

# A SeeClickFix for Public Participation?

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*Assessing the feasibility of an online platform for evaluating public participation activities*

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### **ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS**

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# I. INTRODUCTION

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## Overview

As the world becomes increasingly networked, the development of various online initiatives – e-Democracy, Gov 2.0, the Open Government Initiative – emphasize the interest in and demand for using the capacity of the online world to better government accessibility, transparency, and responsiveness, as well as directing and facilitating citizen engagement and feedback.

This report seeks to assess the feasibility of an online platform designed to gather, track, and analyze data on public participation activities. This research was conducted at the behest of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC), which aims to “bring together practitioners and researchers to support and foster the nascent, broad-based movement to promote and institutionalize deliberative democracy at all levels of governance in the United States and around the world” (DDC, 2012). With over 30 partner organizations, the DDC seeks to “build knowledge around the actual impact of deliberation upon civic attitudes and behavior, and the sustainability of follow-on efforts” (DDC, 2012). To support the research and efficacy of its practitioner members, increased data collection and evaluation of findings related to public participation efforts is critical.

Within this context, DDC recognizes that the development of online technologies present new possibilities for involving citizens themselves in gathering, tracking, and analyzing data on public participation. As proposed by the DDC, an online platform could “facilitate data gathering from public employees, neighborhood leaders, elected officials, and others who convene citizen involvement efforts - as well as the participants themselves.” Ideally, the platform would equip both conveners and evaluators with easy, online feedback opportunities that allow them to report on demographics, citizen satisfaction, and other important indicators for their meetings and activities.

The DDC posits that such a platform “would provide communities with a broader, deeper sense of the patterns and trends in citizen involvement... provide a direct incentive for neighborhood and local leaders to reach out to a broader array of their constituents and help people understand which kinds of recruitment strategies and meeting formats were successful, and how to improve them.”

This report first provides an overview of relevant literature to establish a theoretical foundation for the research and recommendations. Next, the report summarizes responses received from 22 interviews with experts and provides a feasibility analysis based upon those results. Finally, the report outlines recommendations regarding the

next steps in furthering evaluation design and implementation with regard to digital tools and public participation.

#### What is SeeClickFix?

The concept for the online platform described by the DDC is framed as a “SeeClickFix” for public participation. SeeClickFix is an online platform that “allows anyone to report and track non-emergency issues anywhere in the world via the internet” (SeeClickFix, 2012). By providing the technological interface (both web and mobile based), SeeClickFix encourages citizens, community groups, media organizations, and governments to work together to improve their neighborhoods and communities. For more information, see [www.seeclickfix.com](http://www.seeclickfix.com).

## Methods

To meaningfully assess the feasibility of an online platform for evaluating citizen participation activities, we conducted a literature review of online platforms, current methods of public participation evaluation, commonly used metrics, use of online tools in similar evaluative functions, and tools currently serving similar or related functions to the proposed platform.

Following the review, an interview protocol was developed for several types of potential experts. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix B. Next, interviews were conducted with relevant experts, including public participation practitioners, researchers, technologists, policy makers, and event conveners. These interviews were systematically analyzed, with common themes and patterns noted along the way.

Based on the responses from the interviewees and other research, a feasibility analysis was conducted. Finally, conclusions and recommendations were developed about the benefits, costs, opportunities, challenges, and feasibility of developing, implementing, and using an online tool to assist in evaluating public participation activities.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

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This section of the report summarizes the literature related to public participation and evaluation. It serves as the theoretical foundation for the analyses in subsequent sections.

### Citizen Participation

#### *What is it? What is the value of citizen participation?*

Broadly defined, citizen participation is the “processes by which public concerns, needs, and values are incorporated into decision-making” (Nabatchi, 2012: 6). These processes can take either indirect or direct forms. Indirect participation is the act of empowering others to either make decisions or speak on one’s behalf, such as through electoral processes. Direct participation encompasses the sharing of decision-making or power between public officials and members of society (Nabatchi, 2012). Examples of direct participation include responding to community surveys, attending town hall meetings, or engaging in public deliberation events, among myriad other activities and processes that assist in the direct transfer of the citizen’s concerns and values to the decision-making body (Cooper 2006). The primary focus of this report is on direct citizen participation in government decision making.

Inherent in the concept of democracy is the transfer of power from the citizen to the elected official. Despite this transfer, decisions in a democratic society are regarded as driven by the values of “good” or “bad” determined by that society. As Creighton (2005: 15) explains,

When decisions are made about what level of health or safety risk is ‘acceptable’, how much it is ‘reasonable’ to pay to protect an environmental resource, or how costs should be distributed among various classes of people, these are not technical decisions... These are decisions about values or philosophy.

Accordingly, elected officials and decision-making bodies require input from the citizens to best inform what value the public assigns to the choices associated with the decision at hand.

Many scholars and practitioners have asserted that direct citizen participation can produce benefits for citizens, policy decisions, and governance (see box: *“Advantages of Citizen Participation in Government Decision Making”*). Growing recognition of these potential benefits has helped to increase the demand for direct citizen participation over the last few decades (Nabatchi, 2012).

Advantages of Citizen Participation in Government Decision Making		
	Advantages to Citizen Participants	Advantages to Government
Decision Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education (learn from and inform government representatives)</li> <li>• Persuade and enlighten government</li> <li>• Gain skills for activist citizenship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education (learn from and inform citizens)</li> <li>• Persuade citizens; build trust and allay anxiety or hostility</li> <li>• Build strategic alliances</li> <li>• Increase legitimacy of decisions</li> </ul>
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Break gridlock; improve outcomes</li> <li>• Gain some control over policy process</li> <li>• Better policy and implementation decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Break gridlock; improve outcomes</li> <li>• Avoid litigation costs</li> <li>• Better policy and implementation decisions</li> </ul>

Source: Irvin, Renee A. and John Stansbury (2004).

The increased demand and use of direct citizen participation is evident not only in the United States, but also in countries around the world. Overall, international organizations have been increasing and intensifying their emphasis on public participation, in a variety of forms and forums. Similar to the United States, many international governments have encouraged or mandated public participation into certain decision making processes on various scales or have seen a growth in non-governmental organizations spearheading efforts to use participation as a way to gather information, empower the public, or enhance civil society (EIPP, 2009). For example, in the United Kingdom, the exclusion of marginalized participants, lack of vision and strategic coherence, insufficient resources, and communication issues stymied a flurry of participation programs that have been organized and implemented in recent years. Similarly, in Germany, an active civil society has been the prime target for increasing use of public participation in governance. Participatory practices like Brazil’s efforts to include citizens in directing budget processes and Indonesia’s environmental management practices are increasingly being emulated in other countries. That said, a major problem in many programs proved to be the dramatic amount of missing knowledge and lack of connectedness and communication of civil institutions.

Because of this trend in growing participatory efforts, the opportunity to collect and compare data and results across cultures could be beneficial for government officials and researchers, particularly in revealing aspects of participation in different environments and cultural contexts (EIPP, 2009).

### Evaluation Methodology, Design, and Results Validity

*What is evaluation? What are the challenges? What are the benefits?*

Evaluation is “the systematic application of social research procedures for assessing the conceptualization, design, implementation, and utility of social intervention programs”

(Rossi and Freeman, 1993 as quoted in Nabatchi, 2012). In general, evaluation processes follow basic stages of preparation and design, implementation, and analysis and distribution of results. The box below, “Basic Steps of Program Evaluation”, provides more description of the steps in program evaluation.

