way communication between government and citizen
- formalising the participatory process to ensure transparency
- ensuring support for the purpose, promotion and sustainability of the platform
- engaging disengaged societal groups and encouraging empowerment

#### **How to assess collaboration**

- being aware of the trade-off between efficiency and legitimacy
- balancing standardisation with contextual complexity
- improving data sharing between partners
- taking feedback seriously
- improve understanding of the differential impact of collaboration on efficiency