Digital Commons:

A guide to inclusive and sustainable digital participatory processes



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Digital commons to strengthen democracy



In recent years, governments around the world have begun adopting digital platforms to expand citizen participation. These tools can bring society and the state closer together, increase transparency, and allow citizens to contribute directly to policymaking.

But there is a central challenge:

How can we ensure that digital participatory processes are truly inclusive?

This publication addresses that question through the research project "Sustainable digital commons for social justice: the Decidim experience in Brazil," launched in 2024 by the Research Group on State Society Relations (Resocie), based at the Institute of Political Science (IPOL) of the University of Brasília (UnB), in partnership with Instituto Cidade Democrática. The research investigates the implementation of Brasil Participativo, a platform based on Decidim, an open-source digital participation software used by cities and governments around the world.

More specifically, we seek to understand:

- How digital participatory processes can include historically excluded groups;

  Historically excluded groups are segments of the population that have long faced structural inequalities limiting their access to rights, resources, technologies, and decision-making spaces, and thus their ability to influence public policies and participatory processes, both within the state and society. Accordingly, the research focused especially on the inclusion of women, Black people, Indigenous peoples, people living in poverty, and other groups historically excluded from participatory processes.

- How digital participatory processes can foster or strengthen the collective organization of participants;

  We found that, without specific strategies and actions, digital platforms can reproduce existing social inequalities, concentrating participation among groups that are already organized, more highly educated, or have greater access to political resources.

- How to transform digital platforms into digital commons: information, knowledge, data, and cultural resources produced, managed, and maintained collectively;

  A digital commons is a set of tools and resources for information, knowledge, and culture collaboratively created, maintained, and shared by a community, accessible to all and oriented toward collective benefit rather than exclusive appropriation. Free and open-source software, defined by the freedoms to use, study, modify, and distribute it, becomes a digital commons when it is actually developed, maintained, and governed by a community as a shared resource rather than merely a product. Thus, the political inclusion we analyze goes beyond taking part in collective processes: it can extend to becoming an active member of a community that produces, sustains, and uses the digital commons.

How we conducted the research

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining different data sources and research techniques:

- Semi-structured interviews with public officials and social actors;
- Participant observation in participatory processes;
- Content analysis of documents;
- Local workshops in different cities with diverse audiences;
- Statistical analysis of platform usage data.

In particular, we included the perspectives, interpretations, suggestions, and lessons learned from historically excluded actors through semi-structured interviews, interactions during workshops, and listening during participant observation.

By combining these sources and qualitative and quantitative analytical methods, we identified patterns, challenges, and good practices that can guide anyone seeking to implement or improve digital participatory processes.

What this guide is for

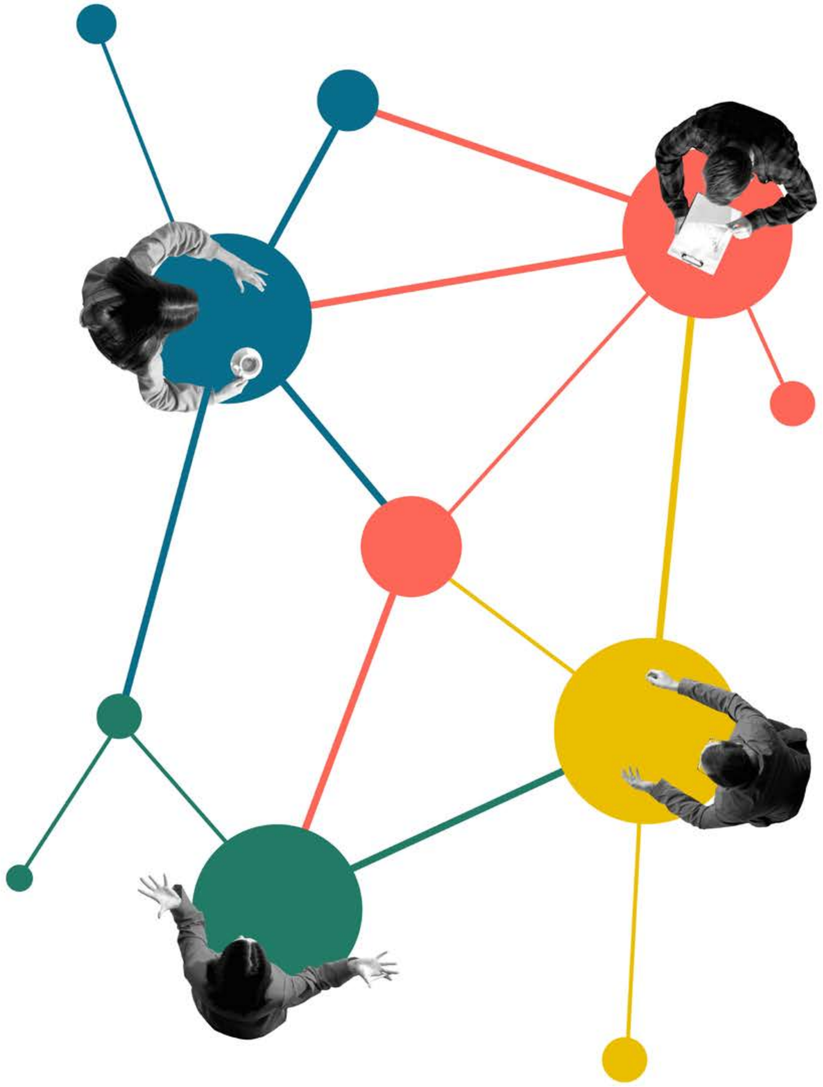
This publication was designed as a practical guide for organizers of digital participatory processes.

