



Measuring Impact in Civic Tech

An introduction on how to measure the impact of your citizen participation platform.



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Introduction

4 years ago, Civic Tech was coined as the next big thing¹. This technology, distinguishing itself by increasing citizen participation and accountability from institutions, became part of a wave of optimism: believing that technology could lead us to a brighter and more democratic future². By now, the world has learned that it is not as simple. Purely because technology has the potential to make processes more open and equal does not mean that it will inherently do so. The power for impact, as argued by Dov Seidman in his book “How: Why We Do Anything Means Everything” (2011), is based on us and on how we choose to use this technology.

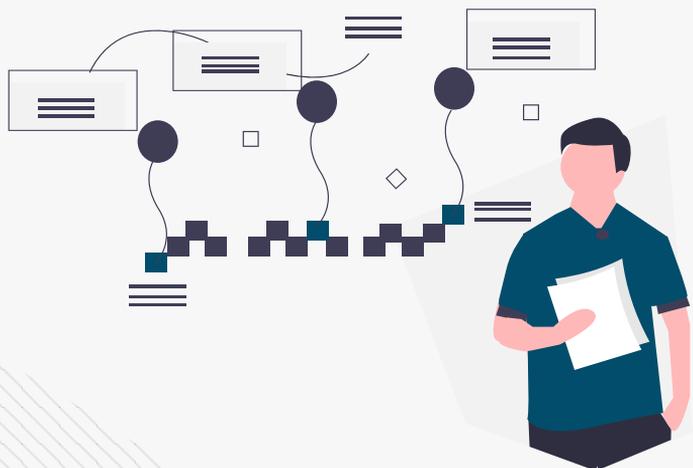
How do we know we choose correctly and use our citizen participation platform properly and according to our social objectives? *By measuring it!*

Let's start with establishing the score. Frankly, we have yet to witness a full blown, tech-enabled, transformation on how governments function and how citizens engage with them to collectively solve local issues. However, just because there has not been a tsunami of change does not mean there has not been any change at all. **Small impact still qualifies as impact.**

Many citizen initiatives, institutions and cities have started to implement citizen participation platforms, and we can expect these numbers to continue to rise. We could assist in further fueling this ongoing development of Civic Tech by **telling clear and honest stories about impact.**

Civic Tech, and its objective to empower citizens to take a larger part in decision-making processes, can be categorized under the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 16.7³. This goal outlines the importance of “responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels”. The *possible* impact of Civic Tech is thus widely recognized. Nonetheless, assessing the *actual* impact of citizen participation platforms has proven a tough nut to crack.

The inability to adequately evaluate and communicate evidence of impact has limited many Civic Tech companies and organizations⁴. How does one measure the impact of online technology on offline communities, along with public interest in general? This question has been debated by a variety of researchers, government officials and public servants alike, as it regularly haunts debates about Civic Tech. *Spoiler alert:* there is not one definitive answer yet.





In an ideal world, we would have enough time, expertise and resources to address this question extensively per project, platform and context. Although there are organizations offering these kinds of services, amongst others B Impact Assessment, Do Big Good, and Digital Impact, hiring external professionals to do the job is not feasible for most (local) governments.

Therefore, this resource aims to provide an introduction to measuring the impact of your citizen participation platform. This can include online websites, apps or another type of platform your government or organization uses to consult citizens directly. The following chapters will discuss the most important agreements in the field of measuring impact, pose suggestions on tackling the main challenges and hereby aim to assist in *getting started on measuring the impact of your citizen participation platform!*

1. *Why* should we measure impact?

There are many reasons to measure and report on the impact of your citizen participation platforms. What are the three key reasons sceptics should consider to assess if it's worth their time and effort to start measuring impact?

1 Measurements can inform decisions on strategy, operations and investments⁵:

Are you spending your resources adequately? A participation tool or platform may look fancy, but it should also deliver. As deliverables in citizen engagement and government efficiency are not easily visible, making the time to establish whether you reach concrete goals allows the focus of your efforts to shift and distinguish between promising pathways and failed attempts.

2 Measurements can drive improvements in performance⁶:

from lower to higher levels of engagement. There is a real difference in impact between users who only log in and users who contribute original content. Via measurements, you can figure out what patterns of user activity produce your desired outcome - so that you can start stimulating this kind of user activity!

3 Measurements can improve accountability and transparency⁷:

Having data to report via measurements will improve accountability and transparency, as you can communicate key information and hereby advocate for your projects! It's good to realize that this data can motivate both external stakeholders as well as internal stakeholders. These measurements can thus be beneficial to organizations, governments and investors alike - and help in telling compelling stories with a concrete, data-backed outcome⁴.