Basic Steps of Program Evaluation	
1. Pre-Design Planning and Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine goals and objectives for the evaluation</li> <li>• Decide about issues of timing and expense</li> <li>• Select an evaluator(s)</li> <li>• Identify the audience(s) for the evaluation</li> </ul>
2. Evaluation Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine the focus of the evaluation in light of overall program design and operation</li> <li>• Develop appropriate research questions and measurable performance indicators based on program goals and objectives</li> <li>• Determine the appropriate evaluation design strategy</li> <li>• Determine how to collect data based on needs and availability</li> </ul>
3. Evaluation Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take steps necessary to collect high-quality data</li> <li>• Conduct data entry or otherwise store data for analysis</li> </ul>
4. Data Analysis and Interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct analysis of data and interpret results in a way that is appropriate for the overall evaluation design</li> </ul>
5. Writing and Distributing Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decide what results need to be communicated</li> <li>• Determine best methods for communicating results</li> <li>• Prepare results in appropriate format</li> <li>• Disseminate the results</li> </ul>

Source: Nabatchi (2012).

Evaluation, particularly in the context of a complex concept like participation, is challenging for several reasons: the variety of program designs; different goals and objectives for different methods of engaging citizens; and lack of consensus across the field for methods and measurement tools (Nabatchi, 2012). Nevertheless, evaluations are crucial for assessing the merit, success, or value of the activity or program at hand. Often, evaluations can produce benefits such as increased accountability; improved management and implementation; better fiscal responsibility, legality, and ethical behavior; and greater ownership of projects and their outcomes (Nabatchi, 2012).

When considering the evaluation of citizen participation, it is necessary to think through two distinct types of evaluation: process evaluation and impact evaluation. Process evaluation is concerned with assessing development, implementation, and output of the citizen participation activity. Process evaluations are conducted primarily as a means of improving internal management and operations, as well as to increase understanding on the relationship between inputs and outputs. For example an organization may wish to determine if their activity was designed to be inclusive of both genders. A process evaluation could be used to assess if gender equality and accessibility were accounted for in the activity’s design and implementation. As such, the likely audience for process evaluation is those that manage events or programs, as a means of gathering feedback on performance (Nabatchi, 2012).

Impact evaluation assesses the outcomes and results of a program or activity to determine whether intended goals and effects were achieved (Nabatchi, 2012). Thus, impact evaluations are targeted towards discovering and verifying the “extent to which observed changes in outcome indicators are due to program activities” (Nabatchi, 2012). For example, an organization may wish to determine if participants were motivated to complete an action after participating in the program or activity. An impact evaluation could be used to assess whether participants pursued an activity after the program, and the extent to which that action was inspired by the program in which they had participated. Impact evaluations are relevant for several audiences, including program managers, government officials, academics and researchers, and practitioners in the field (Nabatchi, 2012).

### *Evaluation Design*

Regardless of whether a process and/or and impact evaluation is selected, the overall evaluation design and methods should be driven by the kinds of data program managers, process conveners, and evaluators wish to collect (see box: “*Questions to Ask When Designing an Evaluation*”).

#### Questions to Ask When Designing an Evaluation

There are many questions that one should ask when designing an evaluation. These questions should be answered prior to beginning the process that the evaluator is seeking to understand. The list below is not exhaustive, but rather serves as a starting point for further inquiry.

*What am I trying to explain? What is the dependent variable?*  
*What are the possible causes? What are the likely independent variables?*  
*Which causes will I explore? What am I interested in evaluating?*  
*What possible mechanisms connect the presumed causes to the presumed effects?*  
*How can I explain what has happened? Are there any confounding variables?*  
*Are there alternative explanations? What is the scope?*  
*Over what time frame? Over what geographical area?*  
*How general is the participation exercise? What aspect of the topic interests me?*  
*How abstract are the concepts? What is the unit of analysis (i.e., organization, individual, county, etc.)?*

*Sources: de Vaus, David (2001), Thompson, Bruce (2003), Bamberger, Michael, Linda Mabry & Jim Rugh (2006), Butler-Kisber, Lynn (2010)*

Below are four major categories of evaluation design, adapted from *Research Design in Social Research* (de Vaus, 2001). This list is not exhaustive, but rather is representative of broadly used and highly popular evaluation designs.

**Experiment.** A controlled experiment is the gold standard of empirical research. When some of the strictures are relaxed an experiment can be described as quasi-controlled. Both controlled experiment and quasi-experiments require at a minimum:

- (1) One pre-intervention measure of the outcome variable;

- (2) Two groups: one group that is exposed to the intervention (treatment group) and one group that is not exposed to the intervention (control group);
- (3) Random allocation to the groups before the pre-test;
- (4) One intervention (treatment); and
- (5) One post-intervention measure on the outcome variable.

The experimental design does not lend itself well to public participation because it is sometimes difficult to have random assignment and it could sometimes be illegal to exclude citizens from the treatment group. There might be potential for the use of this in academic settings to model public participation; however, results from these experiments may not be externally valid, meaning the results of one participatory exercise or activity might not be generalizable to other relevant situations or contexts (see section on validity below).

**Case Study.** According to de Vaus (2001: 50), “Case study designs rely less on comparing cases than on exhaustive analysis of individual cases and then on comparing cases. A distinguishing characteristic of case studies is that contextual information is collected about a case so that we have a context within which to understand causal processes.” Case studies should be done in person, so that the evaluator can observe the intervention and participants first hand. Case studies have been used extensively in collecting data on public participation processes (for example, Fagotto and Fung, 2009). Providing digital access to these cases (for example as is currently being done by [www.participedia.net](http://www.participedia.net)) will be helpful in disseminating best practices regarding public participation. However, it is currently unclear whether digital tools can provide the level of detail needed to be more than a supplementary data collection mechanism for case studies.

**Longitudinal.** Longitudinal designs require at a minimum four things:

- (1) One group;
- (2) One pre-treatment measure of the variables of interest;
- (3) One intervention where everyone receives the treatment; and
- (4) One post-treatment measurement of the variables of interest.

This design lends itself well to public participation in that evaluators do not need to exclude participants from the intervention. Digital tools may enhance data collection for longitudinal studies because there is the potential to reach out to participants both before and after the event. This could help minimize any *Hawthorne effect*, which is any unwanted change in behavior or response due to participants knowing that they are being observed (Draper, 2010).

**Cross-Sectional.** Cross sectional design requires at least:

- (1) Existing variations in the independent variables in the sample;
- (2) One independent variable with at least two categories;
- (3) Data are collected at one point in time; and

(4) No random allocation to groups.

One of the most popular cross sectional methods is the survey, which can be done in person, by phone, and/or digitally. This design lends itself well to public participation because there is no random assignment of groups and the variables of interest are likely to have significant variation among participants.

### *Evaluation Methods*

Evaluation methods are distinct from evaluation design in that the methods represent the tools for data collection. Three commonly used methods are explored here, including: surveys, interviews, and observation. All of these methods can be used in the various evaluation designs outlined above.

In a survey, participants respond to a structured series of questions (Bryman, 1988). Often evaluators seek to survey either the entire population that took part in the participation activity or a reasonably sized sample of participants.

In contrast to surveys, interviews can be structured, where the evaluator asks a series of predetermined, fixed questions, or relatively unstructured, where the evaluator allows the interviewee to guide the course of the discussion (Bryman, 1988). In unstructured interviews, the evaluator still has predetermined questions, but often asks impromptu follow up questions or asks the interviewee for further explanation about responses.

Both surveys and interviews emphasize evaluator/participant interaction, but the final method, observation, eschews this dynamic by attempting to eliminate any direct interaction between these two different entities (Bryman, 1988). In observation, the researcher identifies patterns or trends among the units of analysis directly, rather than attempting to elicit information or knowledge from subjects.