Here you will find:

- Recurring problems in digital participatory processes;
- Lessons learned from the research;
- Common mistakes made by governments;
- Concrete examples from Brazil and other countries;
- Practical checklists for implementing participatory processes.

Our aim is to help transform digital participation into more inclusive, higher-impact processes.

Who this guide is for



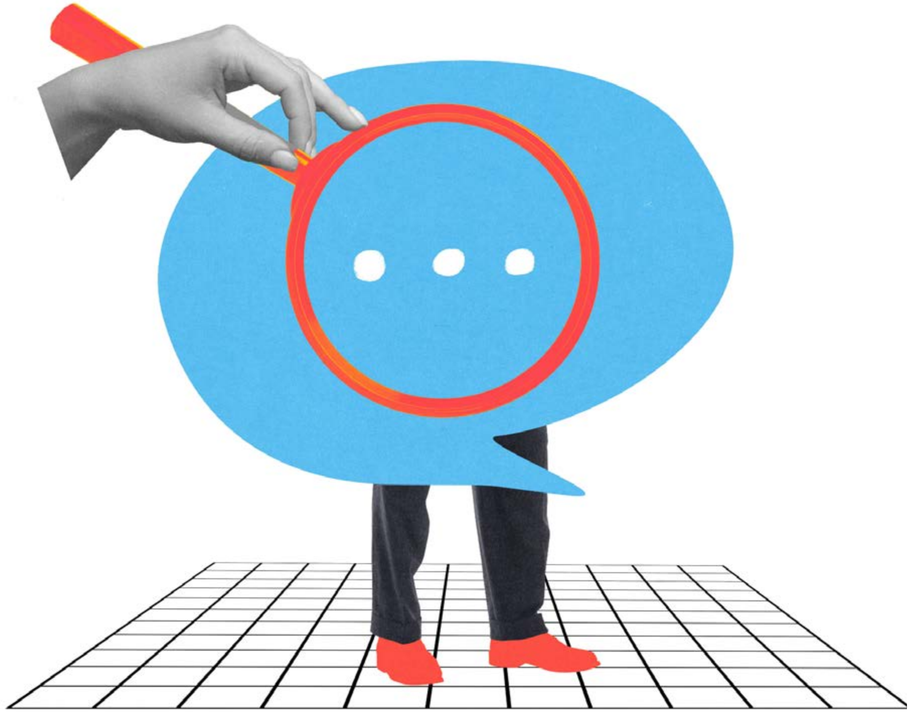
This guide was developed especially for public managers and government technical teams, but it is also relevant to social movements, civil society organizations, activists, researchers, and anyone else interested in the subject.

How can we make digital participatory processes more inclusive?

The problem

Digital social participation processes often become elitist, concentrating participation among people with good internet access and digital literacy who are already organized and politically included. This challenge is shaped by different digital participation architectures. Depending on their design, certain formats for interaction, proposal development, and deliberation can either enable or hinder the participation of diverse groups.