Creating clarity on your assessment purposes is key for you and your team⁸. It can be about accountability (for change), documentation, justification (of resources spent) or learning. So, while it may not be easy, measuring impact is necessary and thus worth your while!

2. *How* to define success?

When are you truly *successful* in achieving change? Wouldn't it be great if there was a straight answer to that question? Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet to define what success entails. It may sound cliché but **the definition of success depends on the context**. Impact cannot mean the same thing for every city, every project and every platform. The answer to this question will thus always differ per situation and stakeholder.

The good news is: there are guidelines that you can follow when defining what success is in your context. As a citizen participation project can be complex to organise, a framework to support the launch can be helpful, such as the e-Participation canvas⁹.

First things first: define success early on. In order to measure progress towards your desirable outcomes, a **clear statement of goals** is a necessary starting point⁵. Only afterwards should methods for capturing patterns of platform activity be identified, as well as laying out a strategy for documenting how activity on the platform leads to outcomes for users and others. While it is crucial to orchestrate a plan when you start, *don't hesitate to revise it* along the way. It is best to start out simple and increase the sophistication of your measurement once the project matures¹⁰.



Good Practice

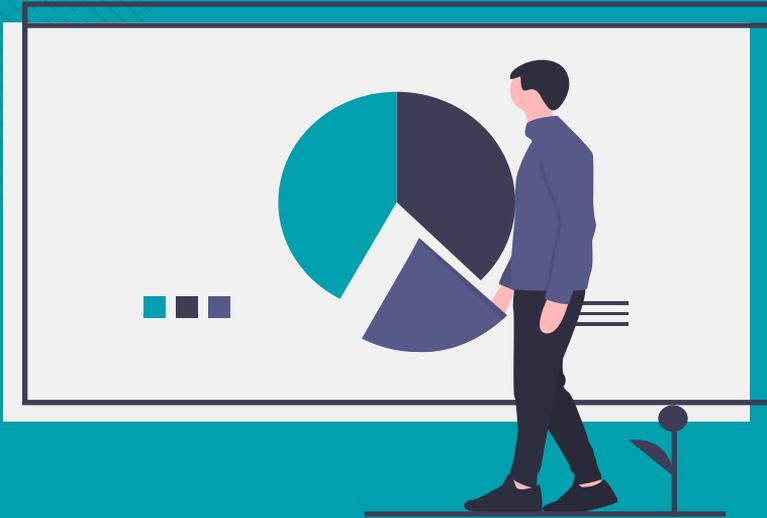
Create clarity early regarding assessment purposes

Sit down with your team and align on your objectives. When developing a plan early on, one can systematically measure a platform's performance and chart its impact over time. "What does success look like?" Ensure your team agrees on the answer to this question before moving forward.

To avoid

Assume large numbers equal impact¹¹

When we talk about measuring success, most people immediately think of numbers. Yet, large numbers do not inherently equal impact in Civic Tech. Actual engagement is about attachment, commitment and involvement - and can thus not always be measured by clicks, views and downloads. Using descriptive data as the cornerstone of your success, may fail to capture the "civic" in Civic Tech.



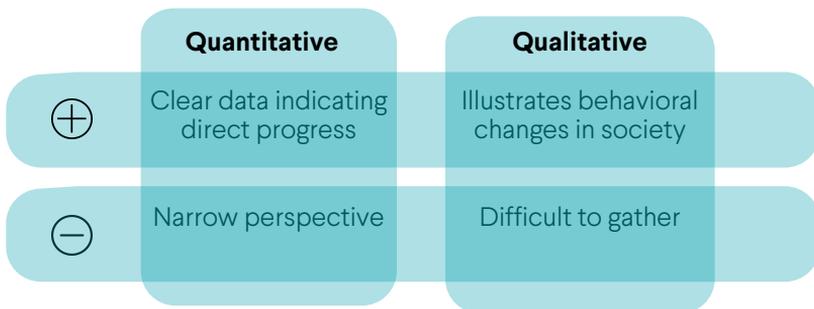
3. The challenges of measuring impact

It has already been mentioned that measuring impact is not a piece of cake. Even when adhering to the do's and don'ts of measuring impact, there are certain trade-offs that have to be taken into account when establishing your focus⁸. What are key challenges to consider in advance when defining how to measure impact in your citizen participation project?

- **Stable criteria vs continuous development:**

To measure impact one should have access to similar data from multiple periods to assess if any change over time has occurred. This is contradictory to the fact that Civic Tech and participation platforms in particular are not static - they tend to evolve rather quickly. Therefore, impact measurement needs to be flexible enough to allow for innovation, yet robust enough to measure meaningful results.