This brief overview of methods is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather is intended to make the reader aware of some basic, specific requirements for creating a robust evaluation design. Different methods have unique concepts of validity, reliability, and accuracy; any tool that is designed will need to address these needs.

### *Validating Results*

Regardless of evaluation design, it is crucial that the results are valid, reliable, and accurate (see box *“Concepts of Validity”*). According to the American National Standards Institute, “Validity concerns the soundness and trustworthiness of the inferences that are made from the results of the information gathering process” (Thompson, 2003). An evaluation that produces invalid results and can be counterproductive by providing misleading information that can hinder good policy or program design.

It is important to be aware of three aspects of validity: internal validity, external validity, and measurement error (de Vaus, 2001 and Bryman, 1988). According to de Vaus

(2001: 28), “Internal validity is the extent to which the structure of a research design enables us to draw unambiguous conclusions from our results.” If an evaluation is not internally valid, then another reason besides the program or activity could be plausibly driving the observed results.

Concepts of Validity	
<b>Validity</b>	Refers to whether a study is able to scientifically answer the question it is intended to answer.
<b>Reliability</b>	Refers to the consistency of a measurement; reliability does not imply validity.
<b>Accuracy</b>	Refers to the closeness of a measurement to its true value; it is analogous to validity.
<b>Precision</b>	Refers to the consistency of a measurement and can be increased with larger sample sizes; it is analogous to reliability.
<b>Measurement Error</b>	Refers to factors that affect a measurement either randomly or systematically.

While internal validity is concerned with the coherence within an evaluation, external validity is concerned with an evaluation’s applicability to other similar situations. “External validity refers to the extent to which results from a study can be generalized beyond the particular study” (de Vaus, 2001: 28-29). An evaluation can be internally valid but so unique that its results are not useful for greater application or analysis in other contexts or situations.

A final threat to validity is measurement error. Measurement error deals with inaccurate, inconsistent, unreliable, or poorly designed measures of the variables used in the evaluation. If measurements are unreliable or invalid, “the results of the study that uses them might plausibly be attributed to poor measurement rather than telling us anything about social reality” (de Vaus, 2001). While most measurement error can be avoided through careful data collection and verification, it may be impossible to eliminate all forms of measurement error. If this is the case, any perceived measurement error should be acknowledged in the results. For further information on validity, see box “Additional Resources on Validity.”

Additional Resources on Validity
<p>One of the best ways to assure validity is to follow the guidelines outlined by professional evaluation organizations that do work related to your particular field of study. Example resources for public participation include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>The International Association for Public Participation</i> (<a href="http://www.iap2.org">www.iap2.org</a>)</li> <li><i>American Evaluation Association</i> (<a href="http://www.eval.org">www.eval.org</a>)</li> <li><i>Association for Conflict Resolution</i> (<a href="http://www.acrnet.org">www.acrnet.org</a>)</li> <li><i>International Association of Facilitators</i> (<a href="http://www.iaf-world.org">www.iaf-world.org</a>)</li> <li><i>International Observatory on Participatory Democracy</i> (<a href="http://www.oidp.net">www.oidp.net</a>)</li> </ul>

## Establishing Evaluation Criteria: Indicators and Metrics

Another key consideration in evaluation design is the development or selection of indicators and metrics by which success can be measured. Indicators capture evidence about the progress in achieving success, while metrics are units of measurement (UKCIP, 2012). Both indicators and metrics can be both qualitative and quantitative (see box “Types of Data”). The use of metrics allows for comparison across variations in program type, situational context, time, and scale.

Types of Data	
<b>Quantitative</b>	Quantitative data captures information in terms of quantity, and uses a range of numerical values.
<b>Qualitative</b>	Qualitative data describes information in terms of some quality or categorization; numerical values are not used.

### *Designing Relevant and Obtainable Metrics for Public Participation*

Selecting or creating metrics for evaluating public participation is complicated, not only because of the wide variations in participatory processes and programs, but also because “the lack of conceptual clarity around the scope and form of participation and its benefits has served to impede the development of more robust evaluation research designs” (Burton, 2009). Rather than attempt to qualify all metrics related to public participation, experts have provided case studies or analyses of specific types of participation to illustrate useful and attainable metrics that could be incorporated into a thorough and valid evaluation.

Further obstacles to effective evaluations stem from sources other than the large variety of program types, such as “1) the complexity and value-laden nature of public participation as a concept; 2) the absence of widely held criteria for judging its success and failure; 3) the lack of agreed-upon evaluation methods; and 4) the paucity of reliable measurement tools” (Assessing the Impacts, 2009).

To determine which metrics to include in an evaluation, evaluators should begin by posing research questions that they wish to answer by the program’s completion. Another way to establish metrics is to determine what program outcomes would mean the program was a success (see box: “Criteria for Evaluating Public Participation Exercises”).

Criteria for Evaluating Public Participation Exercises			
Acceptance criteria		Process criteria	
<b>Representativeness</b>	Participants should comprise a broadly representative sample of the affected population	<b>Resources</b>	Participants should have access to sufficient resources to enable them to fulfil effectively their roles as participants
<b>Independence</b>	The process should be	<b>Task definition</b>	Participatory tasks

	conducted in an independent and unbiased way		should be clearly defined
<b>Early involvement</b>	The public should be involved at the earliest possible stage in the process	<b>Decision structure</b>	The decision process should be clearly structured and be capable of being displayed clearly
<b>Influence</b>	The outcome of the exercise should have a genuine impact on policy	<b>Cost effectiveness</b>	The procedure in some sense should be cost effective
<b>Transparency</b>	The process should be sufficiently transparent so that the decision process is clear to all		
<i>Source: Burton (2009)</i>			

These approaches, while valuable, are limited in their ability to quantify measures of the program not originally purposed in the participation because they fail to measure new aspects that may have escaped or been overlooked by the event planners.

Another approach to creating relevant metrics is to identify the types of perceived benefits associated with the public participation, such as increased public empowerment, efficiency, and others (see box: *“The Benefits of Participation and How They Might be Measured”*; Burton, 2009).

<b>The Benefits of Participation and How They Might be Measured</b>	
<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Possible Measures</b>
<b>Developmental</b>	
<b>Improved self-esteem of participants</b>	Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale; Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory
<b>Increased knowledge and awareness of various aspects of civil and political life</b>	Understanding of civic and political institutions, structures and processes via survey or group discussion
<b>Increased awareness and understanding of own self-interests</b>	Questions to participants via self-completion survey or face to face interview
<b>An opportunity for expression of key elements of personal social identity (e.g., as socialist, conservative, feminist, internationalist, etc.)</b>	Questions to participants via self-completion survey or face to face interview
<b>Greater social citizenship</b>	Measures of social and political engagement (e.g., GHS indicators of civic engagement)
<b>Instrumental</b>	
<b>Managerial efficiency:</b>	
<b>Wider range of views brought to bear</b>	Records of participatory events, prior to any aggregation during census building.
<b>Provides useful reality check</b>	
<b>Political legitimacy</b>	Perceptions of decision-makers
<b>Specific decisions</b>	Survey measurement of views of political

<b>Decision-making system</b>	processes and systems of governance (e.g.,) trust
<b>Whole System Government</b>	in politicians and in politics
<i>Source: Burton (2009)</i>	

Other means of metric assessment can be arranged, particularly with forethought on behalf of practitioners. Such examples include implementation metrics in addition to design or outcome metrics (see box: “*Impact Evaluation Areas, Main Question, and Data Source*”).