Historically excluded groups can be directly affected by these choices.



What we learned from the research

Inclusion in digital participation means ensuring that everyone, regardless of physical or cognitive abilities, personal characteristics, or socioeconomic circumstances, has the access, training, and conditions needed to engage with and influence consultation and decision-making processes—and to take part in the development and governance of digital systems and technologies.

There are three distinct and complementary pathways to greater inclusion:

1. Inclusion by design

2. Inclusion through intermediation

3. Inclusion through the agenda

1. Inclusion by design

Processes must be deliberatelY designed and tools adapted to make them more inclusive. Inclusion depends on institutional, technological, and political design choices that shape different aspects of participation: from ease of access and the cognitive and practical costs of joining the process to opportunities for interaction, developing contributions, and influencing decisions. We call this end-to-end experience the user journeY.

It is also necessarY to balance broader access, greater mobilization, and meaningful opportunities to influence decisions throughout the participatorY process. This means lowering entrY barriers without abandoning mechanisms that strengthen legitimacY and allow contributions to inform decisions. In manY cases, the user journeY can be progressive—like a funnel: participants begin with simpler forms of engagement and, as theY move forward, gain access to forms of participation requiring stronger authentication or deeper involvement.

CASE:

The Digital ParticipatorY Multi- ear Plan (PPA) was a Brazilian federal government initiative launched in 2023 through the Brasil Participativo platform. It allowed the public to vote on and propose priorities for the 2024 2027 Multi- ear Plan. It was the countrY s largest experience of digital social participation in budget planning.

The ParticipatorY PPA simplified Decidim s design, drasticallY reduced the number of active features, and adapted the user experience so people could make their first contribution in just two clicks. It also developed a strategY to engage digital influencers, reach target audiences, and activelY seek proposals. These measures enabled participation at an enormous scale while advancing the inclusion of groups historicallY absent from such processes.

https://brasilparticipativo.presidencia.gov.br/processes/programas

2. Inclusion through intermediation

This occurs when historicallY excluded groups participate indirectlY, with support from intermediaries who help organize their involvement. It can take different forms, such as in-person consultations led bY organizations, collectives, and communitY leaders acting as translators of the participatorY process—its language, methods, rules, and digital tools. Intermediation can also happen through meetings and methods for jointlY developing proposals, enabling those demands to be registered on the platform and promoted through digital campaigns bY those responsible for gathering them.

CASE:

In Barcelona s participatorY budgeting processes, the citY government adopted an active strategY to include migrants and vulnerable groups, recognizing that theY do not necessarilY access institutional spaces on their own. It mobilized teams and organizations to work locallY, make direct contact with underrepresented groups, hold targeted sessions, and relY on intermediaries to facilitate participation and explain the process. It also reduced formal barriers bY allowing participation based on municipal registration, without requiring citizenship or regular immigration status. This illustrates an inclusion strategY based on proactive outreach and support from organizations and networks, even though formal participation remains organized at the individual level.



CASE:

During the participatorY Climate Plan process, some socio-environmental organizations working with groups historicallY excluded from politics—including riverine communities, Indigenous peoples, and residents of extractive reserves—acted as intermediaries. TheY became spokespersons for proposals developed through different strategies of listening, gathering opinions, and collective deliberation among these populations. TheY used their organizational capacities to submit proposals and campaign for them on the digital platform. This is one possible approach to inclusion. However, Brasil Participativo allowed onlY individual participation through personal accounts. Organizations therefore could not register as spokespersons or hosts: theY had to appoint an individual to submit the proposal, which sYmbolicallY undermined their collective role.

https://brasilparticipativo.presidencia.gov.br/processes/planoclima

3. Inclusion through the agenda

This occurs when proposals and agendas addressing the problems and needs of historically excluded groups are present and influential in a participatory process, even when they were not submitted by members of those groups or directly developed by intermediaries in dialogue with them. Such proposals can shape debate and outcomes and potentially attract members of those groups as supporters and voters.

