

CitizenLab's **Impact report** 2020

Measuring the impact of our
platforms for citizens and
city officials





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Introduction

CitizenLab saw the light in 2015. Since then, it's been our mission to strengthen local democracies by using citizen engagement to increase efficiency and legitimacy. In other words, we provide digital participation platforms to local governments to help them consult citizens, increase transparency in decision-making and gather actionable insights.

Our e-democracy platform **has supported +200 local governments and organisations in more than 15 countries** over these past years. This led to the **launch of 8,796 projects**, which enabled **732,327 citizens** to make their voices heard. And they've done so quite convincingly, sharing **134,239 ideas, 330,078 comments, and 4,222 proposals** on our platforms.

However impressive these numbers might sound, **they say very little about our impact.** The total number of projects or ideas doesn't tell us how this input has affected the public perception of government or improved citizens' lives. But that kind of impact is hard to measure. Priorities can shift, budgets can be cut, and change doesn't always have an immediate effect.

Despite the difficulties that come with measuring the impact of a tool like ours, taking regular measures is essential to understand its **potential long term effects.** We therefore reached out to citizens and local governments using our platforms to gauge whether they think communities are changing for the better, and where more efforts might be needed. The information we have gathered will inform strategic decisions, enabling us to help reinforce digital democracy at large.

CitizenLab's mission and **theory of change**

CitizenLab's core purpose is to strengthen local governments' democratic fabric by increasing their efficiency and legitimacy through citizen participation. To make sure this mission drives our everyday decisions, we've translated it into a theory of change.





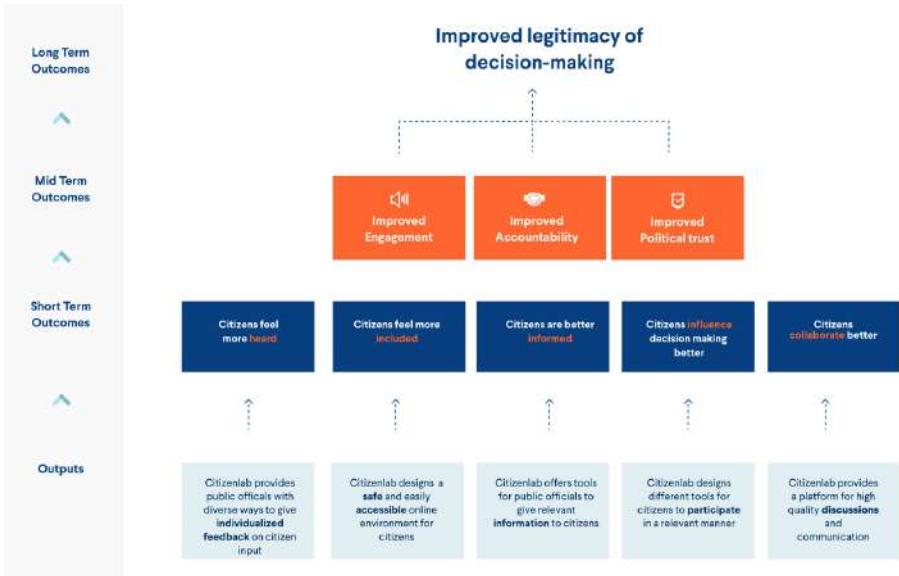
As we develop our product and adapt to the rapidly changing field of citizen engagement, we often have to make challenging decisions. Which features do we strive to perfect? Which audiences do we serve? And which services do we prioritize? When it comes to evaluating our impact, similar considerations pop up. Which metric outweighs the others? Is it the overall number of participants, the number of projects, or the proportion of contributions that receive feedback from elected officials?

