DECIDE MADRID: A CASE STUDY ON E-PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

This paper analyses the award-winning e-participation initiative of the city council of Madrid, *Decide Madrid*, to discover the critical success factors at contextual, organizational and individual level. This analysis is carried out with desk research and semi-structured interviews. Results show that the most relevant success factors are the socio-economic context, the commitment of the city council, the method used to recruit the workers and the knowledge of senior managers about citizen participation and ICTs. However, the lack of transparency and poor functioning of some of its participation activities are negatively affecting its performance.

Keywords: e-participation, local government, information and communication technologies (ICTs).

1. Introduction

In the last decades, the public sector has evolved from government to governance, which is characterized as a new policy framework with high levels of cooperation with external stakeholders in both policy design and service delivery (Dawes, 2008; Stoker, 1998; Kickert, 1997). Developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have contributed to this transformation by making governments more integrated, transparent, efficient and effective governance structures (Liu & Yuan, 2015; Bertot, et al., 2012; Cordella & Bonina, 2012). ICTs are also a driving factor for citizen participation initiatives because of its potential for informing, educating and empowering citizens (Thomas & Streib, 2005) and reducing the costs of the decision-making process (Vragov & Kumar, 2013).

E-participation initiatives are an example of the influence of ICTs in this evolution. E-participation can be defined as the use of ICT to involve citizens and other stakeholders into public decision-making processes and policy deliberation in order to make public administrations participatory, inclusive, collaborative and deliberative for intrinsic or instrumental ends (UN, 2014; Sæbø et al., 2008; Macintosh, 2004). The adoption of e-participation has increased in the last decades at worldwide level. For example, from 2003 to 2018, the percentage of countries with an e-participation index higher than 75% has evolved from 3% to 32%, whereas those with an index below 25% have reduced from 77% to 18% (UN, 2018, 2003).

E-participation is supposed to have multiple benefits, such as increasing the availability of participation tools to communicate with a wider audience, increasing the knowledge of participants about public issues, allowing a more informed and deeper participation and improving the quality of public policies and citizens' trust in government (e.g., Wirtz et al., 2016; OECD, 2003). However, e-participation initiatives have failed to deliver the transformational changes usually attributed to them (Royo et al., 2014; Norris & Reddick, 2013; Bonsón et al., 2012; Brainard & McNutt, 2010). Barriers to effective citizen participation include poor public knowledge of the issues treated, poor provision of information, poor execution of participative methods, low adoption, the digital divide and lack of representativeness of participants, mistrust between the parties involved, coordination difficulties, lack of political support, failure to influence the decision-making process, regulatory constraints or the use of these tools for political propaganda (Toots, 2019; Falco & Kleinhans, 2018; Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017; Panopoulou et al., 2014; Sæbø et al., 2008; Hartley & Wood, 2005). Moreover, public administrations are often not clear about the objectives of different citizen participation initiatives. All this can give rise to different types of tensions, disappointment and reluctance to engage in future processes (Font & Navarro, 2013; Bloomfield et al., 2001).

Achieving engagement and meaningful collaboration through digital technologies requires a better understanding of what hinders governments and citizens from being able to effectively collaborate, both online and offline (Falco & Kleinhans, 2018). Most previous literature has analysed e-participation platforms that only allow one type of e-participation activity. Therefore, more research regarding critical success factors for citizen participation platforms aimed at fostering long-term government-to-citizen and citizen-to government relationships is needed.

To fill in this gap, this research analyses an, *a priori*, exemplary e-participation initiative to discover the critical success factors at contextual, organizational and individual level. The impact of the platform is assessed in terms of participation levels, democratic legitimacy, transparency and influence in decision-making processes and external collaboration.

The e-participation initiative chosen is the *Decide Madrid* platform of the Madrid city council (Spain), launched in 2015. *Decide Madrid* was one of winners of the 2018 United Nations Public Service Award. This award assessed, among 111 nominates, (1) the introduction of an innovation, (2) the fight against discrimination and the encouragement of equality, (3) the promotion of a robust legal framework, and (4) participatory decision-making (UN, 2018a)[1]. A local government has been chosen because municipalities play an important role in the everyday lives of citizens, both in the administrative and service delivery fields and in the sphere of democratic participation. Several authors suggest (e.g., Mizrahi et al., 2010; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Fung & Wright, 2001) that participatory decision making has greater usefulness at the local level. Indeed, the need to integrate citizen engagement with traditional structures and processes is one of the main challenges faced by local governments (Nalbandian et al., 2013).

This initiative includes some of the most popular e-participation tools (e-forum, e-consultation, e-voting and online participatory budgets) in a single platform created and managed by the city council. Madrid has a long-standing experience in neighbourhood-based participation. Before *Decide Madrid* was created, citizen participation was carried out offline and, in most cases, through associations. Until 2018, more than 400,000 users were registered in the platform, being participatory budgets the participation option that has attracted the highest level of participation. The software created for this platform, *Consul*, has been adopted –or is in the process of being implemented– in around 100 institutions from 33 countries that build a collaboration network. Porto Alegre, the first city in the world that implemented participatory budgets in 1989, adopted *Consul* in August 2018 in order to implement its first online participatory budgets and online polls[2]. So, this research focuses on an example that could be considered a best practice in e-participation.

2. Background and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Background

Almost all the literature on e-participation has been published in the last ten years and currently the research output is stable (Steinbach et al., 2019). According to its content, e-participation research can be classified as (1) barriers and facilitators (factors that explain the success or failure) and (2) strategies both for the adoption, implementation and/or institutionalization of e-participation (Steinbach et al., 2019). This research makes a complete and exhaustive analysis of both dimensions.