CASE:

A qualitative analysis of proposals submitted to the Participatory PPA reveals a slight mismatch between the content of the issues debated and the social profile of participants, suggesting a form of inclusion through the agenda. On one hand, the proposals address structural inequalities, social policy agendas, and groups historically excluded from participation. Recurring proposals include guaranteeing the rights of persons with disabilities, increasing territorial equity in health-service provision, and expanding universities across regions to equalize young people s access to education. On the other hand, the research team s effort to characterize participants profiles suggests that these groups were not fully represented. This tension between a potentially inclusive agenda and unequal participation suggests that, in some cases, the demands of these groups reach participatory arenas through other actors. Inclusion thus occurs more through proposal content and efforts to give visibility to excluded groups agendas than through the direct participation of those affected. It is important to note, however, that inclusion through the agenda was limited and lacked a clear implementation strategy: the specific demands of historically excluded groups were proportionally fewer and received fewer votes.

Common pitfalls



- Introducing complex authentication protocols that exclude people with poor-quality internet access;
- Designing participatory processes that focus only on the top of the funnel, without sustaining engagement after people enter the platform;
- Listening without commitment: organizing participatory processes unable to turn public contributions into proposals that genuinely influence government decisions;
- Opening overly generic consultations that are disconnected from concrete problems;
- Relying excessively on written text, which can become a barrier to inclusion;
- Treating intermediation as informal rather than an integral part of the process requiring trained staff;
- Choosing consultation themes based on government needs (drafting plans, consulting on decrees or regulations) rather than issues directly discussed by society.

Recommendations

When designing the process:

- Do not demand everything from everyone: develop different stages of engagement and features to allow different participation experiences;
- Test the language with diverse audiences before launch;
- Create strategies for gathering opinions, collectively developing proposals, and campaigning to build legitimacy for intermediation;
- Organize consultations and participatory processes around concrete everyday needs (work, income, public services);
- Publicize processes on external platforms and traditional media to stimulate debate about the realities of historically excluded groups.

When adapting the tool:

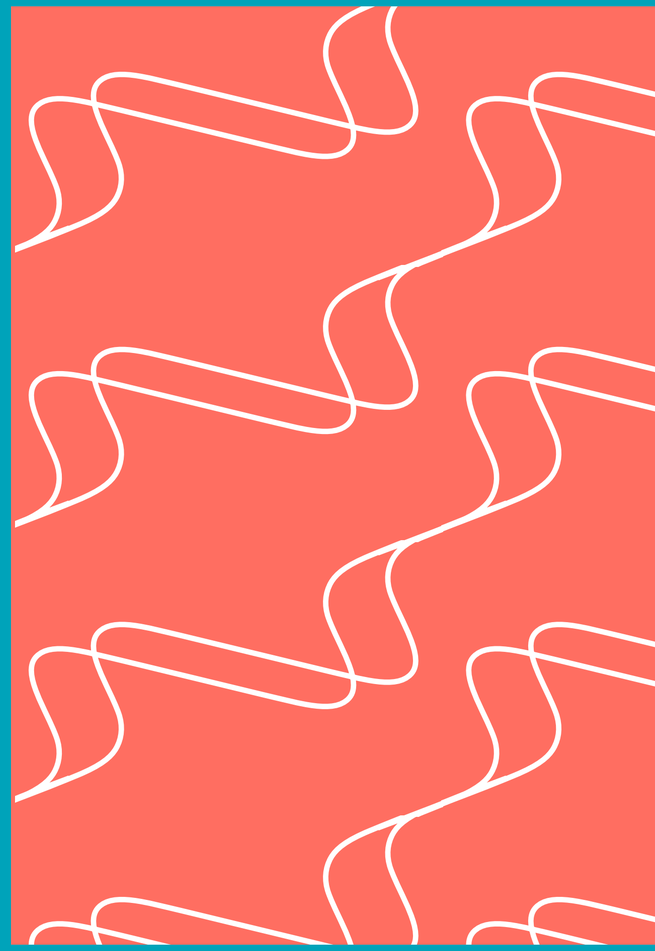
- Simplify language, the user journey, and the interface, eliminating the need for extensive reading;
- Provide thematic micro-campaign features to expand the platform s overall reach;
- Enable voice-based interaction;
- Do not require participants to produce complex written texts;
- Connect with communities on external platforms to reach users with poor-quality internet access (for example, WhatsApp);
- Use messaging apps as an alternative participation channel;
- Lower authentication barriers to registration.



