

**PUBLIC GOVERNANCE DIRECTORATE
PUBLIC GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE**

Cancels & replaces the same document of 22 December 2023

Summary of the PGC event “Getting Civic Tech Right for Democracy”

17 October 2023

This document presents the summary of the PGC side event “Getting Civic Tech Right for Democracy” held on 17 October 2023 ahead of the 68th session of the PGC.

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Summary of the PGC event “Getting Civic Tech Right for Democracy”

Opening Remarks

1. The event “Getting Civic Tech Right for Democracy” brought together over 200 participants for a discussion among representatives of government, civil society organisations, academics and private sector civic tech organisations. The objective was to reflect on the use of technology by governments and public institutions to improve citizen-government relations and ensure civic tech solutions that uphold democracy. To support the discussions, the Secretariat prepared a Background Note drawing from existing research setting out the main concepts and actors around civic tech [GOV/PGC(2023)32], complementing the framing questions proposed in the to the revised draft annotated Agenda [GOV/PGC/A(2023)6/REV3]. The event helped inform ongoing work under the OECD Reinforcing Democracy Initiative (RDI) and, in particular around the Action Plan on Enhancing Participation, Representation and Openness in Public Life [[OECD/LEGAL/0484](#)], and the upcoming Action Plan on Digital Democracy.
2. The Chair, Dustin Brown, Chair of the Public Governance Committee and Deputy Assistant Director for Management at the Office of Management and Budget in the Executive Office of the President of the United States, opened the event by highlighting the importance of discussing the practical adoption of civic tech tools, creating an enabling environment for a meaningful implementation and impact, and sharing best practices at the international level.
3. French Minister for Democratic Renewal and Government’ Spokesperson, Olivier Véran, presented civic tech as a key element to counter the growing mistrust of citizens towards elected representatives. Minister Véran highlighted France’s examples of the use of civic tech tools to directly involve citizens and stakeholders in legislative process and policy making. He flagged the recent launch of Agora, a mobile application enabling citizens to pose questions to the government and vote on the queries they want answered. Within just a few days, it garnered over 65 000 downloads. Minister Véran concluded by reinforcing the idea that direct and participatory democracy need not be in opposition with representative democracy but should instead serve and complement it.
4. Adrien Duguet, President of the Association Civic Tech Europe (ACTE), highlighted the growing ecosystem of different civic actors in Europe which share the common goal of improving trust in democratic processes and institutions. He stressed that this ecosystem should deepen its efforts to create synergies among different formats, tools and processes that can fit at different stages of different initiatives emphasising the importance of interoperability to improve the efficiency of the ecosystem.
5. Elsa Pilichowski, Director of the OECD Public Governance Directorate, underscored the impact of digital technologies on our societies, including the functioning on public administration and the interactions between citizens and public institutions. She highlighted the findings from the OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions released in 2022, indicating that governments are falling short of meeting people’s expectations on participation, representation and responsiveness. She highlighted that civic tech is the cutting-edge space where the OECD’s Reinforcing Democracy Initiative priorities around participation, representation and digital democracy converge. She noted that while the use of civic tech tools is growing, as most OECD countries have government-wide digital platforms for consultations, the sector is yet to fully meet its democracy-enhancing expectations. She underscored that the event was an opportunity to identify best practices and elaborate strategies to enhance the impact of civic tech in support of democratic governance.
6. Finally, Katju Holkeri, Head of the Governance Policy Unit in the Public Governance Department at the Finnish Ministry of Finance, and Chair of the OECD Working Party on Open Government, insisted on the importance of openness and inclusion in developing technologies for democracy, by adopting a citizen-centred approach, countering the risks of online interaction, and using plain language to make sure

that no one is left behind. She encouraged to broaden the scope of the objective of civic tech to include, beyond democratic representation, the protection of civic space.

Panel 1: Meeting the needs of modern democracies: Is civic tech delivering according to expectations?

