Government bodies, institutions and organisations such as municipal councils and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), are increasingly using websites, mobile applications and other digital resources to engage citizens in policymaking and public decision-making. However, most of these public participation forums are used to a limited extent for practical purposes, or there is no effective consistency between their theoretical objectives and their practical application. That is the starting point of the CO3 European research project, which will be creating a new platform for the relationship between institutions and citizens using disruptive technologies over three years.

This initiative uses co-creation, co-production and co-management methodologies that engage all the interested parties to establish a digital platform that meets the needs of both citizens and the public or private organisations that use it as the end result. At the same time, the scientific project evaluates the risks and benefits of using new technologies which are still used to a limited extent in public participation processes.

The project is known as "CO3. Transformative impact of disruptive technologies in public services," and is receiving funding from the European Horizon 2020 programme (grant no. 822615) and has an overall budget amounting to almost € 3.2M. The project was launched last January and will conclude in early 2022, and is led by the Università di Torino (Italy). It is interdisciplinary, and also involves researchers from very varied fields from the University of Vic - Central University of Catalonia (UVic-UCC) in Spain, the LINKS Foundation (Italy), the Institut de Recherche et d'Innovation Centre Pompidou in Paris (France), the OpenLab in Athens (Greece) and companies including Flexiguided and U8 (Germany) and Geomotion (Spain).

A platform made by and for everyone

"Imagine that the municipal council wants to build a new school on a disused plot of land in the neighbourhood where you live, but many of the residents think that the school is unnecessary, and that the disused area would be very useful if it was turned into a green area instead. It would be very useful if all those affected could use a mobile application, for example, to look at the plan for the new school via augmented reality, give their opinion, vote and make alternative proposals suited to their needs," says Ruth S. Contreras, a researcher at CO3 project by the University of Vic - Central University of Catalonia.

The platform that will be obtained after three years of work will become a web space and a mobile application that will include many technological opportunities: geolocated social networks, the use of augmented reality, the ability to vote or participate in a debate, in an environment, according to Contreras, "where stakeholders will be able to create, start or add events to monitor activities which have the highest participation in the CO3 ecosystem." It will also incorporate gamification, i.e. techniques from games (or rather video games), such as points, rankings and prizes, to encourage public participation.

However, the researchers believe that there are two key factors to the success of their product: first, the preparation process that has been adopted throughout the entire project, and which has involved all those affected from the outset: "as a working methodology, co-creation involves designing something in tandem with the person who has to use it, and this is essential in the case of software, particularly if it is complex and is going to be used for social and public purposes, as in this case," explains Contreras. The researcher points out that "the design of software or a platform must always be based on a need, it must be easy to use for the end users, and it must be useful."

The initiative uses co-creation, co-production and co-management methodologies to involve its end users in defining the technology, which will take the form of an app and a website.

co3project
co-create · co-produce · co-manage

Second, "everyone who wants to must be able to use the end product freely and adapt it to their own requirements," says Andreas Nitsche of Flexiguided, and as such "each government body or institution that uses it will enable options and disable others depending on their goals and the stakeholders involved." The technology developed will also be available as an app and in a web format, which can also be customised, and available in several languages.

Three pilot tests underway

The software created by the CO3 partners is being developed in three phases, which involve three pilot tests in Athens, Turin and Paris respectively. In these three cities, the councils "are fully committed to the initiative" and they are now "cities with a smart city model in development," says Guido Boella, lead researcher of the project at the Università di Torino. The first phase was carried out in 2019, when ideas were gathered at technological meetings and demonstrations, group work sessions and above all, co-design workshops, about "what form the web and the application should take so that all the stakeholders find them useful and functional," explains Boella.

According to the LINKS researcher Antonella Frisiello, during this first they realised phase that the need for a fully customisable end product is the cornerstone of the project: "In general, everyone wants a practical, easy and fast resource, but the type of functionalities they want differ widely between one city and another, depending on each situation, context or problem they have to address." In all cases, citizens, members of government bodies, institutions and academics have participated in the co-design process, and in some cases students and even children were involved.

Local markets, urban development and public spaces in the pilot tests

During the second phase of the project, which is beginning now, the partners will work at different levels to produce and implement the software based on the information received in the co-creation phase. Finally, in the last phase of the project, they will return to the three pilot cities to test their results in three real situations, in the third "co-management" phase.

In the case of Athens, the pilot project will address the problem of providing good quality food to people in disadvantaged situations by integrating the technologies developed by the CO3 consortium in the realm of local markets. In Paris, the urban development of the Olympic facilities for the 2024 Games will be the test bank for the project, and will involve multiple stakeholders in defining the new environment. Finally, in Turin, the pilot project will involve the Case del Quartiere, which are associations running public spaces where a wide range of activities take place, and will provide means to drive economic exchanges between the stakeholders and to participate in the management of the Case themsemselves.

This third phase will also be used to fine-tune the areas of the software with operational problems, and to obtain the end product, which will be made available to any government body, institution or organisation that is interested.

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