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[1] Moreover, Madrid joined the Subnational Government Pilot Program of the Open Government Partnership in 2016 (OGP, 2018) and participates in other networks that foster citizen participation at the local level (Sustainable Cities Platform, Local Governments for Sustainability and the Covenant of Mayors).

[2] See https://opdigital.prefeitura.poa.br

According to Medaglia (2012), the methodologies most frequently used in e-participation research are surveys and content/discourse analyses. The methodology used in this investigation, case study, is the third. Most of the case studies published to date refer to a particular e-participation activity (Toots, 2019; Lackaff, 2015; Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2014; Fedotova et al., 2012; Chadwick, 2011; Quittkat, 2011; et al., 2011; Sæbø et al., 2010; Rose & Sæbø, 2010; Wright, 2007; Chen et al., 2006; Wright, 2006), e-forums being the most common one. The analysis of e-participation platforms that allow different types of e-participation activities are testimonial (Meneses et al., 2017; Kipenis & Askounis, 2016).

Overall, research in e-participation has found that several factors can determine the success or failure of e-participation initiatives, such as the legal framework, funding, organizational structure and culture, commitment by politicians, administrators and staff, the complexity of e-participation tools, security and privacy issues, the combination with offline activities, the communication and promotion plan, the moderation of debates, the degree of inclusiveness (e.g. representation of different socio-economic statuses and minorities), and transparency-related issues (e.g. goal clarity and information about the influence of the contributions of participants in decision-making processes) (see, e.g., The Effective Institutions Platform, 2014; Panopoulou et al., 2014; Medaglia, 2012).

Some specific aspects of the *Decide Madrid* platform have been analysed by previous research. Sánchez & Pastor (2018) analysed two participatory processes of urban reorganisation: the reforms of "Gran Vía" and "Plaza de España". They found that the legal framework and political commitment were success factors, whereas the lack of an action plan for the processes, unspecific communication strategy and insufficient transparency were barriers.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The adoption of initiatives for citizen participation by local governments can be carried out due to legal requirements or on a voluntary basis. Therefore, the adoption of e-participation can be explained by institutional theory. According to this theory, institutions tend to adopt similar structures through three types of isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983): coercive (pressure imposed on an organization by legal, hierarchical or resource dependence), mimetic (imitation of practices and models of leading organizations in their institutional field in an attempt to achieve greater recognition) and normative (environmental pressure for transformation from stakeholders). Mergel (2013) found that best practice examples and comparisons with companies and governments were used by government organizations to adopt social media (mimetic isomorphism). The diffusion of citizen participation in local governments has also been explained by the need to comply with legislation (coercive isomorphism, see Royo et al., 2011).

The main objective of e-participation initiatives should be to obtain stakeholders feedback and include it into decision-making processes. Therefore, the stakeholder theory can also play a role to explain the adoption and development of these initiatives (Royo et al., 2011; Sæbø et al., 2011). According to this theory, organizations should identify their different stakeholders and fulfil their needs and expectations in order to succeed. The level of interest in e-participation initiatives differs among stakeholders and changes over the 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 about their participation and the same reasons that mobilized them can lead to disappointment (Font & Navarro, 2013). Citizens can also have a greater participation at specific moments, when e-participation tools are dealing with policies that affect them more directly. The commitment to the e-participation from other stakeholders usually depends on their role. For example, Sæbø et al. (2011) found that politicians show more levels of participation before the elections, whereas civil servants and private companies are more committed before the initiative is launched, because they participate to a greater extent in its development and implementation.

The behaviour of citizens in e-participation can be also explained by networked individualism, that describes how people connect and communicate in the new social system of online relations (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Networked individualism describes a "new pattern of sociability" where people build and manage multiple sets of personalized, mutable networks and identities to meet their needs (Castells, 2001). According to this theory, people involve in networks more as an individual than a group. They tend to participate in many different groups, but with reduced levels of commitment to any of them, in general terms (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Its application to e-participation anticipates that citizens would be easily involved in different e-participation initiatives. However, sustaining citizen commitment to long-term e-participation processes will be more difficult than in offline processes and there is a real risk that levels of participation will decrease over time, as previous research has found (Yetano & Royo, 2017; Pina et al., 2017).

2.3. Model

Porwol et al. (2013) proposed three not mutually exclusive categories to classify the different theoretical models to analyse e-participation initiatives proposed by previous research up to 2011: democratic perspective (models dealing with the democratic context of e-participation initiatives, such as transparency, political utility and objectives), project perspective (models dealing with project management issues, such as organizational change, stakeholders and outcomes) and sociotechnical perspective (models dealing with information about the participation activity on the platform, such as topics, tools, timelines and monitoring). Other models have been proposed since then. Nabatchi (2012) states two types of evaluations: 1) process evaluations, which examine program management and administration and, 2) impact evaluations, which examine program outcomes and results. This model is more focused on project and sociotechnical perspectives. Nam (2012) proposed a framework for assessing citizen-sourcing initiatives on the grounds of design evaluation, process evaluation and outcome evaluation (sociotechnical and democratic perspectives). Wirtz et al., (2016) propose an integrated strategic framework of factors (e-participation targets, forms, strategies, instruments and demand groups) and drivers (accountability, transparency, stakeholders and technology) that covers the three perspectives defined by Porwol et al. (2013). Porwol et al. (2016) propose a model that includes the three perspectives identified in 2013 and the relations of the concepts within them. Kubicek & Aichholzer (2016) propose a generic input–activities–output–outcome–impact model (project and sociotechnical perspectives) to evaluate e-participation processes: inputs, activities and outputs refer to the evaluation of the offer and resources by the organizing entity; outcomes cover the demand side component (number, profile and activities of the participants and the characteristics of the contributions made, for example) and impacts are the final

consequences of the participatory process (e.g., changes of attitudes or behaviour, higher trust in political institutions, learning, the building of social capital and so on). Lastly, Toots (2019) presents a model of four factors (context, e-participation system, project organization and stakeholders) to explain the failure of e-participation systems that also covers the three perspectives defined by Porwol et al. (2013, 2016).