7. The Moderator Irene Blázquez, Director of the Center for the Governance of Change at IE University, provided an assessment of the past 20 years of civic tech marked by the sector's growth, with a significant number of tools adopted globally to transform the way citizens and institutions interact. However, numerous concerns related to the challenges of technologies have emerged, and this is expected to continue as new technologies such as generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) become more prevalent. She underscored the importance of reflecting on the gaps between the initial hopes for civic tech and the actual outcomes it has achieved. Alicia Combaz, founder of Make.org, and Robert Bjarnason, founder of Your Priorities, reminded the original intent of civic tech, highlighting that its purpose is not to replace existing institutions but to reinforce them. The main challenges lie in engaging people to participate and improve decision-making processes. Matt Stempeck, founder of the Civic Tech Field guide, pointed out that expectations put on civic tech tools went far beyond what tools themselves could achieve. He emphasised the positive outcomes of the sector's growth: governments have adopted a more citizen-centred approach when designing public services and recognise the importance of building trust. Civic tech tools have also brought new talents into public administrations. To sustain these positive trends, the civic tech sector should strengthen its ties with public institutions, integrating tools or processes into institutional processes. Paula Forteza, former Member of the French Parliament, encouraged to abandon all forms of techno-solutionism and called for a politicisation of the civic tech community. She pointed out that civic tech communities are highly active, and despite the existence of good digital tools, they still lack real access to decision-making spaces. The speakers discussed the potential of AI in the civic tech ecosystem, but also highlighted the crucial challenges involved in adopting these technologies.

Panel 2: Are civic tech solutions fit-for-democracy? Risks and enablers for civic tech to reinforce democracy

8. The Moderator Kevin Casas-Zamora, Secretary General of International IDEA, opened the panel indicating that civic tech should prioritise strengthening democratic principles while countering the risks embedded in technologies and invited the speakers to focus on the enabling factors for civic tech to succeed.

9. Alexandre Quintanilha, Member of the Portuguese Parliament, noted that civic tech requires trust and a culture of dialogue, both of which require time and effort. Henriette Litta from the Open Knowledge Foundation stressed the key role of a lively civil society in consistently demanding and sustaining the use of civic tech tools and citizen participation processes overtime. Civic tech differs from GovTech for its deeply political nature, rooted in communities engaged in ensuring inclusion, accessibility, and transparency. Both Carlos Luca de Tena from IE University and Wietse van Ransbeeck, founder of CitizenLab, stressed the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach to the development and implementation of civic tech tools to ensure multidisciplinary dialogue between technical and political communities. Renato Simões, Secretary for Social Participation at the Presidency of Brazil, presented Brazil Federal Government's use of civic tech to involve citizens in important decisions, such as budgeting, aiming to renew the social contract in a polarised society. Mr. Simões stressed the need for low-tech and in-person formats to be inclusive and bridge digital divides. All speakers agreed that civic tech requires political commitment and support from civil society organisations for institutionalisation. The success of civic tech is tied to fostering a culture of participation and using suitable technologies.

Panel 3: Getting it right: what can governments do to leverage the full potential of civic tech?

10. The Moderator, Dominik Hierlemann, Senior Advisor on Democracy at the Bertelsmann Stiftung, outlined the panel discussion around three enablers of the success of civic tech: political leadership, cultural change inside the administrations, and a strong policy framework.

11. The speakers discussed the challenges around the change of culture inside the public administrations. Ieva Valeskaite, Vice Minister of Economy and Innovation in Lithuania, shared Lithuania's use of civic tech through the lenses of GovTech and public sector digitalisation, a process that is spearheaded with strong political will. Marc Serra Solé from the Barcelona Provincial Council pointed out that even in one of the cities where civic tech is most consolidated some challenges persist, both inside the administration which “resists” to change, and outside, namely in terms of inclusion. He also underscored that digital participation should complement and not replace in-person participation, especially in the case of deliberative processes. Rudi Bormann, Deputy Director of Open Government Partnership Local, highlighted successful civic tech tools examples across different levels of government and contexts. He emphasised that stronger ties between the civic tech ecosystem and other communities, including on innovation and open government, and spaces to share best practices are essential to take these efforts forward. Adriana Groh, founder of the Sovereign Tech Fund in Germany, highlighted the “tragedy of commons” of open-source tools, suggesting a third way between private and public software development. She stressed the need for government strategies to financially sustain and maintain open-source projects for strategic independence. Open-source software require lively communities to keep them alive and improve them over time, exemplified by Decidim and Code for Japan.

12. Speakers discussed the advantages and disadvantages of handing civic tech tools internally (insourcing) or outsourcing it. Insourcing offers full control of projects and data but tends to be more time and cost effective. They noted the need to balance strong government leadership, with benefiting from market talents and competition. To conclude, the Moderator outlined three equally important factors for civic tech success: (i) political leadership for project continuity and attention; (ii) a cultural shift in the administration for sustained efforts; and (iii) strong policy frameworks defining the governance of these projects and ensuring their sustainability.