Our theory of change helps us **determine precisely which aspects of democracy we can improve, which of our services contribute to that change, and who this serves**. In other words, it's a way for us to measure and track our impact over the years. Our primary goal is based on [the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 16.7](#): "*to ensure inclusive, participatory, representative and responsive decision-making*". According to these parameters, we've defined **4 key elements for improved decision-making**:

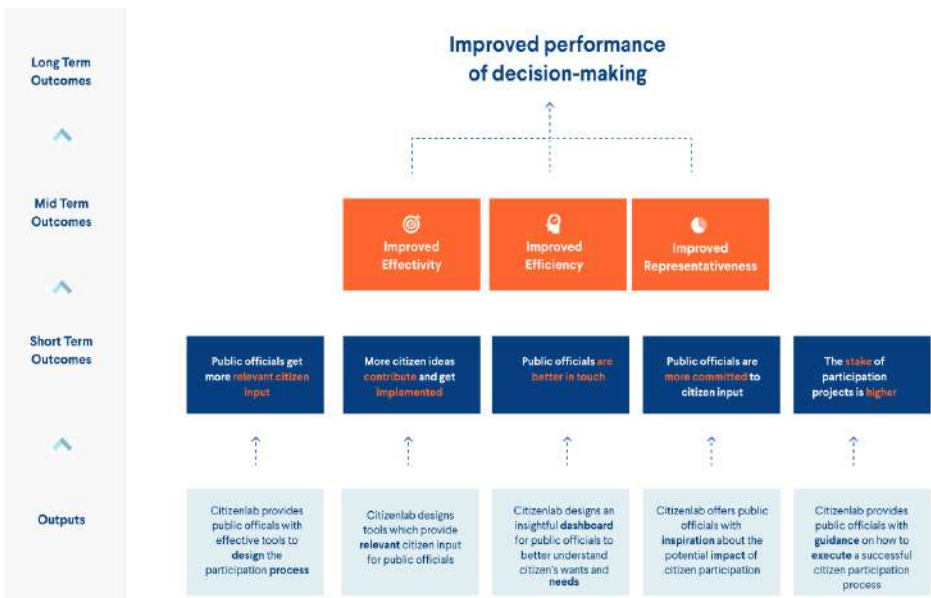
- **More participatory.** We not only involve more people in political decision-making, but also make their voices more impactful. We do so by offering constructive methods and tools and making relevant information more accessible to citizens.
- **More inclusive.** Our platform is designed as a safe space for citizens to express their opinions freely, and its user-friendliness makes people feel more confident about participating politically. Because we aim to develop an optimal environment for qualitative deliberation, citizens can collaborate more effectively.
- **More responsive.** We provide public officials with the necessary tools to give citizens valuable feedback, design the participatory process, and effectively manage the incoming ideas. All of this ensures that policies are more dynamic and aligned with the community's views.
- **More representative.** We provide public officials with an insightful dashboard that helps them get in touch with citizens' wants and needs. Our actionable reports enrich decision-making and make public officials more committed to citizen input. Through practical guidance, we raise the stakes of participation projects.



1. Theory of change - for citizens



2. Theory of change - for cities



Measuring **impact**: what we've learned

Citizen engagement impacts two distinct groups: **citizens**, who contribute to projects and experience potential change first-hand; **and cities or elected officials**, who run the consultations and see the impact citizen engagement can have on the administration. The outcomes and success metrics of engagement projects can vary for these two groups, which is why we ran two separate surveys for citizens and civil servants.

Having defined our two audiences, we set out to measure our impact using **surveys and qualitative interviews**. The surveys, which targeted our registered users and municipalities worldwide, were distributed **through email and pop-ups on the platforms**.





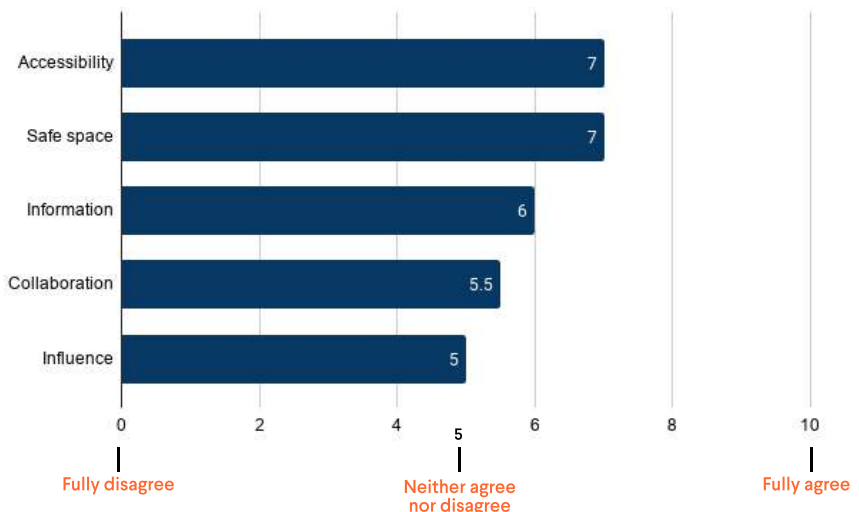
Measuring the impact of engagement for citizens