Impact Evaluation Areas, Main Question, and Data Source		
Evaluation Area	Main Question	Data Sources
<i>Efficiency</i>		
<b>1. Cost to Agency</b>	What agency costs are associated with the participatory program (e.g., staff time, dollars, and other resources)?	Archival, Program Staff
<b>2. Time for Agency</b>	How much agency time was required for the participatory program (from planning and design to implementation and evaluation)?	Archival, Program Staff
<b>3. Cost to Participants</b>	What participant costs are associated with the program (e.g., child care, elder care, transportation, etc.)?	Participants
<b>4. Time for Participants</b>	How much time was required of participants in the program (including pre-and post-participation activities)?	Participants
<b>5. Participant Satisfaction</b>	How satisfied are participants with various aspects of the program?	Participants
<i>General Outcomes</i>		
<b>1. Benefits for Individuals</b>	What are the outcomes of the participation for individuals?	Participants
<b>2. Benefits for Community</b>	What are the outcomes of participation for relevant community(ies)?	Participants, Stakeholders, Program Staff
<b>3. Benefits for Community</b>	What are the outcomes of participation for the agency?	Participants, Stakeholders, Program Staff
<b>4. Benefits for Policy or Public Action</b>	What are the outcomes of participation for policy or public action?	Participants, Stakeholders, Program Staff
<b>Process-Specific Outcomes</b>	What are the outcomes specific to the goals and objectives of the participatory program?	All data sources possible depending on outcomes assessed
<b>Specific Program Features</b>	What unique features of the participatory program should be assessed?	All data sources possible depending on outcomes assessed
<b>Intervening Events</b>	What intervening events might have influenced the implementation and operation of the participatory program.	All data sources possible depending on outcomes assessed
<i>Source: Nabatchi (2012)</i>		

The reason for the participation activity also plays a key role in its effectiveness and the ability of an agency to effectively evaluate it. This makes metrics such as the aim, or goal

of the participation, the public credibility, the motivation (mandated, coupled with incentives, or voluntary), and timing important (EIPP, 2009).

In participation processes aimed at influencing governmental decision-making, valuable metrics have been identified, but vary in how they are measured. Some questions that are commonly asked include:

Do participants know why participation is taking place? Can the process claim some sort of representativeness, and is that clearly communicated? Does the choice of process match the question at hand and the intention of the process? Is every participant given the opportunity to speak and be heard? What are the costs and benefits for citizens (time and resources devoted in comparison to the perceived impact of the process) and for organisers? Was everything that had been promised realised? Did the process have an impact on the political system? What do citizens perceive of the process? Do they develop feelings of ownership for the process and the outcome? Does participation change people's attitude to democratic processes? What do they learn about policy-making? Do discussions within the participation inform wider public debate? Are politicians and public officials responsive? Are the outcomes of the participation reflected in their policy justifications and actions? What have the organisers of the participation learned about the methods they have used? (EIPP, 2009).

Other pieces of literature have also suggested that meeting certain prerequisites is essential for conducting a meaningful evaluation of any participation process, regardless of the approach of the practitioners or the aim of the program. Among these are that "the nature and distribution of the problem or issue are known; the targets of the programme are identified; and the intervention has been described in an impact model (i.e., a statement about the expected relationship between a programme or set of interventions and its goals and objectives)" (Thurston and Potvin, 2003).

## Using Digital Tools to Conduct Evaluations

### *Digital Tools*

In this report, digital tools refer to any data collection method that uses internet, mobile phone, or other remote technologies to enhance the evaluation process.

### *Linking Digital Tools with Evaluation of Citizen Participation*

Digital tools can allow for data collection, as well as either descriptive or explanatory research (de Vaus, 2001). While some websites focus on citizen participation and engagement, such as the Austrian Ministry of Environment ([www.partizipation.at](http://www.partizipation.at)) and INVOLVE ([www.involve.org.uk](http://www.involve.org.uk)), these tend to focus on spreading the virtues of and knowledge about public participation to NGOs and government managers. Very few

focus specifically on the evaluation of participation programs. Examples include Ushahidi ([www.ushahidi.org](http://www.ushahidi.org)) and Participedia ([www.participedia.net](http://www.participedia.net)), which deal with public participation quantitatively (with large amounts of data) and qualitatively (with case studies).

In some countries, technology and online platforms have been used to design, and occasionally evaluate public participation. Among these tools is a growing roster of online toolkits and platforms that are becoming increasingly widespread and sophisticated, such as the Austrian Ministry of Environment ([www.partizipation.at](http://www.partizipation.at)), the Toolkit for Citizen Participation ([www.toolkitparticipation.nl](http://www.toolkitparticipation.nl)), the Pan European eParticipation Network ([www.pep-net.eu](http://www.pep-net.eu)), the eParticipation Network of Excellence ([www.demo-net.org](http://www.demo-net.org)), People and Participation ([www.peopleandparticipation.net](http://www.peopleandparticipation.net)), and many others.

However, scholars seem skeptical that the digital evaluation tools will reach the level of customization necessary for effective evaluation design in the near future. Therefore, it is crucial that designers of current and future online tools are explicit about the intended purpose of the tools that they design (Bamberger, 2006).

### III. INTERVIEWS

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As a next step in the assessment of the feasibility for an online platform for evaluating public participation, an interview protocol was designed and interviews were conducted with a number of experts in the field. These experts included technologists, academic researchers, and participation practitioners. The purpose of the interviews was to:

- 1) Assess the feasibility of measuring public participation;
- 2) Assess the feasibility of using online tools to gather data related to public participation;
- 3) Identify current shortfalls associated with evaluating public participation;
- 4) Discover which measures would be most valuable and important to include in the proposed online platform; and
- 5) Assess expert perceptions about the potential benefits of digital evaluation tools.

Over the course of two weeks, 22 interviews were carried out in person, via phone, and through email. This section of the report outlines in broad detail the general types of responses received during the interview process. The interview protocol is available in its entirety in Appendix B.

#### Questions for All Respondents

The interview protocol began with standard interview questions for all respondents.

#### *When measuring public participation, what kinds of data should be gathered? Qualitative? Quantitative?*

Overall, respondents emphasized that both quantitative and qualitative data could be collected on a variety of important subjects, including:

- **Inputs.** Respondents were interested in issues related to accessibility of activity, as well as costs in regards to the time, money, and personnel resources that are required to conduct a given participatory activity.
- **Outputs.** Respondents expressed a desire to know what the participants, their community, and policy makers thought of the activity, as well as the impact of the activity on policy.
- **Participants.** Respondents further emphasized that gathering data on participants was critical, both in terms of who the participants are, as well as their perceptions of the activity.
- **Processes.** Respondents focused on data collection around effectiveness and efficiency of processes.

*How could you envision using this kind of data? Is there anything in particular that would help you in developing or using evaluations of public participation that should be included?*

With respect to using the data, respondents talked about both hypothetical uses and current practices.

Hypothetical uses attempted to get at conceptual issues, such as the legitimacy or quality of a deliberative process. Other hypotheticals addressed trying to understand the effectiveness of a given process - what was its impact on policy or on participant's attitudes. One respondent saw the potential to use this data to proactively address emerging problems. Another saw the data as an opportunity to evaluate and improve participation processes. Yet another saw the potential to use analytic software to extract trends from qualitative responses.

Current practices included collecting quantitative and qualitative demographic and other information on participants, and information regarding the nature of the process. For example, one organization's goal was to communicate data about the participation process to the wider community.

In regard to the second part of the question, the most common theme was the need to collect more information to evaluate public participation. Some of the specific areas that were referred to by more than one interviewee include: information on participants, context, and goals. Interviewees also suggested including benchmark statistics, which they describe as comparative statistics or metrics. Several respondents indicated that participants sometimes lack interest in completing evaluations.