The analytical model used in this case study (see Figure 1) is based on the model designed in the WP5 of the TROPICO Project (H2020) (Randma-Liiv & Vooglaied, forthcoming), that also covers the three above-mentioned perspectives and consists of five main elements of analysis: context, e-participation initiative, organizational factors, individual factors (actors) and evaluation of the initiative. The context analyses the following aspects: cultural-historical framework; socio-economic, digital governance and politico-administrative factors, legal requirements, civil society and lesson-drawing aspects. The e-participation initiative analyses the goals, scope, chronology, legal framework and technical features of the e-participation platform (*Decide Madrid*). Organizational factors include aspects related to the ownership and administration of the platform, partners, internal collaboration arrangement, funding, human resources and organizational processes and culture. Individual factors (actors) cover the analysis of both internal (leaders and administrators) and external (other formal or informal actors outside the city council structure) actors. Finally, the evaluation of the initiative is carried out in terms of performance indicators, democratic legitimacy, transparency of the process, influence on policy design and influence on external collaboration. Examples of successful practices and failures are also provided in this last unit of analysis.

Figure 1. Analytical model
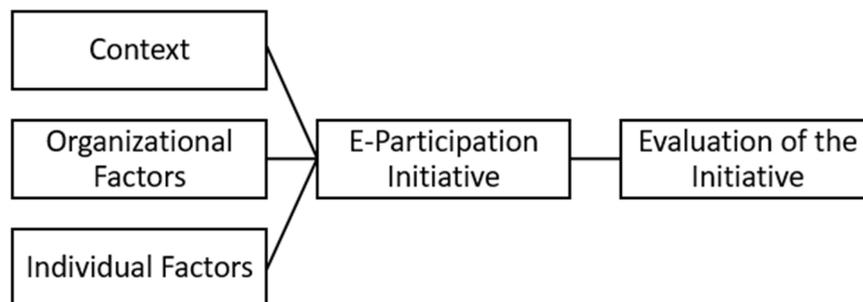
Note: Adapted from Randma-Liiv & Vooglaied (forthcoming).

3. Methodology

The data and the information used to carry out this research were obtained through desk research and semi-structured interviews. The combination of the analysis of different reports and data sources and interviews with politicians, civil servants and users of the platform has allowed us to triangulate data and assess the real success of the initiative according to different points of view.

Desk research included, mainly, the analysis of *Decide Madrid* platform (main website and related data provided in the open-data and transparency portals of the Madrid city council), statistical data from Eurostat, the Spanish Institute of Statistics (INE) and the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), relevant legal documents at national (such as "Law 57/2003, on Measures for the Modernization of Local Governments") and local level (such as "the Organic Regulation of Citizen Participation of the Madrid City

Council") and other related reports issued by international organizations and governmental bodies (such as the "E-government survey" from the United Nations or the "E-government in Spain" report from the European Commission).

In December 2018, nine interviews (see Table 1) were carried out following the questionnaire template designed by Randma-Liiv & Vooglaied (forthcoming). It included a set of questions following the structure of the analytical model defined in the previous section: description of the initiative, contextual, organizational and individual factors, and evaluation of the initiative. The interviews lasted for around 1.5 hours and were recorded for further analyses.

Table 1 Interviewees

Politician 1	Politician of the governmental area in charge of *Decide Madrid*
Politician 2	Politician of the governmental area in charge of *Decide Madrid*
Civil servant 1	Senior civil servant of the general directorate in charge of *Decide Madrid*
Civil servant 2	Technical staff of the general directorate in charge of *Decide Madrid*
Civil servant 3	Technical staff of the general directorate in charge of *Decide Madrid*
Citizen 1	Member of a municipal association and user of *Decide Madrid*
Citizen 2	Member of the political party which promoted this initiative and user of *Decide Madrid*
Citizen 3	User of *Decide Madrid*
Citizen 4	User of *Decide Madrid*

Note: Contacting with users of *Decide Madrid* was a main difficulty in this research. The data protection law did not allow the city council to provide us with users contact data and most users of *Decide Madrid* do not disclose their complete name.

The importance of each source of information is different in the analysis of each dimension of the theoretical model. The information needed to describe the e-participation initiative was obtained mainly from *Decide Madrid* and *Consul* websites. The contextual factors around the e-participation initiative were obtained mainly from desk research. The information about organizational and individual factors was obtained from the interviews to politicians and civil servants and desk research (legal documents about the organizational structure of the city council and competences of different departments and units, human resource reports and the city council website). Finally, the interviews to citizens have more importance in the qualitative evaluation of the initiative (together with the interviews to politicians and civil servants) and data from the open-data portal of the city council in the quantitative evaluation (i.e. number of users, activity in the platform and so on).