During the process:

- Contact and partner with organizations, collectives, and community leaders that can translate participatory processes—their language, methods, rules, and digital tools;
- Ensure trained intermediaries can connect territories and politically excluded groups with the state;
- Establish permanent participation-support and intermediation channels, including training programs;
- Collect aggregate profile data about who does and does not participate so outreach strategies can target those not yet reached;
- Analyze aggregate profiles of proposal authors as well as platform users, identifying patterns and fostering diversity among those who submit proposals, not only those who participate.

How can we facilitate and recognize collective participation?



The problem

Digital participatory processes tend to be understood and designed as individual activities, often anchored in personal accounts (such as gov.br login). This makes collective forms of organization and participation harder to recognize and incorporate.

Such an approach not only obscures the plurality of forms of participation and dialogue; it is also associated with one-off and discontinuous processes that treat participation as a momentary activity rather than an ongoing and sustained process.



What we learned from the research

Communities are groups of people connected by shared interests, practices, or goals who, through interaction and participation, begin collaborating to advance those goals. In participatory processes, communities come together to develop proposals and agendas, mobilize other people, and influence decision-makers.

The research found that communities emerge when shared interests are recognized, connections become visible, and relationships develop among individuals and groups during a process—and can persist beyond it. Digital participatory processes may therefore create new communities or strengthen existing ones. The latter happens, for example, when participation expands a community s ability to mobilize online or reinforces its role in connecting actors and demands during the process, as discussed above.

Proposals are meeting points for these dynamics: they connect people around shared interests and help organize collective action, increasing engagement.

Finally, one of the most important impacts identified is that strengthening communities during participatory processes can expand their ability to act—whether by intermediating or enabling their members to enter other spaces for participation and negotiation.

CASE:

The participatory process for the National Culture Plan showed how communities can both emerge and grow stronger through participation. In one case, an activist proposed the creation of a digital library and, to mobilize support, brought together a group that had not previously been organized around the issue. In another, a proposal author already involved in an academic community mobilized that community to support renovation of the university theater, a cultural facility important to different audiences in the region. This proposal not only united existing stakeholders but also raised the demand s visibility and strengthened their coordination, attracting the attention of lawmakers with regard to allocating budget amendments. These cases illustrate different but complementary pathways: digital participation can start the formation of a community, while also strengthening existing networks and expanding their capacity to organize, advocate, and transform their circumstances.

https://brasilparticipativo.presidencia.gov.br/processes/planocultura/f/287/proposals/31795

https://brasilparticipativo.presidencia.gov.br/processes/planocultura/f/287/proposals/30860



CASE:

Following the 2019 pension reform—which allowed social security contributions to be levied on the benefits of retired public servants earning below the ceiling of Brazil s National Social Security Institute (INSS)—unions, parliamentary associations, and retirees became activists in the fight against this deduction. The coalition initially organized mainly through social media to pressure decision-makers and influence public opinion. It later decided to participate in the Participatory PPA. According to some members, this was the first time they had engaged so directly in a government-led participatory process to try to influence public policy outcomes.

https://brasilparticipativo.presidencia.gov.br/processes/programas/f/2/proposals/867



Common pitfalls

- Treating participation as a one-off event;
- Failing to make connections between participants visible;
- Not facilitating communication among participants;
- Not maintaining recurring cycles of participation;
- Failing to recognize participants prior engagement before they submit proposals;
- Failing to make institutional feedback an ongoing dialogue with participating individuals and groups;
- Processes that produce no political impacts visible to participants.

Recommendations

To facilitate and recognize communities:

- Design digital participatory processes that enable communities to participate, through tools for:
  - developing micro-campaigns;
  - voting and mobilizing around proposals;
  - communication among community members.
- Encourage interactions among participants within the process itself (through comments or other forms of dialogue and exchange).
- Facilitate communication between participants who share interests and support the same proposal.
- Develop initiatives to foster these communities sense of belonging, recognition, and visibility.
- Include community members in subsequent participatory bodies or institutional dialogues after their online participation.

To sustain participation over time:

- Adopt ongoing communication strategies throughout participatory processes to build dialogue and encourage community mobilization.
- Design participatory processes to be continuous and ongoing, maintaining dialogue and relationships with communities over time.
- Proactively communicate the outcomes and next steps of participatory processes using plain language.