*When designing an online platform to collect data, what key issues should be considered?*

Respondents identified several areas of concern, but also highlighted the potential benefits that digital tools can provide. The primary area of concern respondents emphasized was the importance of confidentiality, as the data collected could potentially be directly linked to a known individual. To address this concern, an often mentioned solution was the strict enforcement of anonymity on the reporting process. Further concerns around data security were also expressed, as respondents stated the need for sound security protocols around the storage of the data collected. Suggestions included limiting access, password protecting data, and deleting data after analysis. Additional worries emerged in the form of data ownership, proprietary assurance, and data security.

A minority of respondents raised issues related to the logistics of an online platform, including the design of the platform itself.

One respondent focused on the benefits an online tool could bring to the evaluation process, noting that digital tools can lower the cost of collecting data by reducing the time it takes respondents to complete an evaluation, the cost of contacting participants, money needed to reach out to potential participants. Additionally, this respondent focused on the use of analytical software to mine the raw data collected from a digital tool.

*Are you aware of online tools, platforms, or initiatives that are used to gather and/or evaluate data on participatory engagement?*

The majority of respondents said they were not aware of an online tool or platform that would both gather and evaluate data. However, many of them did mention existing online tools that could be used for data collection, such as Survey Monkey ([www.SurveyMonkey.com](http://www.SurveyMonkey.com)) or Google Forms ([www.google.com/google-d-s/forms/](http://www.google.com/google-d-s/forms/)). A respondent further noted that Google+ Hangouts ([www.google.com/+learnmore/hangouts/](http://www.google.com/+learnmore/hangouts/)) or Skype ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)) could be used to conduct individual or group interviews as a means of gathering qualitative data. However, none of these platforms or tools is specifically designed for evaluation.

Several respondents further mentioned participatory organizations that have an online presence or are designed for online participation, such as Participedia ([www.participedia.net](http://www.participedia.net)), the Participatory Governance (PG) Exchange by CIVICUS (<http://pgexchange.org/>), AmericaSpeaks ([www.americaspeaks.org](http://www.americaspeaks.org)), the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation ([www.ncdd.org](http://www.ncdd.org)), ChangeByUs ([www.changeby.us](http://www.changeby.us)), Community Planet (<http://www.communityplanet.org/index.php>), MindMixer (<http://www.mindmixer.com/>), and the Code for America Engagement Commons (<http://codeforamerica.org/>). However, the majority noted that they do not believe these sites to have evaluation tools as part of their online presence.

## Questions for Specific Groups

At this point in the interviews, the protocol diverged into two separate tracks, with questions more specifically applicable to the respondent's field of work as a practitioner or researcher. At the interviewer's discretion, questions from the opposite track may have been asked. The section below captures the responses from practitioner-specific questions.

## Questions for Practitioners

*What is the objective of the public participation initiatives that your organization undertakes?*

Most respondents noted that deepening the relationship between citizens and government and increasing citizen engagement were the primary objectives of their participatory initiatives. Some approached this question from the government's perspective, analyzing and facilitating government's approaches to interacting and

engaging with the public. Others focused on analyzing and engaging from the citizen's point of view, encouraging and facilitating interest among the public to increase interaction with government and policy decision making. A few of the respondents' organizations facilitated direct interactions between citizens and government, either in person or online.

*Currently, does your organization evaluate its public participation initiatives? If so, what information do you use and how do you collect it?*

Many of the respondents' organizations have attempted to evaluate participation activities. These evaluations took the form of looking into the demographics of its participants, simple pre-test and/or post-test measures of participant attitudes, or in-depth evaluations by external consultants. A recurring theme noted by practitioners is the evaluation of who attended participatory programs, and how representative the participants were of the targeted population.

*What do you think are the greatest obstacles to evaluating citizen participation?*

The number one response among respondents was the lack of time and money. Lack of expertise, ambiguity about the benefits of evaluation, and having little access to tools for evaluation were also common themes. Practitioners also noted the challenges of obtaining a representative sample of participants and determining who needed to be present at the participatory activity for the results to be externally valid.

Respondents also cited a fear of lack luster appearance and commitment from participants, as well as difficulty in remaining transparent about the evaluation without disrupting the delicate dynamic of the program. Difficulty in obtaining meaningful measures was also cited, along with the challenge of identifying causation, linking program inputs to outcomes, and measuring long term or intangible changes for example in participants' attitudes and civic dispositions.

*Is an online/digital/mobile platform a feasible way to collect data related to your public participation work?*

Respondents were unified in their agreement that an online tool would be significantly valuable in evaluation; however, they noted several feasibility challenges. Common themes related to feasibility include: troubles dealing with self-selection; accessibility; ease of use; confidentiality for practitioners and participants; having a limited audience of few savvy individuals; difficulty in communicating and marketing the tool well enough to achieve critical mass; time or money costs associated with the tool; and a lack of defined benefit of evaluations among relevant organizations (why do it?). Many respondents also emphasized the need to keep a tool simple and flexible in its operation. The tool was identified as having the potential to save huge amounts of time, but would be limited in the kind of information that it could help with (for example, it may be limited in generating qualitative responses). Most respondents also emphasized the need to couple such a platform with a toolkit on more robust evaluation techniques

so that evaluations did not become wholly reliant on any online tool. There was also a recurring theme that the tool should be able to account for context, as well as data taken from questions or observations.

## Questions for Researchers

The section below captures the responses from researcher-specific questions. In this report, “researchers” typically refers to academics in various fields such as political science, public administration, and communications, among others.

*What are the metrics you currently collect and which ones would like to see when evaluating citizen participation? Would a pre-test, post-test, or follow-up measure be possible to obtain in your type of public participation?*

All respondents mentioned the importance of having both quantitative and qualitative metrics, but they also acknowledged the need to tailor the metrics to each participation activity. Likewise, all recognized the benefits of assessing participants’ attitudes and knowledge before and after the engagement process. Two respondents further suggested that advanced evaluation techniques, such as regression analysis, could also be used. The specific metrics suggested are described further in the next section.

One respondent argued it was important to assess whether the participation activities are used by the community, since simply having the channels for participation does not ensure that citizens are actually using them. Similarly, it would be important to assess whether governments are using the information obtained from citizen engagement initiatives. Another respondent focused on community planning, noting that public participation information is used in technical reports that justify community planning activities.

*Please describe the processes, activities, events, etc. you are interested in evaluating.*

Each respondent argued that their evaluation highly depends on the objective(s) of the activity. Among the topics mentioned as being of interest are public involvement in electoral reform, mapping projects, collaboration between citizens and governments through websites, and collective action to improve communities.

Despite differences in the type of projects the researchers work on, all noted that they seek to learn what kind of public participation works best under given circumstances.

*Are there any metrics that you are currently incapable of collecting because of shortfalls in available technology? If so, what are they?*

Respondents identified several metrics that cannot be collected due to technology limitations. However, upon further inspection, the problem does not seem to be limited technology, but rather difficulty in determining correlation and causality between participation and outcomes, as well as the challenges of measuring more normative

issues, such as the legitimacy of the process, the visibility of the issues dealt with in the participation exercise, the efficiency in the decision making processes, and the tracking of social outcomes produced by the process, such as an increased access to public goods.

One researcher suggested that despite the shortfalls of current technology, it does provide some advantages that allow for data collection on levels that would be impossible without technology, such as access to larger populations and reduced or eliminated geographical or language barriers.