4. Case study

4.1. Context

Since the 90s, the digitalization of administrative processes has been a priority in Spain (see European Commission, 2015). 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, 2018, 2015) and Spain occupies high positions in the e-government development index (16th position in 2002 and 17th in 2018 (UN, 2018; UN/ASPA, 2001) and e-participation index (5th position in 2018 (UN, 2018)). The use of ICTs by citizens in Madrid exceeds the national average (INE, 2018; Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2018). Data for 2017 show that 91.7% of the households in Madrid have broadband internet connection. Furthermore, Madrid city council has traditionally ranked above the average in e-government empirical studies.

Madrid has also long experience in neighbourhood-based associations that collaborate with the municipality in the co-production of public services (Sánchez & Pastor, 2018).

In Spain, the possibility of direct citizen participation in public affairs and individual or collective petitions are recognised in the 1978 Constitution (art. 23 and 29). Law 57/2003, on Measures for the Modernization of Local Governments, introduced specific ICT procedures to facilitate the effective participation of citizens in local public life matters and Law 40/2015 introduced the requirement for local governments to carry out online public consultations. The participation of citizens in Madrid is regulated by an Organic Regulation approved in 2004 and subject to subsequent modifications. Some previous municipal regulations (1988 and 1992) about citizen participation existed even before the legal requirement established by Law 57/2003. This regulation established the right of citizens, entities and collectives to participate in local governance. As regards individual citizens, it includes the right of citizens to information, public consultation, public audience, participation in the formulation of public policies, and to make petitions and proposals, among others. There is no specific mention to e-participation in this regulation.

The lack of foresight of the crisis, the government's response focused on financial sustainability through austerity that neglected the effects on the welfare state, the determination of policies by supranational organizations and numerous cases of corruption have lowered citizen trust in public institutions and politics. Indeed, political parties and corruption have been important problems perceived by Spanish citizens in the last ten years (CIS, 2018). This situation led to the protest of hundreds of people in many countries. In Spain, the greatest was the "15M movement" originated in Madrid on May 15, 2011. It was mainly organized online through social networks and the platform "Democracia Real Ya!" supported by more than 200 organizations (Hughes, 2011). The "15M movement" followed the traditional phases of collective action and its institutionalization arrived at the end of 2013 (Portos, 2017). The movement evolved in new political parties, "Podemos" being the most representative. In Madrid, it formed a coalition with other political parties under the name of "Ahora Madrid" that governed the city from May 2015 to May 2019.

"Ahora Madrid" included in its electoral program a commitment to "Implement tools for citizen participation through the Internet […]", and created *Decide Madrid* to achieve this commitment. This initiative belongs to the set of proposals to include citizen participation in the management of the city by (1) "making participatory processes and budgets", (2) "promoting digital participation tools" and (3) "fomenting the collective management of common resources" (Ahora Madrid, 2015). Moreover, Madrid city council, that joined the Subnational Government Pilot Program of the OGP in 2016, is formal member of this organization since 2017, promising to develop participatory budgets and collaborative and efficient legislative mechanisms, and to expand the policy of citizen participation (OGP, 2018).

4.2. *Decide Madrid* e-participation platform

Decide Madrid was launched in September 2015. Through this platform "the City Council of Madrid aims to encourage the participation of citizens 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 a management closer to citizens that allows the city council to receive citizens proposals and to create direct

communication channels with citizens, helping managers to make the most appropriate decisions for the general interest" (translated from the Spanish version available at: https://decide.madrid.es/condiciones-de-uso). *Decide Madrid* is implemented only at Madrid city level, but the open source software developed, *Consul*, has been implemented or is in the process of being implemented in about 100 organizations around the world, most of them in Europe (especially in Spain) and Latin America (see http://consulproject.org/en/). To create this platform, some examples of citizen participation were reviewed, especially *Better Reykjavik* (Iceland), Brazil (Porto Alegre) and Switzerland.

Participation in *Decide Madrid* can be carried out through five sections (debates, proposals, polls, processes and participatory budgeting, see Table 2). Citizens can participate in three moments of the policy cycle: 1) agenda setting, 2) policy analysis and preparation, 3) policy formulation and, to some extent, policy monitoring. In all cases, the topics eligible are only those under Madrid council competences.

Table 2. Types of participation in *Decide Madrid*

Participation option	Description
Debates	E-forum where all users can post topics, comment or state agreement or disagreement. It can also be a tool for users to develop, organize and boost actions in other sections of the platform, such as proposals. The city council can also create debates (it is not only a bottom-up participation tool).
Proposals	Users make a request which can be complemented by audio-visual materials and/or supporting documents. Verified users can support the proposals and those proposals with the support of 1% of the people over 16 registered as residents in Madrid (27,662 inhabitants at 2018) are voted on.
Polls	Polls are carried out when a proposal receives 1% support or when the city council wants citizens to decide on an issue. They include decisions about whether a proposal should be carried out or to choose among different projects. Polls can be open to all citizens or to the citizens of one district.
Processes	Tool the city council uses to seek inputs to develop or modify regulations or actions undertaken by the council. The way the processes are carried out depends on the topic and the information that the city council needs (e.g., specific debates about regulations or policy documents drafts, provision of documents in text format so that citizens can propose changes, or requests for proposals for an activity…).
Participatory budgeting	Annually, citizens can decide directly on how a part of the next year's budget will be spent. The projects can be for the whole city or for specific districts and they can affect current expenditures, subsidies or public investments. Citizens can vote on projects for the whole city and/or projects for only one district of their choice.

Note: Sometimes the actions carried out can differ to some extent from those initially proposed by citizens, as some projects need to be exactly defined, further developed or limited in order to be under the competences and capabilities of the city council.

