

Zaragoza: Co-Creating Participatory Processes through Intersectionality



 Zaragoza, Spain

Participation

Digital transition

Introduction

In collaboration with the Universidad de Zaragoza, the Ayuntamiento (City Hall) de Zaragoza developed an innovative and sustainable digital platform designed to enhance public participation among residents. This initiative has reshaped how citizens interact with the government in participative processes, reflecting the city's commitment to fostering inclusive governance and advancing sustainable urban development by mainstreaming access and equality into its broader digital strategies.

[Problem Statement]

As a founding member of Ciudades Abiertas (Open Cities), Zaragoza has been part of a national effort to promote open data, public participation, and transparency in Spain's emerging smart cities since 2016. Despite these efforts, the city faced a common challenge: although participatory processes existed, they did not necessarily meet expectations for citizens or civil servants. For example, while developing the city's gender equality plan, only nine people (three representatives of organisations and six individuals) participated in the online processes during January 2017. More traditional methods, such as the two-hour deliberative working group sessions, also had low participation among individual residents: 25 people participated across the eight sessions, only 3 of which were men... In turn, developing tools to facilitate participation in the public domain became a part of the strategy to promote equality at the municipal level in the final plan.

Zaragoza, like many cities, sought to harness emerging technology to make these processes more functional, efficient, but most importantly: accessible and responsive. Taking inspiration from other online public participation platforms in Spain and around the world, the project began to develop a service which not only met the goals of the municipality, but was designed to meet the particular needs of citizens who were not previously engaged in existing participatory processes. As Susana Díez, a member of Idea Zaragoza's university design team, shares, "*while many platforms for citizen participation can be very functional, with interesting features, if they are not applied within the local context, they cannot respond to the public's real needs.*"

[Implementation and Actions]

Recognising this gap, Zaragoza sought a more tailored approach. Partnering with local researchers at the University, the city initiated and funded the co-design of Idea Zaragoza – an accessible digital platform to facilitate inclusive citizen participation. At the beginning of the project over 50 stakeholder interviews were conducted to identify the main issues with existing participatory processes: lack of participatory culture, complex barriers to access, and non-representative outcomes were among the most cited factors. These challenges highlight the importance of people's identities and circumstances in shaping how and when they participate. It is not only important to consider how many people show up – but who does, who speaks or stays silent, and understand the factors and experiences that shape these behaviours. In response, the designers at the University of Zaragoza rooted the process in 'service design thinking' methodologies, ensuring that stakeholders' perspectives were incorporated from the outset and that they specifically included underrepresented voices from care-givers, youth,

migrants, and women. Surveys, interviews, and empathy mapping exercises engaged diverse voices, fostering a truly co-creative process where the platform was continuously adapted to user feedback and differing perspectives.

The platform's key feature is its presentation of 'challenges,' where citizens are invited to participate through surveys, brainstorming sessions, project proposals, and other forms of engagement. Participants can consult ongoing initiatives to leave comments, pinpoint specific locations on interactive maps, or contribute general ideas to these challenges. Users can also view the results of closed campaigns, including survey data, reports, or comments left by other users. These different features are a direct result of integrating stakeholder feedback, as earlier online participation processes were designed one-directionally, and did not allow users to engage directly with other participants.

The scope of these challenges ranges widely, addressing themes from climate change adaptation to public space and family support strategies, broadening the platform's relevance to different demographics. A dedicated steering group, composed of platform designers, politicians, and citizens, collaborates to design and present these challenges, while managing the platform to ensure it remains responsive to emerging needs while also being deliberate about how they are presented to the community and what sorts of engagement tactics are most effective.

[Lessons Learned]

One of the key insights from Zaragoza's experience is that using technology to increase public participation is just the beginning. While the city had previously used online campaigns, these initiatives became more impactful when the service was co-created with its users. The Idea Zaragoza experience demonstrates the importance of designing participation processes intersectionally: acknowledging that the complexity of people's identities shapes their experience, and responding accordingly when designing a solution.

Successful engagement requires a comprehensive understanding of the stakeholder ecosystem. As Diez emphasised, "*don't just consider one type of profile, consider all of them, talk to them, get involved, co-create with them, participate, let them give you their ideas and solutions, let them contribute. That's essential.*" This approach not only strengthens representation but also enhances the quality and relevance of the ideas and perspectives that inform public decision-making. Continuous feedback and adaptation keep the platform relevant and ensure it actually responds to public needs, but also demonstrates a 'living' commitment to engagement on the part of city governments.

Another challenge remains: while the platform offers an effective tool, continued efforts are necessary to raise awareness and encourage broader usage. While accessible to everyone in theory, not all concerned communities are aware of the platform or how to access it. Over half of the non-users surveyed in the 2023 evaluation indicated that they were simply unaware the platform existed!

[Key Takeaways]

Since its launch in 2021, Idea Zaragoza has made it easier to launch public participation campaigns and increased overall engagement with citizens on urban challenges. While there were eight participatory processes launched by the city in 2020, in 2022 there were over twenty campaigns! Using a consolidated platform, residents can discover new campaigns more easily and contribute their input while also engaging directly with proposals and comments from other individuals. An evaluative survey conducted in September 2023 revealed that 94.5% of respondents expressed a willingness to continue participating via the platform, demonstrating a strong endorsement from the community.

Idea Zaragoza has also successfully increased participation among underrepresented groups, especially young people. For example, during the development of the city's fourth Youth Plan in 2017, the technical office of participation and youth service opened an online participation form on the municipal website, which received just over 700 responses. In 2023, the youth service launched

another survey – this time on the Idea Zaragoza platform – and saw the number of responses triple to over 2,500!

[+] Learn more about this Project

- + [Evaluación de la plataforma Idea Zaragoza para la mejora de los procesos de participación ciudadana \(2021\)](#)
- + [Cómo aumentar la participación ciudadana mediante el Diseño de Servicios \(2023\)](#)
- + [OECD Observatory of Public Sector Innovation - Idea Zaragoza](#)
- + [Idea Zaragoza Platform](#)