Panel 4: Connecting the dots and identifying the way forward

13. The Moderator Carlos Santiso, Head of the Open and Innovative Government Division of the Public Governance Directorate at the OECD, noted that making technology work for democracy is a global concern. Civic tech faces several important challenges at the international scale, such as scalability, technical and financial sustainability of projects, and interoperability of tools and systems. Mr. Santiso asked the speakers to set the main principles for developing a global strategy for civic tech in a way that they also contribute to face current and emerging global challenges.

14. Arturo Herrera, Global Director of Governance at the World Bank, retraced the history of digitalization of public services showing that civic tech, if supported by trust, can truly enable a two-way interaction between citizens and governments. France's Ambassador for Digital Affairs, Henri Verdier, insisted that governments should focus on the overarching purpose of digital transformation: empowering and ensuring citizens' freedom within a framework that protects democratic values. He encouraged participants to view the State as a platform, serving as an enabler and connector to ensure digital technologies involve a broader and more diverse public in decision-making. Digital diplomacy's role should be to promote democratic values in the digital space, advocate for interoperability, and strongly support digital commons to prevent digital monopolies. Mr. Verdier called the OECD and other multilateral fora to include the commons into their broader focus on democracy and digital tools. Minna-Liina Lind, Undersecretary for Global Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Estonia, emphasised the global role of civil society to counter the “competition effect” among countries working towards a common goal. All speakers emphasised the importance of multilateralism and a multi-stakeholder approach to ensure that civic tech tools are designed to promote democratic values, accessibility and inclusion for all.

15. When asked about the role that the OECD could play in contributing to the success of civic tech at the international level, speakers emphasised the opportunity for the OECD to convene multi-stakeholder fora and create frameworks and standards for civic tech and democracy, ensuring its success, evaluation and impact.

Closing Remarks

16. The Chair, Gillian Dorner, Deputy Director for Public Governance at the OECD, summarised the day's discussions, noting that the conversation on civic tech has matured and focused on creating favourable conditions for the sector's growth and positive impact on democracy. These conditions are closely tied to trust and a healthy civic space, including in the digital sphere.

17. The event concluded with remarks by representatives from the event's knowledge partners: the Bertelsmann Stiftung, the Center for the Governance of Change at IE University, and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance of International IDEA. Irene Blázquez from IE University emphasised the two-way process of getting technology right for democracy: technology must be developed to embed and channel democratic values, while democracy must also adapt to the digital world. Civic tech could help shape democracy by broadening access to power. Alberto Fernández Gibaja, Senior Advisor on Digitalisation and Democracy at International IDEA, stated that civic tech's role is to strengthen, not replace, democratic institutions, requiring careful consideration of where and how it should be adopted. Highlighting the political nature of civic tech, he stressed its aims to share power with citizens. He outlined three considerations on digital public infrastructure around legislation, to give weight to decisions taken via civic tech tools and digital rights safeguards; social trust in institutions; and physical requirements. Dominik Hierlemann, Senior Advisor on Democracy at Bertelsmann Stiftung, summarised key challenges facing the civic tech sector: (i) public institutions resistance hindering democratic innovation from moving beyond the pilot stage; (ii) the need for public administration to embrace the transformation and build a culture of innovation; and (iii) the importance for civic tech actors to prioritise interactions and connections, especially regarding emerging technologies like AI, which challenge the concept of participation. He stressed the need for the civic tech ecosystem to effectively communicate with a non-expert public. He concluded noting that successful civic tech stories have largely been low-tech, but that this should not undermine the potential of AI for citizen participation in the digital sphere.

18. In her closing remarks, Elsa Pilichowski, Director of the OECD Public Governance Directorate, thanked speakers for their reflections on how to close the gap between the potential and the reality of civic tech. She pointed to the new OECD Recommendation on the Governance of Digital Identity as a building block of governments' digital infrastructure and highlighted the ties between different OECD workstreams supporting countries in this area, such as the OECD Trust Survey, the OECD Observatory on Civic Space, and the OECD DIS/MIS Resource Hub, inviting participants to join the upcoming conference "Tackling disinformation: Strengthening democracy through information integrity" on 13-14 November 2023. The Director underlined that the Secretariat would continue to support countries in their civic tech efforts through frameworks for policy action and identification of good practices and peer-learning exercises. This would contribute to preparations for the OECD Global Forum on Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy to be held in autumn 2024, which would include a strong focus on the use of technology to support citizen and stakeholder representation and participation in democracy.