The platform is open to everyone without registering, but participation is limited according to the different types of activities. Everyone, including associations, NGOs and companies, can be registered in the platform, create debates or proposals and make comments in all sections. However, only registered individual citizens of Madrid over 16

years old can verify their accounts and then they can create proposals for participatory budgeting and support and vote proposals. *Decide Madrid* is accessible to people with disabilities and the verification processes and almost all participation activities can also be done offline in any of the 26 citizen attention offices. Moreover, support for the projects could be collected by using a printed signature form and presenting it to a citizen attention office.

The guidelines and procedures that support the working of this platform have been approved by different agreements of the city council since October 2015[3] and have been amended in the following years as the platform has been improved. However, the existence of *Decide Madrid* is not guaranteed by any law and depends on political will.

The *Consul* code, freely available on the Internet, allows any organization, public or private, to use and adapt the platform to its own needs. Indeed, the improvements made by any organization or individual user can be exploited by the rest, fomenting collaboration between them. Madrid is the partner that is the most significant driver of *Consul* at the moment but, according to the interviewees, it is expected to be more decentralized in the future.

4.3. Actors

Internal Actors. The highest political leader of this initiative was Manuela Carmena, the Mayor. She played an important role in the promotion of the initiative and the coordination of the areas involved. She had a long career in the judicial system as a judge and she was already retired when was elected Mayor of Madrid. The city council decided that the results in polls and participatory budgets are binding, but this agreement has no legal coverage, so the application of the results of the citizens' participation through *Decide Madrid* by other areas is only ensured because all areas depend directly on the Mayor's Office which acts in cases of disagreement (e.g. when the managers of one of the areas or directorates involved disagree with citizen proposals because of technical or cost-related issues).

The second political leader was the councillor responsible for the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area, who sends proposals to the city council plenary, proposes projects of regulations, sets targets for the area and approves, evaluates and assigns resources for action plans. This person has wide experience in programming and has created and managed software companies. Other important political leader is the executive advisor and director of *Decide Madrid*, who elaborates and communicates guidelines for the General Directorate of Citizen Participation (GDCP), together with the councillor responsible for the Area of Government. According to the technicians interviewed, the executive advisor is more focused on the supervision and implementation of these directives. The executive advisor holds a PhD in Theoretical Physics and is one of the creators of Incoma, a software programme that allows debates between lots of people. According to the interviews, these three political leaders were who decided the creation of the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area and *Decide Madrid* and the selection of the managers and staff.

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[3] Agreements of the 29th October 2015; 10th September 2015; 3th December 2015; 22th February 2016; 15th September 2016; 20th October 2016; 18th January 2017 (published in the official gazette of Madrid city council No. 7.530, 7.496, 7.554, 7.604, 7.746, 7.771 and 7.828, respectively).

Finally, the General Director of Citizen Participation, the administrative leader, is responsible for the execution of the guidelines established by the executive advisor and the councillor and the day to day operations. This person is a graduate in Law, a civil servant since 1981 and has been an executive advisor in positions related to higher education and technology in different public administrations. Under the General Director of Citizen Participation are the Administrators of *Decide Madrid*, civil servants whose most common tasks encompass citizen contacts, collaboration with other areas of government and management and organization of their respective units. They influence how *Decide Madrid* works within the guidelines established and under the close supervision of the General Director of *Decide Madrid*.

External Actors. *Decide Madrid* has no significant relationships with non-governmental leaders, media or international consultants. Promotors of *Decide Madrid* were only advised by Citizens Foundation (the non-profit organization that manages Better Reykjavik) about technical issues at the beginning of the initiative. The interviewees state that during the setting up of the platform and the development of the participation processes, the platform has had three main detractors: the most important media in terms of audience and two right-centre political parties. These parties were critical of the initiative for two reasons: one of them was against "direct democracy" and so it opposes everything related to this platform and the other criticises some of the methods of participation of *Decide Madrid*. For example, they question the reliability of the method to obtain supports in the proposals section due to the speed with which some proposals get a lot of support and the confidentiality of the postal vote (Ramos, 2018; Europa Press, 2017).

4.4. Organizational Factors

Decide Madrid is managed by the GDCP whose competences are citizen participation and social innovation programs. This directorate belongs to the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area which depends directly on the Mayor's Office (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2015).

Partners. At international level, the most important informal partners are organizations using *Consul*, as they collaborate in improving the software and in the implementation of this platform around the world. Within the City Council, all government areas (10) and administrative units are partners and contribute to *Decide Madrid* by proposing topics and evaluating proposals made by citizens. The Service of Inclusion, Neutrality and Privacy is a particularly relevant partner to promote the development of participation processes of groups at risk of social exclusion (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2015). Another relevant partner is "Medialab Prado"[4] (city council-owned company), a citizens' laboratory and a meeting place for the production of open cultural projects where some innovation projects in citizen participation related to *Decide Madrid* are being developed and the annual congress of the *Consul* project takes place. The city council also contracts external companies (e.g. "Agora Voting SL") to comply with the data protection law (e.g. encryption of votes to ensure anonymity).

Internal collaboration. Specific collaboration with other areas of government occurs (1) for the verification process of the users' accounts, with the register of inhabitants, that is the competence of the Economy and Finance Area; (2) for promotion tasks, the

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[4] https://www.medialab-prado.es/en/medialab

communication unit of the GDCP collaborates with the General Directorate of Communication, and (3) for offline activities related with *Decide Madrid,* with the Area of Government of Territorial Coordination and Public-Social Cooperation, which is in charge of the coordination and promotion of offline participation (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2015). This collaboration is regulated, as these competences are backed by agreements of the city council.