In under a month, we were able to gather **363 responses from platform users**. To properly compare active and inactive users, we analysed results from users with at least one action on the platform (a vote, comment, or idea) separately from users who had signed up but never actually participated. We asked them to **respond on a scale from 0–10**, with 0 being full disagreement, 5 a neutral position, and 10 full agreement.

In line with our theory of change, we measured five key elements:

- **Collaboration:** How do users feel they can collaborate on the platform?
- **Accessibility:** Do users consider our platform to be easy to use and accessible?
- **Safe space:** Do we provide a safe space for expressing opinions?
- **Information:** Do users feel more informed?
- **Influence:** How do users think they could better influence decision-making?

Survey results





What have we learned?

Our platforms are considered to be **trustworthy spaces for dialogue and information.**

Online platforms usually don't tend to inspire trust. [The Edelman Spring 2020 Trust barometer](#) shows that **only 45% of citizens consider social media a reliable source of information**, which places them below search engines (64%) and traditional media (69%). One of the challenges participation platforms face is steering clear of the failings of social media and online forums by **avoiding polarization of the debate**, and **ensuring every voice gets a say**.

91% of respondents agree or strongly agree that our platform is a "safe" and "accessible" space, rating each criterion 7 out of 10. These results stem from long-term work. Accessibility has been one of CitizenLab's long-standing priorities, and we aim to comply with the highest accessibility standards (we adhere to the WCAG AA guidance).

Accessibility is also a matter of wording and user experience. We have analyzed, user-tested, and optimized the platform to ensure easy navigation for all audiences, often reconsidering the design of landing pages or editing unclear wording.

Our survey also revealed that **65% of users agree the platform makes them feel better informed**. Information from the city (whether it's on a project level or a contribution level) has a prominent place on the platforms, and we encourage administrators to communicate as much and as frequently as possible.



However, citizens fail to see the **impact they're making.**

Despite identifying our platforms as relevant spaces for dialogue and information, it seems that citizens fail to see the impact of their contributions. The citizens we surveyed indicate **not having an opinion on how the platform enables them to influence decision-making.** They **neither agree nor disagree** that the platform helps them make an impact.

This last result ties in with the latest research on participation platforms' role in citizens' capacity to influence governmental decisions. Research states that although **participation platforms are on the rise across the world**, we can conclude that most of these initiatives are **top-down governmental projects with little to no real influence in the decision-making process.** It's not technology but political power that stands in the way of the democratic process. Moreover, these findings suggest that **merely giving citizens the technological tools to influence the political process is not enough.** A more involved approach is necessary to maximize potential political results.

There is room to grow **collaboration between users.**

Data from the surveys show that **59% of users agree our platforms facilitate collaboration between participants.** Collaborative and deliberative features are an essential item on our 2021 agenda. We're aware that online participation relies too often on individual acts such as voting, idea sharing, or survey submission. Our challenge will be to bring citizens together to **elaborate on each other's ideas in a collective debate, rather than sharing their individual opinions.** This kind of participation will help local governments move up on the ladder of participation and lead to more meaningful and in-depth conversations.