- **Quantitative vs qualitative measurements:**



The decision between these two data collection methods outline a trade-off for every kind of research. Optimally, one combines these two types for comprehensible measurements in Civic Tech, but a deliberate decision based on objectives is often more realistic for governments.

- **Visible vs invisible impact**

Visible results of your citizen participation platform can refer to a project executed as a follow-up, a park being built or the placement of eco-containers. Less tangible impact, such as increasing trust and efficiency requires a different approach to be measured. Sometimes, your project can also have unexpected, longer-term impacts that are hard to grasp in the short term. The various forms of visible and invisible impacts are further discussed in the chapter on “*How to measure impact*”.

- **Non-linear value creation vs measuring value at a specific point in time**

It can be hard to take credit for change in the social context: it can always be dependent on (political) events which are out of your hands. Causality is easier to identify than to be proof, especially in social environments¹².



4. *How* to measure impact

Now, this is where the difficulty really starts. Impact can come in different shapes and forms, and there's no easy, all-in-one fixed set of impact measurements.



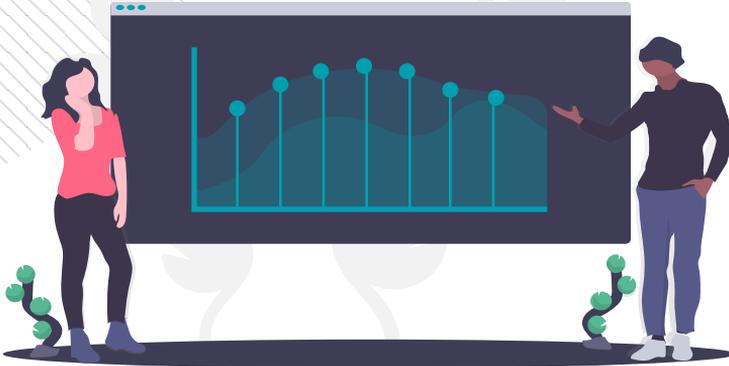
Before going into specifics, let's start with three things to keep in mind when measuring the impact of a citizen participation project.

Align with stakeholders: if you want to measure properly, you should adopt an approach with your entire team. There is nothing more inconvenient than figuring out that you initially forgot to measure an important metric halfway through the process. Getting everyone on board early into the planning increases the probability that everything is in place (on time) to capture the data necessary to track progress and assess results.

Focus: start with assessing the outcomes that your platform is most *directly* designed to produce rather than focussing on broad overarching goals like “improving participatory democracy”¹³.

Transparency: when collecting data from your users, always ask yourself “do I have everything I need, do I need everything I have?”. While it may be tempting to “grab as much data as you can”, realize that being selective does not only clarify your focus, but also is a more *responsible and ethical decision*. Citizens should always be aware of the fact that you are collecting data on their behavior, and be informed on *why* you do so and *how this data will be used and stored*. As the main goal behind Civic Tech is to serve the public good, transparency in achieving this objective ensures that practices do not backfire and harm trust amongst citizens. It's best to **avoid collecting personal data that cannot be justified**.

Impact



Now that we have established some ground rules, let's move on to the *real deal*. One can categorize between various types of impact, which require a different approach in being measured. The first, easiest and most direct approach is to measure visible, short-term impact.

Visible Impact

The first level of this type of measurement can be the number of participants in the project, the number of votes cast, or the number of views on a platform. These are often the numbers that are communicated with upper levels of management or shared on the city's official channels. They can be a good *indicator of a project's immediate success* (after all, who doesn't want to have good participation numbers?), but they're not very telling on the longer-term impact that the project has had.

Knowing how many individuals have interacted with the project isn't enough. Ideally, impact measurement also looks at **who participated, and how**. What percentage of your website's visitors created an account? How many took the actions required? How many visits did users make on average? How many pages during their visit? These numbers can be gleaned from analytics tools such as Google Analytics and can be a precious indicator of how in-depth engagement has been. In many ways, an engagement rate is more telling than raw usage numbers.

Gathering this information on “who” participated, as indicated before, is sensitive and should thus be approached carefully. Tools like Google Analytics can give a first overview of users of the website: the tool can estimate age range or vague geographical locations. However, in order to truly understand who the participants are, it’s best to work with precise data voluntarily collected from citizens. Such data can be collected through **surveys** sent to participants, or during short profile information questions collected upon **sign-up**.