Other types of collaboration depend on the will of each area, staff motivation and the accountability structure. Other services and departments collaborate by proposing topics for the processes/consultations and evaluating the proposals made by citizens. According to the interviewees, this collaboration in the evaluation of proposals is critical as they have the relevant knowledge. At the beginning of *Decide Madrid*, internal summaries of debates and processes for other areas of the city council were prepared, but now the respective areas revise the debates and processes that affect them, as occurs with comments in participatory budgeting projects and polls. Moreover, the GDCP often contacts the other areas as continuous communication is needed for monitoring the implementation of the results of the e-participation activities. In response to citizen concerns about delays in the execution of participatory projects, the city council is setting up a Participatory Budget Execution Office to improve the monitoring of the implementation of approved projects, so the collaboration with other areas in the monitoring phase will be more formal.

The huge quantity of proposals for participatory budgets to be evaluated increases the workload of the other areas of government. Sometimes, citizen's proposals change the planning, priorities and ways of working of the areas. Consequently, according to the interviewees, at the beginning of *Decide Madrid*, there was some resistance and complaints from the other units and services but now they are adapted to the new organizational culture.

Financial resources. The creation, implementation and the operational costs associated with *Decide Madrid* are funded by the city council's budget so *Decide Madrid* is free for users. *Decide Madrid* also receives funds for its participation with other 3 city councils (Zaragoza, La Coruña and Santiago de Compostela) in an open government project, funded with FEDER grants, which aims to improve the platform and create new modules, among other things. The politicians interviewed note that the purpose of participating in this project was to establish a collaboration channel with other municipalities rather than obtaining funds. Politicians and some technical staff interviewed state that the funding has been sufficient in all the phases of development of *Decide Madrid*, although other technical staff think they need more funds. All the interviewees state that financial sustainability is guaranteed.

Human resources. The GDCP had 40 civil servants approximately, including administrative staff, lawyers, social workers, computer scientists and communications staff, together with three senior managers and advisors from different backgrounds (software companies, universities and public administration). The staff of the GDCP came from other governmental areas because the Citizen Participation, Transparency and Open Government Area was new. In order to recruit them, an open process for the city council personnel was established and they carried out individual interviews to ensure that the candidates were motivated and could adapt smoothly to the organizational culture that the managers wanted to develop. According to the

interviewees, there are 130 civil servants from other areas of government that participate occasionally in the analysis and evaluation of proposals and approximately 10 interim civil servants with different competences (depending on the projects in implementation phase) who work temporarily in this area for the Participatory Budget Execution Office.

The interviewees highlight the importance of the knowledge of legal matters, advanced technologies and languages and of skills in dealing with citizens (for staff and administrators), indicating that the most lacking aspects are those of languages and advanced technologies. Sometimes, occasional staff are contracted for specific aspects, such as social media or platform developments (e.g. people with knowledge in advanced technologies that civil servants in the area do not have for the design of new modules for the platform). However, this is an unusual practice because the contracting process is slow and there are many restrictions for this type of contracts.

Organizational processes and culture. The GDCP and area of government in charge of *Decide Madrid* must follow the regular organizational processes as a part of the city council. However, the GDCP shows some differences in decision-making processes, as the staff have more autonomy than in other areas. *Decide Madrid* is embedded in the overall formal policy-making processes because other areas of government use the platform to carry out public consultations and public audiences. According to the interviewees, *Decide Madrid* has made a progressive change in the perception of other staff areas about direct citizen participation in the policy cycle and the use of open-source software. Indeed, within the possibilities allowed by local and national regulation, the GDCP has generated a particular subculture within the city council, given the greater autonomy of its staff, the looser definition of jobs, more teamwork than in other units/departments/areas and staff commitment to citizen participation.

4.5. Evaluation

Performance indicators. Decide Madrid presents aggregated statistics (number of supports and votes, percentage of participation by gender, age group, district, and via web or offline, when appropriate) both for the first polls (up to 2017, inclusive) and for the participatory budgets. For the participatory budgets, the platform also provides data about which projects are technically unfeasible, under study/analysis, in processing, in execution or ended. Until July 2017, the GDCP published reports where the results of polls and participatory budgets were analyzed and the results of satisfaction surveys and suggestions and claims systems were included. Interviewees said that the GDCP has more information and has their own indicators, revised monthly for internal purposes. According to the politicians interviewed, they focus on the number of users and participants, participation growth and impact on the decisions of the city council (e.g., money spent on participatory budget projects).

All interviewees agree that there is a growing trend in terms of users, participation and impact of the participatory budgets, which is consistent with the data reported in Table 3, although some of the citizens interviewed think that the participation in proposals has decreased.

Up to the end of 2018, 25,418 proposals have been made and only two proposals have obtained enough support to go forward to the voting phase (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2019). In total, 13 polls at city level and 21 polls at district level have been carried

out in 3 voting periods. In the first voting period, 214,076 citizens participated and 963,887 votes were counted (one citizen can vote in more than one issue), there were more participants by mail (54.0%) than through *Decide Madrid* (35.1%) and ballot boxes (10.9%), but more votes were cast through the platform (49.3%). In the second and third voting periods, participation decreased and there were only 92,829 and 9,854 votes (the third voting period was only at district level and not all districts had projects), respectively. This could be explained by the fact that voting was only allowed through *Decide Madrid* and ballot boxes, the topics were much less important and that these polls were initiated by the city council.

Table 3. Statistics for participatory budgets, debates and processes.