*Is an online/digital/mobile platform an appropriate tool for data collection related to public participation? If yes, what do you see as its strengths, weaknesses? If no, why not?*

The majority of respondents stated that an online platform would be an appropriate tool for data collection about participation activities. However, most also offered a caveat to their response, saying that the appropriateness would depend on the complexity, accessibility, and design of the online tool. A few respondents felt that they were unable to answer this directly, as the online tool had not yet been developed.

## IV. FEASIBILITY ANALYSIS

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This section further synthesizes the findings from the interviews and the literature review and provides commentary on the feasibility of using an online platform for evaluating public participation activities. In this section, feasibility is discussed in relation to opportunities and challenges identified for the platform, as well as detailed suggestions for technical and design considerations, including the selection of metrics.

### Opportunities

Overall, the findings highlighted several potential opportunities or benefits of an online platform designed to aid in the evaluation of public participation activities. These benefits include easing data collection, sharing, and analysis, increasing opportunities for or lowering the costs of data collection and storage, and expanding information available for decision makers.

#### *Increased opportunities for data collection, sharing, and analysis*

First and foremost, the interviewees emphasized that an online platform would have the potential to increase opportunities for data collection, sharing, and analysis. The experts hypothesized that the platform may be able to increase data collection, as the availability of digital tools could incentivize both conveners and participants to complete evaluations. Further, the online platform could be used to facilitate data sharing and expand analysis in the field by providing consistency in metrics and indicators.

#### *Lowered costs for data collection and storage*

It was further noted that the use of an online platform could lower the costs for data collection and/or storage, particularly if the platform was hosted by a third party. For conveners of public participation activities, free or low-cost online tools could reduce cost barriers that currently prevent them from evaluating their participatory activities.

#### *Benefits for policy makers*

Another valuable opportunity identified by the interviewees was the increased insight and information available to decision makers. With the online platform, a policy maker or community decision maker could better assess the validity and reliability of opinions and recommendations from public participation activities conducted in their district or jurisdiction.

### Challenges

However, both the literature review and expert input highlighted challenges to the adoption and use of the online platform, primarily around user capacity and interest.

### *Assessing User Capacity*

First, the issue of user capacity to adopt and use the technology will be critical to the platform's success. As was emphasized in the findings, conveners of public participation activities may be reluctant to use an online tool for evaluating their activities due to a lack of time and resources (both technological and monetary). Similarly, users of the online platform, whether participants or organizers, will have varying levels of access to, knowledge of, and familiarity with digital tools. This disparity may hinder their ability to interact with or use the online platform. These issues may have implications for the validity of evaluation results due to decreased adoption and self-selection.

A second issue of user capacity is the capacity of conveners or participants to effectively and accurately design evaluation activities. This technical capacity was identified as a key concern throughout expert interviews.

### *Generating and Sustaining User Interest*

Another key challenge will be to generate user interest in the platform itself. The tool will need to be advertised and promoted widely among the different audiences to introduce the platform and its capabilities, as well as to sustain use and adoption. Many may see the tool as duplicative, given the availability of free online survey and data collection websites.

Even more fundamentally, the findings emphasized that many conveners of public participation activities, particularly those in resource constrained environments, may be reluctant to engage in evaluation at all. The respondents highlighted a veritable disconnect between the national-level or academic interest in evaluation and local organizers of participation activities who see evaluation as an "add-on." This represents a critical challenge to adoption and use of an online platform, as the benefit of evaluation and data collection may not be widely known or recognized.

Finally, a key issue for adoption will be the use by the participants themselves. As was noted by several experts, participants are often reluctant to engage in evaluations, as they may see them as unnecessary or have misperceptions as to the reason for the evaluation. Again, the use of an online platform for evaluation may either increase or decrease a participant's likelihood of completing an evaluation.

### **Design and Technical Considerations**

Turning to the design and technical considerations, the findings suggested that an online platform has the potential to be more than a mere repository of information. Building off of the opportunities and challenges identified above, conveners of participation activities expressed interest in a tool that would allow for the comparison and identification of best practices, valuable metrics, comprehensive data analysis, and program impacts.

The large amount of diversity of participatory processes and programs is one of the sources of push back practitioners experience in evaluation, as it requires the capacity to both work with the sheer volume of information produced and design specific evaluation frameworks for each process or program. This stems from the fact that “too many organizers of public participation do not seem to use the tools that already exist to assist them in organizing public participation and choosing methods. The tools that are available are too little known or present large amounts of information in a manner that is only of limited accessibility. Existing tools need to be developed further so that organizers can more easily use them” (EIPP, 2009: 40).

### *Requested Features*

Under the premise that “the approach taken to evaluation in most empirical studies of consultation or participation methods involves documenting how a particular method was used, what results were obtained” (Abelson et al., 2003: 243), the technical feasibility of an online platform to evaluate citizen participation initiatives depends on the objectives of the evaluation. Defining what the objectives of the evaluation are will determine the information to be collected and later displayed to the users.

Despite the variety of participation processes and evaluation objectives, a key finding from the interviews and the literature review is that an online platform requires a common set of features regardless of the particular participation activity it evaluates. The common features identified by interviewees include:

- **Online and offline data integration.** Seamless integration of online and offline data from the participatory projects to the system; collecting information needs to be embedded in the participation initiatives so that surveys and follow-ups are carried out regularly and no information is lost in transferring it from offline to online.
- **User friendliness.** The platform should require none or minimal training for its use.
- **Filtering options.** The platform should include a control dashboard that provides the ability to filter data by interest, for example: by topic; by type of participation activity (method used in the participation exercise); by government level; and by location (could integrate with “public participatory” geographic information systems or an open map tool).
- **Data visualization tools.** To make information easily understandable, the platform and end analysis must be presented in a friendly format that allows users to complete their own analyses.
- **Geo-localization tools.** Unlike face-to-face evaluations, using a digital tool to evaluate public participation, allows to track the location of the participants using the geo-localization capabilities of the cell phones or computers used to access the platform. The information fed into the system, if desired, can then be mapped using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) or Open Map tools. The objective of *Public Participatory GIS* is to “enlarge the level of

citizens' involvement in decision-making and to improve access to relevant tools, data and information" (Steinmann 2005:25).

- **International comparisons.** Respondents deemed it important for an online evaluation platform to have the functionality needed to carry out international comparisons. While international comparisons are possible, differing international law and even state and local regulations, which use varying definitions of participation, make them complicated.

While no website currently provides tools to evaluate wide arrange of public participation initiatives, principles from other disciplines like management could help shed some light on how to design a platform that is useful for evaluating a wide arrange of public participation initiatives. For example, adapting a balanced scorecard system, which is a management system that aligns activities with the vision and mission of the organization, could provide a framework for participation conveners to decide what to measure and why. It could also give them options so they can create a custom dashboard that adjusts to their specific goals.

### *Technical Considerations*

Respondents highlighted several critical design limitations. The first and most important is the willingness and capacity to collect the required data to evaluate public participation activities. Additionally, public participation outcomes can manifest over the long term; thus, data collection and analysis could go beyond the duration of the participatory process itself. An online tool to evaluate public participation activities needs to be open to assessing long-term effects.