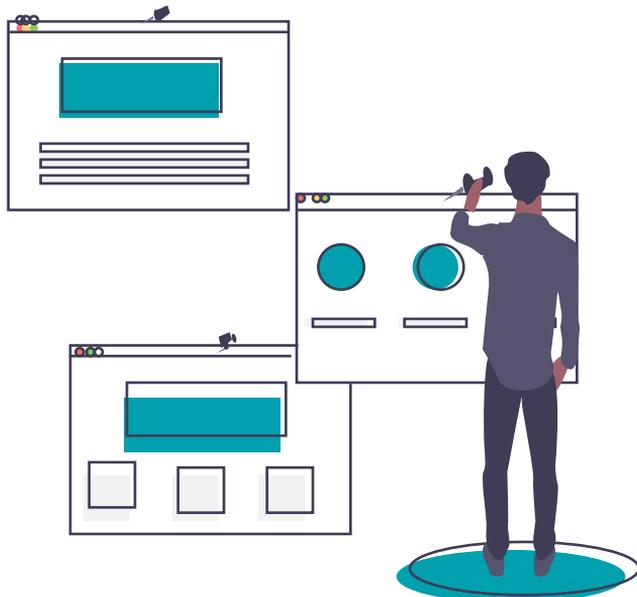
Before you decide on how to collect this data, *think about what you will use it for*. Is your project based on accessibility or outreach, and does its success depend on who you reach? If so, collecting detailed demographic information is justified. If you’re just looking to gather votes or share information, you don’t need as many details about your users. Keep in mind that most citizens are sensitive about sharing private information: collecting data in an intrusive, extensive or non user friendly way might cause a drop-off in usage. Finally, don’t forget about the **comparison of data**: if you’re looking to measure change across a project, make sure you take measurements before the project starts to ensure you can compare results.

Aside from numbers regarding participants, measurements regarding the actual projects also count towards visible impact. How many projects have been initiated to consult citizens? How many policy areas are discussed? How many direct outcomes of the projects have resulted in policy decisions? The answers to these questions matter as they provide an indication of the scale and direct (and visible) results of your project.

Invisible Impact

If there is visible impact, there is most likely also invisible impact. This encapsulates all the larger goals your participation platform is working towards like increasing trust and efficiency. Basically, with visible impact one is measuring *outputs* and with invisible impact *outcomes*. This impact is less tangible, straightforward and often long-term oriented, which makes it harder to measure. However, it is not impossible, and there are visible metrics you can use to measure these invisible changes.

Start with **trust**. Most local governments launching citizen participation initiatives do so in the hopes of boosting the levels of trust from their citizens. Trust can, and is measured: local governments and independent organisms send out regular **polls** to measure the levels of trust, which can be seen to vary over time. Ideally, a citizen participation project would have visible positive impact on the numbers of citizens saying they trust their government.



Of course, it's slightly more complicated than that. Increased trust levels can also be linked to external factors such as new policy decisions or recent actions from elected officials. These results would, ideally, be cross-checked against demographic data: are people from certain communities or age groups more or less likely to trust their local government after the project ends? What about 6 months later? What about after the 2nd project?

Other metrics to watch out for are **support levels for policy decisions**.

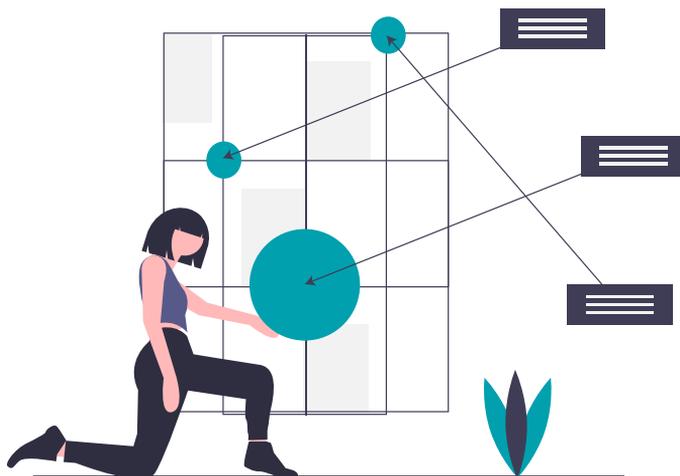
A recent study has shown that citizen participation projects can increase support for policy decisions and increase compliance to these decisions¹⁴.

These changes can also be measured through regular polling and surveys, whether these are carried out by the cities or by independent bodies. When carrying out these surveys yourself, make sure to maintain neutral languages and to keep identical scripts for large periods of time so as not to bias the data you are collecting.