How can we build a digital commons around participation software adopted by the state?

The problem

Participation software is often created as a temporary tool controlled by a small number of actors, primarily governments. Even when it becomes free and open-source software and is treated as a commons, it can still be difficult to build broader governance that involves a variety of people—not just hackers, programmers, and government officials.



What we learned from the research

Governance refers to the mechanisms of leadership, oversight, decision-making, and coordination of collective action around a commons. It determines who participates, how decisions are made, and which rules organize the process. In a digital commons, social governance means broadening these mechanisms beyond technicians and programmers to include users, communities, civil society, and other affected actors, ensuring meaningful participation, a diversity of voices, and shared responsibility for managing and developing the shared resource.

A digital participation platform understood as a digital commons—especially when conceived as a service to its users—is more than software designed to be used or consumed. It becomes a space for collective action where different actors help define not only how they use it but also the rules, dynamics, and forms of participation it enables. Viewed as a participation service, the platform s governance extends beyond technical experts to include users, social movements, and civil society in debates about its operation, design, and development. It therefore becomes not only a means of participation but also an object of contestation, collective creation, and appropriation.

CASE:

The co-creation workshops held in Barcelona to involve citizens in decisions about the development of the free and open-source Decidim software provide an example of inclusion in commons governance. As the Decidim digital community s discussions about features and code became increasingly limited to political activists, government officials, hackers, and specialists, in-person co-creation workshops were organized. Citizens were invited to discuss and influence the software s strategic priorities, goals, visual design, and key features. This effort continues through annual gatherings and seeks to bring new members into the Metadecidim community on an ongoing basis.
https://decidim.org/pt-br/community/



CASE:

The National Youth Conference needed to decide which Brasil Participativo features it would use and set its "participation rules." These rules determined how proposals would be selected for inclusion in the in-person national stage and how online delegates participating in that stage would be elected. The decisions were made by the National Youth Council, a legally established participatory institution bringing together government and civil society. This is an example of inclusion in governance that concerns not software coding but the political choices and rules governing how the digital tool is used—in other words, the participation service that the commons provides.

https://brasilparticipativo.presidencia.gov.br/assemblies/confjuv4



Common pitfalls

- Reducing participation to the policy formulation stage;
- Failing to define clear institutional responsibilities;
- Failing to provide feedback to participants;
- Lacking participatory governance bodies that include key consultation participants;
- Failing to establish or use a participatory body bringing together government, society, and programmers to decide on participation rules, goals, and the platform development schedule;
- Excessive dependence on specific governments and administrations, making tools vulnerable to electoral cycles and threatening their continuity.

Recommendations

- Understand and structure digital platforms as public participation services, with participatory, evaluative, and transparent service arrangements—such as user councils and service charters;
- Design participatory processes or use existing participatory institutions (such as public policy councils) to govern these services, so people can demand, debate, and decide on their operation, rules, and features;
- Create permanent participation mechanisms within platform management—such as councils, forums, or advisory bodies—that involve users, civil society, and other actors in defining rules, priorities, and improvements;
- Develop ways to evaluate the platform as a service, including ratings, comments, and feedback;
- Ensure transparency about platform rules, processes, and decisions. Make criteria for moderation, prioritization, curation, and handling contributions visible, so participants can understand and question how the system works;
- Use tools that are open to collaboration and, above all, to use and appropriation by different levels of government and civil society organizations;
- Develop features and processes that allow users to influence not only proposal content but also how the platform operates, strengthening a sense of belonging and shared responsibility.



Conclusion

Today, the adoption of information and communication technologies is essential for establishing new relationships between the state and society. Beyond an instrumental view of technology, however, digital participatory processes and the tools that support them must be designed not to reproduce—and ideally to challenge—existing forms of exclusion and inequality.

This guide has sought to bring research and practice closer together by systematizing lessons from digital participatory processes and turning them into actionable recommendations. Throughout, it has emphasized that the potential of technology lies not only in expanding access but also in improving the quality of participation, strengthening collective ties, and supporting more continuous and inclusive forms of engagement. Technology can thus be used strategically to deepen democracy and build more open, plural, and collaborative relationships between the state and society.



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