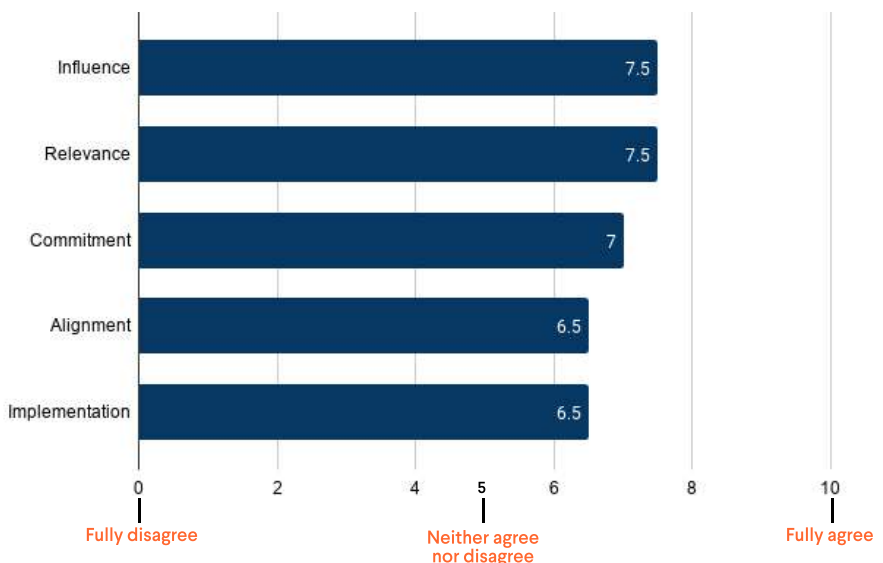
Measuring the impact of engagement for cities and civil servants

We launched a separate survey for civil servants and public officials, again **measuring the impact goals of the theory of change on a scale from 0–10**, with 0 being full disagreement, 5 a neutral position, and 10 full agreement. We measured 5 different aspects:

- **Influence:** To what extent can citizens influence policy?
- **Commitment:** How committed are public officials to citizen input?
- **Alignment:** How aligned are public officials with citizens' wants and needs?
- **Implementation:** How effectively are citizen ideas being implemented?
- **Relevance:** How effectively can public officials gather relevant input?

Moreover, we conducted **17 in-depth interviews with our clients** to gain more insight into their use of the platform and its impact on their community and administration.

Survey results





What have we learned?

Citizens have **more influence than they think**.

Our surveys showed **an interesting discrepancy between citizens' and city officials' perceptions of influence**. As mentioned in the previous section, citizens using the CitizenLab platform report that their contributions seemingly don't influence policy decisions. However, the second part of the survey shows that **78% of the civil servants using our platforms feel citizen input helps them inform decision-making**.

The interviewed cities reported that the platforms were **slowly changing policymakers' mindsets**, and that citizens' contributions aided the decision-making process by bringing much-needed insights. Some of our interviewees also indicated to be **willing to give citizens influence over a growing number of matters**, including sensitive topics, to break out of political stalemates.



Lokeren, Belgium.

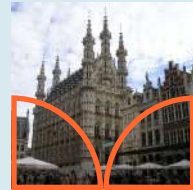
"When we asked for citizen proposals, **we received over 100+ propositions in a month**. We bundled them all and sent them to the municipality board, which will now proceed to formulate feedback. There's some very active involvement going on."

Contributions are **relevant and insightful**.

78% of surveyed municipalities reported feeling that **an online platform had made the collected contributions more relevant**. The structure a platform provides (by organizing projects into phases, giving instructions to users, etc.) **simplifies collecting and processing the input**. City officials also found that **the comments expressed genuine concerns and needs**, which could aid the decision-making process.

Interestingly, these interviews revealed that **the public nature of the contributions helped city officials feel more accountable**. Cities report that citizens and civil servants take the citizens' contributions more seriously because of the platform.

“Because we now have a complimentary online channel outside of our offline participation efforts, we can give more citizens a voice, because the platform appeals to a different type of audience. **The bigger picture is more representative**. Feedback no longer exclusively comes via email, which makes citizen input more relevant. The quality of the input is different.”



Leuven, Belgium

CitizenLab platforms help **policy-makers feel more connected** to their communities.

Over half of the surveyed cities reported that **public officials' commitment had grown since implementing the online consultation platform**. Interviews revealed that, because of the general trend towards more citizen participation and the investment made to work with Citizenlab, public officials became more supportive for participation projects.

“The commitment of public officials has definitely improved. I think that, if you have something written down publicly, it almost **feels like making a public commitment**.”



Nuuk, Greenland.

61% of the cities we interviewed also shared that, thanks to the platform, **public officials are more in touch with citizens' wants and needs**. They are not only more committed to the citizens' input but use the collected information to inform their decisions.