Another type of invisible impact your project should aim for is **continuous citizen involvement**. It has already been argued that the number of participants alone doesn't indicate much about a project. Yet, comparing these numbers over time and across multiple projects can be an indicator of how much citizens are willing to engage. Another clear indicator to measure this could be the number of *Citizen Initiatives* launched, either online or offline¹⁵. Despite the fact that Civic Tech facilitates processes online, it is important to keep an eye out for metrics offline as well - especially when measuring invisible impact and continuous involvement. Other offline metrics could include voting numbers and attendance at town hall meetings in the area.

Finally, participation projects can also impact the structures they emanate from. At CitizenLab, we closely follow the impact that our platforms have on governments. We aim to increase the efficiency of local administrations, and the involvement of city officials in the projects. Both these notions can be difficult to measure, but we have translated them into tangible metrics: we aim to see official feedback for 75% of the citizen ideas posted, and for that feedback to be processed in under 3 months. These numbers serve as indicators to measure whether local governments use the participation platform to foster dialogue with their citizens.

It's good to realize that these various forms of invisible impact are highly *interconnected*. For example, increased efficiency can affect both trust and continuous citizen involvement. Moreover, they can be approached from diverse angles. How about measuring the trust within your government? The support and trust for the platform within your team can also highly influence the project and possibly link back to its impact. It is likely that addressing all these possible correlations is not realistic for your platform. but be sure to consider them when deciding on relevant metrics for your platform's goals.



Impact

Invisible impact is, in the end, about a change of heart, which sometimes is difficult to indicate via numbers. Therefore, especially in this regard, it is important to **collect stories** on how your platform (or a project resulting from it) has been making change in society. Success stories can effectively point out what can be achieved when citizens and activists work together on a common goal. Moreover, actively sharing these stories can contribute to a ripple effect: it can motivate citizens to get involved, public officials to invest in their own projects and assist in the larger objective of rebuilding trust in our democracies.

act

Possible frameworks to consult

The previous paragraphs provide an indication of *what to keep in mind* and *how to start* when measuring the impact of their Civic Tech project. As there is no step-by-step guide to success, these models outline bigger guidelines, which hopefully can be of assistance in determining *your* next steps.

Theory of Change¹⁶ this is a popular tool used by many organizations to map impact. Establishing your Theory of Change is something to consider in the first stages of your impact measurement. Contrarily, the framework works best if you start at the end and work - with a clearly defined end goal - and work backwards. It allows you to check whether you are on the right track. Specificity is key when using this framework, especially for your Key Performance Indicators (KPI). For the optimal result, KPI's should be SMART: *specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound*. Based on these KPI it is possible to define what kind of data and metrics will be necessary to measure your impact. As this model is widely used, there are also resources available to help you build your theory of change¹⁷.

Impact Management Project¹⁸ is a forum for building global consensus on how to measure and manage impact. Bottom-line is that the consensus can be deconstructed into five dimensions: *What, Who, How Much, Contribution and Risk*. In order to have a comprehensive measurement of your project, it is helpful to at least consider all these areas when establishing your metrics.

Nesta Standards of Evidence¹⁹. To get going with impact measurement, it's best to start out simple. However, as your project matures, there should be the ambition to increase the sophistication of your measurements. Nesta, an innovation foundation, has established "Standards of Evidence" to assist in scaling up the level of measurements. This overview can serve as inspiration when your team has got the hang of the basics and it is becoming time to aim a little bigger.



5. Conclusion



Our collective goal should be to start aiming a little bigger, while celebrating every inch of positive impact we achieve. Celebrating the successes within your team is just as important as sharing them outside of your team. ***Imagine in the impact we can achieve by collectively and consequently sharing the impact of our citizen participation platforms...***

Sharing our measurements and stories can, in themselves, serve to increase trust. They assist in proving the relevance of these platforms to various stakeholders, inspire citizens and public servants alike by reminding them what is possible. There are already great initiatives out there, like Participedia.net, to facilitate sharing these stories of impact, so what are we still waiting for?

Telling better data-backed stories about our impact is a great next - and realistic - step to fuel the rise of Civic Tech. However, our ambitions should not stop there... Why should we only address the collective intelligence by sharing our stories and experiences? Let's aim bigger: The **Big Hairy Audacious Goal**²⁰ when it comes down to measuring impact in our citizen participation platform is to let citizens participate! We can empower communities to codesign and contribute to our impact assessments, and even make this part of our projects participatory! It's ambitious, for sure, but it's important to keep our eye on the horizon.

Who needs Civic Tech to produce a tsunami of change? Our practices on citizen participation platforms should be complementary to other democratic practices, and aimed at **rebuilding the strength of our institutions** rather than flooding them out. Moreover, we can proudly share our impact stories, no matter how big or small, to keep building towards the Big Hairy Audacious Goal where citizens participate in impact assessments as well. Because in the end, every drop counts.

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