A second obstacle is related to data management and ownership. In terms of data management, defining how and who will feed data into the platform could cause work overload on already strained bureaucracies and NGOs. In terms of data ownership, the challenge emerges from the fact that different types of data used for the same evaluation could be gathered from different sources, making sharing a key issue – some might not want to “surrender” their information. All stakeholders need to buy into whatever data control, ownership, and management structures are implemented, otherwise meta-analyses of large participatory processes cannot be conducted. These concerns are summarized in the following questions, which many interviewees posed in their responses:

- (1) Who will own the data? Is it all public? Does it belong to the agency gathering the data? Does it belong to the people who submit it? Can third parties perform their own analysis of the data?
- (2) How long will the data be stored? This needs to be communicated up front for two reasons: 1) after the data is deleted, no further analysis or review of the raw data is possible, and 2) it gives the people to whom the data refers a sense of peace knowing that they are not going to have to worry about their data ad infinitum

- (3) What is the total universe of ways in which the data will be used? Will the data be used only for a single project, or kept to a single agency, or will it be used in other capacities? People have a right to know, and agencies should have the opportunity to serve constituents better through the judicious and appropriate use of data.

Financial resources are another possible obstacle to the feasibility of an online platform for evaluating of public participation activities. While a cost-benefit analysis is outside the scope of this study, it is germane to acknowledge that unless all software is open source and free, the initial expense of buying it or paying a fee every time someone uses any of its components could easily blow the budget of any organization – also, some software charge a per-user fee, thus the larger and more successful the online platform gets, the more expensive it would become to manage.

The balance between accessibility and usability is key for the success of an online platform for evaluating of public participation activities. Several respondents noted that it would be hard to develop a platform that is simple enough that everyone can use it, but comprehensive enough that it is actually useful. In addition, technologists and practitioners commonly mentioned that the platform should be designed to maximize the number users. From user friendliness to server hosting, from data access to data visualizations, interviewees expressed concern over technical issues that could negatively impact the added value of an online tool if not properly addressed from the beginning.

### *Suggested Metrics*

In almost all cases, respondents noted the need for metric selection to be carefully matched to the type, goal, design, and context of the participatory activity. Regardless of type, however, several common metrics were emphasized by a large portion of interviewees (see box below, “*Suggested Metrics for the Proposed Online Platform*”).

<b>Suggested Metrics for the Proposed Online Platform</b>		
<b>Process Evaluations</b>		
	<b>Qualitative</b>	<b>Quantitative</b>
	Was the process fair?	Demographic characteristics of participants.
	Did people feel as though they could be heard?	Number of participants.
	Was the process properly run?	Length of participation process.
	What were the goals of the process?	Number of issues discussed.
	Did the process meet the individual’s expectations?	Satisfaction of participants (before and after the event).
	How were the issues framed?	Attitude of participants (before and after the event).
	Whether participants were active in other	Timing of the participation activity in

	participatory events and to what extent.	terms of the policy process.
	Previous experience in civic engagement (first time participants or otherwise).	Number of participation processes the individual has attended.
	Types of issues discussed.	Voting information (active voters, registered voters, party affiliation).
<b>Impact Evaluations</b>		
	<b>Qualitative</b>	<b>Quantitative</b>
<b>Output/Input</b>	What was participants' perception of the likely impact on policy?	How many of the participants had been to similar participation activities prior to the program?
	What were the participant's motivations for coming to the program?	How many participants stayed for the duration of the program?
	Did participants change their attitudes?	How much did the participant's attitudes shift before and after the program (Likert scale)?
	Did participants learn anything?	Were participants satisfied with the process and its outcomes?
	Did participants understand the goals of the activity?	Did participants believe the activity was worthwhile?
	Were relevant actors missing?	How did participants arrive at the program?
<b>Outcome</b>	Were there any unforeseen consequences that were a direct result of the participation (i.e., groups being formed, palpable civic action etc.)?	
	Did participants end up attending another, similar participation activities within a certain time frame of the program being evaluated?	
	Did the participation process affect a policy decision?	
	How was the information generated by the participation process used by policy makers?	

## V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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### Conclusions

Through the completion of a literature review and interviews with experts in the field, this report has assessed the feasibility of an online platform for the evaluation of public participation activities.

The analysis of the 22 interviews identified the needs, benefits, and potential shortcomings of an online platform to evaluate citizen participation.

Through the interviews, practitioners and researchers highlighted the barriers that to evaluating public participation processes. The primary barrier is a lack of capacity for data collection and analyses. Also, a lack of standards with respect to the information that they collect is a hindrance to valid evaluations; this in turn is exacerbated by a lack of sharing of information among these organizations.

Overcoming these barriers would allow practitioners and researchers the ability to compare among projects. Improved data collection would greatly increase the validity and statistical significance of the results obtained. An online platform to evaluate public participation can provide benefits to all the involved parties by namely lowering the costs of data collection and data sharing by expanding the pool of potential participants.

Despite the consensus on the need of such a platform and its potential benefits, some obstacles need to be overcome before a digital tool can provide value as an evaluation mechanism for public participation processes. Evaluation is inherently a difficult endeavor. Although digital tools can be useful aids, a poorly designed evaluation even with the best tool will not yield valid and meaningful results. Digital tools can help overcome some of the inherent difficulties of evaluation, but they are not a silver bullet. Moreover, fixating on digital tools can distract from conducting high quality evaluation.

A good tool for digital evaluation begins with identifying the stakeholder's needs, creating a solid research design, and knowing the various audiences who will be utilizing the evaluation. An online platform has the potential to greatly enhance these steps, and this feasibility study provides a starting point for those who want to design tools for evaluation of citizen participation. We conclude with some recommendations for pursuing this work.

### Recommendations

The recommendations below are geared toward the future development of the proposed online platform for evaluating public participation processes. The first set of recommendations deals with issues relevant to the technical design of the platform. The

second and third set of recommendations respectively deal with its use by practitioners and researchers.

### *Recommendations for Technical Design*

As the design of the online platform is considered, the host organization developing the platform should:

- Consider developing the online platform as an extension of a pre-existing website already frequented by conveners of public participation activities. Suggestions include umbrella organizations such as the DDC, NCDD, or associations of government decision makers.
- Establish a network of participant organizations. Securing buy-in from the beginning, even if only from a small number of organizations, is critical for launching the platform, enticing others to use it, and developing a critical mass of users that would allow comparisons across projects and provide statistical significance.
- Determine data ownership and develop privacy controls.
- Identify the unique abilities of the online platform as opposed to pre-existing, free online tools.
- Define a mechanism to systematically disseminate the results of the evaluations.

### *Recommendations for Users (Practitioners)*

- Build partnerships with academics and technologists to identify relevant metrics during the program design and before its implementation.
- Build organizational capacity and desire to conduct off-line evaluations.

### *Recommendations for Users (Researchers)*

- Researchers should play an integral role in the design of the online platform by helping to determine the metrics to be collected, particularly those indicators needed for meta-analyses which could be beyond the interest of participation conveners or public officials.
- Help define empirically robust measurements of concepts of interest where none currently exist, and further refine the concepts which are currently recognized, for example, metrics of success, quality of the deliberation or policy attitudes, among others.
- Track how the evaluations facilitated by this platform are used (either as input in decision making processes or as providing legitimacy to decisions already made).

## APPENDICES

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## B. Interview Protocol

### *Overview*

This interview protocol was designed inform a research initiative exploring the possibilities for an online assessment platform for public participation. The platform would facilitate data gathering from public employees, neighborhood leaders, elected officials, and others who convene citizen involvement efforts - as well as the participants themselves. Ideally, the online platform would allow all kinds of users to gather, analyze, and report on feedback related to citizen satisfaction with public meetings and other activities.

The purpose of this interview is to:

- 1) Assess the feasibility of measuring public participation;
- 2) Assess the feasibility of using online tools to gather data related to public participation;
- 3) Identify current shortfalls associated with evaluating public participation;
- 4) Discover which measures would be most valuable and important to include in the proposed online platform; and
- 5) Assess expert perceptions regarding the potential benefits of digital tools.