		2015	2016	2017	2018
Participatory budgets	Number of participants		45,529	67,132	91,032
	Number of votes in final phase		32,725	38,866	53.891
	Projects initially presented		5,814	3,215	3,323
	Final projects		206	311	328
	Budget		60 millions	100 millions	100 millions
Debates	Debates started per day	37.8	1.5	1.1	0.7
	Comments per day	151.5	21.9	7.2	6.5
Processes	Processes started	6	5	36	23

Source: Open-data platform of the city council of Madrid (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2019) and *Decide Madrid* website. Information about the number of participants in debates and processes and the number of comments in processes was not found.

The first poll (held in February 2017 and dealing with the improvement of Gran Vía Avenue and "Plaza de España" and the first two proposals with enough support to go to vote, "Madrid 100% sustainable" and "Single ticket for public transport") and the participatory budget of 2016 (held from February to June 2016) had more participation than expected and more resources and organization for the offline participation were needed, according to the technicians interviewed. As these were the first processes with visible results in the city, their good results were critical to gain the confidence of citizens in subsequent processes.

Democratic legitimacy. Even though the platform provides detailed information about how the different sections work, one of the citizens interviewed thinks that the methodology of participation through the platform does not allow the citizens an effective direct participation: "*[…] It does not achieve its objectives […] because a lot of citizens get lost in the website*". All citizens interviewed agree that the most important motivation is the possibility of seeing their contributions implemented or taken into account. However, they note that they do not have enough information about the effect of their contributions and the progress of the projects already approved (the monitoring of citizen participation through the platform only covers participatory budgeting).

Transparency. The users of *Decide Madrid* decide what is discussed in the platform in most cases, with the exception of the processes section. The politicians and technicians interviewed give a lot of importance to free communication among users, so there is only a slight moderation before the comments are published to ensure there are no illegal comments (e.g., incitement to violence, insults or discrimination). The moderation is carried out by the staff of the GDCP and volunteers at specific moments

(e.g., at the beginning of *Decide Madrid*). Citizens can select other citizens' activities as inappropriate and moderators can revise them. Experts are not systematically engaged in the deliberation processes; they can participate as any other individual citizen or through associations' accounts.

Citizens are provided with information to facilitate their participation in polls, participatory budgeting (e.g., technical reports) and processes (e.g., the proposal for public consultation and other related laws, documents or information about the topic). However, citizens can only follow up their contributions in participatory budgets, as they have a monitoring section in 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 complain that they lacked information about the outcome of their contributions.

Influence on policy design and external collaboration. According to the technicians interviewed, there have been more than 1,000 actions 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 studies that are made for the rest of the projects of the city council. For the other sections of *Decide Madrid* (debates and processes), the respective area analyses citizens' comments and decides what to do, but no feedback to citizens is usually provided in these cases.

According to the citizens interviewed, *Decide Madrid* has increased citizen participation in Madrid (online and offline). The platform has channeled associations' initiatives to online participation, to defend associations' values and to present projects and proposals that were previously carried out offline. However, some citizens interviewed think they can put less pressure on the municipal government online than offline and one of them thinks the integration of associations in *Decide Madrid* is not enough.

Successes and failures. Two examples of successful participatory activities are the proposals of "Madrid 100% sustainable" and "Single ticket for public transport", which obtained enough support to go to the voting phase and won. Other successful practices are the participatory budgets and the poll promoted by the city council as a result of which eleven squares are being refurbished, including "Plaza de España". Some processes and debates have caused a remarkable number of reactions in *Decide Madrid*, for example, those related to the municipal regulations of motor traffic for the lease of transport vehicles with a driver (e.g. "Uber" and "Cabify"). Some contributions of citizens in processes have resulted in changes in governmental documents and proposed policies (e.g., articles 9.6 and 15 of the Organic Regulation of the Observatory of the City and some commitments for the Second Action Plan of Open Government of Madrid City for the OGP).

The citizens and some technicians interviewed state that there is a problem with proposals: since the beginning of the initiative only two of them have obtained enough support to go to the voting phase and a lot of them expire after receiving a lot of support (e.g. "Massive planting of trees in Madrid" with 20,602 supports of 27,662 required). Furthermore, some citizens seem to be using participatory budgets to present previous proposals that were unsuccessful. In this way, they can be approved without obtaining the minimum support required for proposals.

Regarding debates and processes, citizens express the difficulty of following the dialogues and indicate that they are often just confrontation of opinions without any real contribution or argumentation. Some citizens indicate that many of the debates and proposals created are used by citizens to make a punctual criticism when they are angry about a public service or issue, but without greater implication. Also, there are processes with no comments (e.g. "Project for the regulation of the organization and operations of the San Ildefonso boarding school").

The citizens interviewed indicate that they do not perceive any gratitude for their participation, that they do not see the impact of their contributions in the decision-making processes of the city council or that, many times, it takes a long time to see the result of their participation. Some citizens also indicate that, in some cases, the low participation and the possibility of external influences question the legitimacy of the results and demotivated their participation. This last problem may be due to the possibility of fake profiles and people making comments that try to influence in favor of some ideas, projects or proposals. Citizens also express their concern about the high cost of some participation processes.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this research is to discover the critical success factors at contextual, organizational and individual level of an award-winning e-participation initiative: *Decide Madrid*. The impact of the platform is assessed in terms of participation levels, democratic legitimacy, transparency and influence in decision-making processes and external collaboration. Three factors have been particularly relevant for the development of *Decide Madrid*: the high implication of the city council with citizen participation, the method used to recruit the workers for that general directorate and the knowledge of senior managers about citizen participation and ICTs. The role of the Mayor has been crucial in launching *Decide Madrid*, improving the coordination of the council areas and ensuring enough financial, political and managerial support to develop and run the platform. This situation contrasts with previous research where the lack of political support was found to be a barrier (Toots, 2019) and confirms the importance of political leaders support (Panopoulou et al., 2010).