Interviews are to be conducted with technologists, academic researchers, experts in online engagement, and other participation practitioners. Responses received as part of the interview process will be used to develop a set of recommendations about what kinds of data should be gathered, which of these kinds of data could be effectively gathered through an online platform, and potential next steps for developing such a platform.

### *Interview Questions*

The following data was collected for each respondent at the beginning of the interview:

1. Name of Interviewee / Name of Interviewer
2. Profession / Position
3. Date / Time of Interview
4. Recording? Y / N

#### **Questions for All Respondents:**

Q1) When measuring public participation, what kinds of data should be gathered? Qualitative? Quantitative?

Q2) How could you envision using this kind of data? Is there anything in particular that would help you in developing or using evaluations of public participation that should be included?

Q3) When designing an online platform to collect data, what key issues should be considered?

Q4) Are you aware of online tools, platforms, or initiatives that are used to gather and/or evaluate data on participatory engagement?

**Questions for Practitioners:**

Q5) What is the objective of the public participation initiatives that your organization undertakes?

Q6) Currently, does your organization evaluate its public participation initiatives? If so, what information do you use and how do you collect it?

Q7) What do you think are the greatest obstacles to evaluating citizen participation?

Q8) Is an online/digital/mobile platform a feasible way to collect data related to your public participation work?

**Questions for Researchers:**

Q5) What are the metrics you currently collect and which ones would like to see when evaluating citizen participation? Would a pre-test, post-test, or follow-up measure be possible to obtain in your type of public participation?

Q6) Please describe the processes, activities, events etc. you are interested in evaluating.

Q7) Are there any metrics that you are currently incapable of collecting because of shortfalls in available technology? If so, what are they?

Q8) Is an online/digital/mobile platform an appropriate tool for data collection related to public participation? If yes, what do you see as its strengths, weaknesses? If no, why not?

## C. Interviewees and Organizations

**Carolyn Abdullah**, Director of Community Assistance at Everyday Democracy. A national leader in the field of civic participation and community change, Everyday Democracy helps people of different backgrounds and views talk and work together to solve problems and create communities that work for everyone.

**Mary Lou Addor**, Organizational Development specialist and Interim Director, Natural Resources Leadership Institute. The Institute's mission is to educate and support North Carolinians committed to seeking consensus on issues affecting North Carolina's natural resources.

**Terry Amsler**, Public Engagement Program Director at the Institute for Local Government. The Institute for Local Government promotes good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities.

**Gadi Ben-Yehuda**, Social Media Director for the IBM Center for the Business of Government. The IBM Center for the Business of Government connects public management research with practice; it sponsors independent research and creates opportunities for dialogue on a broad range of public management topics.

**Ben Berkowitz**, CEO & Founder of SeeClickFix. SeeClickFix is a website in which citizens report neighborhood issues (from potholes to water leakages) and involve local authorities to solve them.

**Alissa Black**, Director of California Civic Innovation Project at New America Foundation. The New America Foundation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public policy institute that invests in new thinkers and new ideas to address the next generation of challenges facing the United States.

**Carrie Boron**, Knowledge Management Officer at Everyday Democracy. A national leader in the field of civic participation and community change, Everyday Democracy helps people of different backgrounds and views talk and work together to solve problems and create communities that work for everyone.

**Ann Mei Chang**, Senior Director for Emerging Markets at Google. Google is an American multinational corporation which provides Internet-related products and services, including Internet search, cloud computing, software and advertising technologies.

**Daniel Clark**, Program Director at AmericaSpeaks. AmericaSpeaks' mission is to reinvigorate American Democracy by engaging citizens in the public decision-making that most impacts their lives.

**Lance Cooper**, Director of Conflict Management Center (CMC), Syracuse University. The Conflict Management Center is a student-led, educational project of the Program for the Advancement of Research on Conflict and Collaboration for Syracuse University students interested in developing awareness of and the skills in conflict resolution.

**Sarah Eisele-Dyrli**, Research & Evaluation Officer, Everyday Democracy. Everyday Democracy helps people of different backgrounds and views talk and work together to solve problems and create communities that work for everyone.

**J. Ramon Gil-Garcia**, former Research Fellow at Center for Technology in Government, University at Albany, SUNY and current Associate Professor at CIDE (Mexico) where he works on public policy evaluation, e-government and information technologies and communication in government.

**John Gotze**, Partner and Co-Founder of EA Fellows; Associate Professor, Copenhagen Business School and IT University of Copenhagen. His work focuses is on enterprise architecture, standardization, , governance, digital leadership, strategic planning and communities.

**Eric Gordon**, Assistant Professor at Emerson College School of the Arts. Eric's work focuses on location-based media, mediated urbanism, and games for civic engagement. Eric also serves as the director of a new research lab called the Engagement Game Lab.

**Mark Headd**, Director of Government Relations at Code for America. Code for America provides fellowships and a startup accelerator for individuals interested in making governments work better through the use of the web.

**Sandy Heierbacher**, Director of the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD). NCDD is a network of over 1,600 contacts who bring people together across divides to discuss, decide, and take action together effectively on today's toughest issues. NCDD serves as a gathering place, a resource center, a news source, and a facilitative leader for this vital community of practice.

**Alison Kadlec**, Director of Public Engagement Programs at Public Agenda. Public Agenda is a public opinion research and public engagement organization that works to strengthen America's democracy capacity to tackle tough public policy issues.

**Amy Lee**, Program Officer & Media Director at Kettering Foundation. The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's research is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address common problems.

**Minch Lewis**, part-time Professor at Syracuse University and Owner of On-Info Serve. Mr. Lewis also served as an Onondaga County Legislator, and contributed both input based on his years as a policy maker and as a technologist.

**Greg Munno**, PhD. student in Mass Communications at S. I. Newhouse School of Public Communication at Syracuse University with a focus on civic engagement and strategic communication. Also co-founder of CNYSpeaks and formerly the Civic Engagement Editor at the Syracuse Post Standard.

**Peter Muhlberger**, Director of the Center of Communications Research at Texas Tech University. His research focuses on democratic deliberation, the online public sphere and new media, automated analysis of political text, ideology and public opinion.

**Meredith Perreault**, Project Scientists at Onondaga Environmental Institute (OEI). The purpose of the OEI is to advance environmental research, education, planning and restoration in Central New York. OEI seeks responsible stewardship of the local environs as a means to achieving the overall goal of sustainability.

**Alexandra Samuel**, Director of the Social and Interactive Media Center at Emily Carr University. The Social + Interactive Media Centre supports a wide range of applied social, interactive and design projects and it engages BC companies as collaborators in uncovering new ways to use social technologies and tackle interactive design challenges.

**Vito Sciscioli**, Executive Director (ret.), Syracuse 20/20 and Part-Time Professor, Syracuse University. Mr. Sciscioli spoke from his expertise as a policy maker and implementer.

**Pat Scully**, Director, Participedia and President, Clearview Consulting LLC. Clearview Consulting conducts public policy research and analysis, designs and leads public participation and engagement initiatives, develops and evaluates programs, and provides leadership and management support. Participedia is an online resource based on a crowd sourcing model that encourages researchers and practitioners to contribute articles that explain, discuss and assess issues on governance, public participation.

**David Stern**, Director of Online Engagement at AmericaSpeaks. AmericaSpeaks' mission is to reinvigorate American Democracy by engaging citizens in the public decision-making that most impacts their lives.

**Mark Warren**, Political Science Professor at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Warren's current research interests fall within the field of democratic theory, especially the new forms of citizen participation, new forms of democratic representation, the relationship between civil society and democratic governance, and the corruption of democratic relationships.