The restrictions of the legislative framework (e.g., the minimum support needed for citizens initiatives in Spanish municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants is 10% of the citizens) have been avoided by the commitment of the city council of assuming as binding the results of the polls and participative budgets, independently of the number of participants. This commitment has also been important in the transformation of the organizational culture of the city council in order to take into account citizen participation proposals in decision-making processes. The transformation of the organizational culture is a positive impact that has been previously observed in some e-participation initiatives (e.g. Tambouris et al., 2012). However, managers interviewed agree that the transformation of the organizational culture is a slow process. This could have caused some delays in the implementation of winning projects, insufficient communication with citizens, lack of coordination among different services and units of the city council and insufficient participation of some of them in *Decide Madrid*, in some cases.

The success of the *Consul* software combined with the use of an open source license and the decision of the city council to create an international network around it have promoted international collaboration among different institutions that results in improvements in the platform, the development of an active network of public sector entities interested in online citizen participation and a positive image of *Decide Madrid*. This wide adoption of the software by other institutions could be considered an example of institutions imitating leader organizations practices to achieve recognition (mimetic isomorphism, DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) or be the result of an informed and rational decision to adopt freely available technology rather than develop a new technological solution. Further research analysing the e-participation experiences of these institutions would be quite interesting.

The high level of Internet use in Madrid and the possibility of offline participation in the most significant activities carried out through the platform reduce the digital divide related issues found in other initiatives (e.g. Meneses et al., 2017), that could reduce participation and delegitimised the initiative. However, the citizens interviewed have concerns about the security of the platform and the verification processes. These problems have also found to be significant in other e-participation initiatives (Panopoulou et al., 2014) and should be carefully managed.

In addition to the slow process of organizational change, transparency and communication seem to be the most important problems of *Decide Madrid*. All citizens interviewed agree that their most important motivation is the possibility of seeing their contributions implemented or taken into account, although they note that they do not have enough information about the effect of their contributions, the results of public consultations, the progress of the projects already approved and the cancelation of debates and proposals. In fact, the monitoring of citizen participation through the platform only covers participatory budgeting. The lack of feedback is a failure previously reported in other initiatives (Royo & Yetano, 2015; Fedotova et al., 2012). Moreover, citizens interviewed think that there is not enough information about the internal working of the city council (organization, procedures and competences) for a correct evaluation of the impact of their contributions. The lack of transparency makes it difficult to legitimate e-participation initiatives and could also negatively influence citizens' future participation levels.

Traditionally, citizen participation in Madrid was offline through associations, while *Decide Madrid* is focused on individual online citizen participation. Although associations can participate in most of the sections, only individual citizens are allowed to vote for proposals or participatory budgets options. The platform allows the participation in a wide variety of initiatives and networked individuals tend to be involved in multiple online networks and activities. However, they also expend less time in each activity and abandon them easier). Therefore, the lesser role attributed to the traditional participation stakeholders in Madrid municipality may be the reason behind less continued participation, because online participants are less committed than offline participants, according to networked individualism theory (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Moreover, although most of the activities carried out through the platform can also be carried out offline, offline participation is not integrated in the platform. Including in the platform information about activities carried out offline, could also be a useful measure to ensure continued participation. The lack of habit among citizens of participating in

online forums and the lack of moderators or other mechanisms to organize debates, proposals and comments seem to have had some negative effects in the debates and processes sections of *Decide Madrid*. This pushes many citizens to participate only on an *ad-hoc* basis when polls and participatory budgets are carried out. The proposals section needs a minimum threshold of participation (27,662 supports) for the citizens' proposals to go to vote and only 2 proposals have achieved this number up to July 2019. This causes the feeling of "a waste of time" in both users that create a proposal and those who support it. Indeed, online participants could be more motivated to do only a punctual participation because of the lack of time they have to manage or their online relationships (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) and this factor that has been found as the most important reasons to abandon long-term e-participation initiatives (Yetano & Royo, 2017). It seems that both citizens and the city council need more time to adapt themselves to online direct participation.

The economic, social and political context that caused the "indignados" movement also increased the interest of many citizens in new mechanisms of participation in public life, which explains the high levels of participation in the initial stages of *Decide Madrid*. However, the high expectations of citizens combined with the lack of transparency they perceive in some e-participation activities also contribute to explaining the decreased citizen interest in some of them, as noted by previous research (Yetano & Royo, 2017; Font & Navarro, 2013). This negative evolution in the number of participants is a big threat, as some e-participation platforms have been closed down because of that (Toots, 2019; Sæbø et al., 2011).

Although citizens interviewed have some complaints and proposals for improvement and sometimes question the levels of participation and the effectiveness of *Decide Madrid*, both citizens and municipal staff consider that *Decide Madrid* is necessary. This agreement among interviewees evidences the high motivation for e-participation and direct citizen participation for both the city council and the citizens. Improvements in *Decide Madrid* based on the feedback and lessons learned from the first experiences could help to increase citizen trust, participation levels, and the legitimacy of this platform among citizens. The way in which these challenges are tackled and the maintenance of the commitment to e-participation of future governments of the city council will determine the lev of citizen participation and the viability of the initiative.

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