Lokeren, Belgium.

“Yes, public officials are more in touch now. The sheer fact that **a single civil servant can collect, summarize, and transfer the collected input** to the municipal authorities has made a change.”

It's not just about **the outcome**.

The initial survey result shows that, overall, city officials agree that citizens' contributions and ideas are efficiently being implemented. However, for many of the cities we spoke to, participation is about much more than concrete projects. City officials have reported that **citizen engagement is contributing to a new political vision** and is **changing attitudes within the administration**.

Of all civil servants who've organized a project on a CitizenLab platform this last year, **three-quarters indicate a more positive attitude** towards participation since these platforms launched. Our surveys and qualitative interviews have shown that our platforms have changed the attitudes of governments and civil servants alike.



Dendermonde, Belgium

“Participation projects have definitely become more important. Choosing CitizenLab as our digital platform to bundle citizen input **has led to a new political vision, which sees participation as a priority for the municipality.**”

“The way our colleagues view the potential of citizen participation has improved since Citizenlab. They see how the platform works and **understand that its functionalities and reach are quite extensive**. The number of colleagues working with the platform is growing, too.”



**Hollands Kroon,
Nederland**

Our digital platforms have **helped projects scale up and reach more citizens**, while the reporting features have made it **easier for teams to share results** and **highlight the value of participation**.

Lessons for 2021

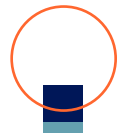


Our survey clearly shows that **citizens have more influence than they think**. In order to change their perception of the consultative process, cities must **improve the way they communicate** about the results of their consultation projects. The fact that citizens fail to see the impact of their efforts is a threat to future participation projects. In the long run, it could lead to disengagement or even mistrust.

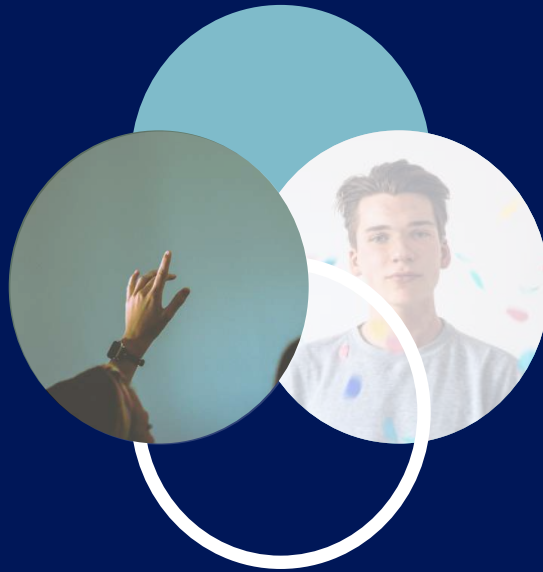
Local governments need to **communicate how they handle contributions** and how this input influences policy-makers. The decision-making process tends to be long and arduous. When change doesn't occur instantly, it's easy for citizens to feel that their ideas have been dismissed along the way. **Updates on the project's progress and feedback on citizens' contributions, no matter how small, nurtures this trust.**

Part of this responsibility lies with the government, but some of it is ours. **In 2021, we'll be working to develop two-way communications within the platform, ensuring that city officials have all the tools at their disposal to provide frequent updates and feedback.** Transparency is a crucial part of the platform, and we are working on several features to evolve in that direction.

Secondly, concrete outcomes aren't the only thing that matters to local governments. Although city officials overall agree that the projects are being efficiently implemented, most city officials we interviewed shared that **the main impact for them happened internally**. Focusing solely on concrete implementation of ideas would therefore be unfounded or ill-advised - **the platform is contributing to changing mentalities around citizen engagement, and bringing officials closer to their constituents' needs.**



This invisible, slower impact is in fact **linked to our core mission of improving decision making in local governments**. Citizens will only ever be able to see the impact of their contributions if mentalities have changed within governments, and if participation has become a central piece of the policy-making process.



Want to engage your community online? We're here to help!

CitizenLab has worked with **+200 local governments** on online citizen engagement projects. **The platform offers a mix of participation methods**, including an online workshop feature. Get in touch with us today to see the tool in action and discuss your next project with our participation experts!

[Schedule a free demo of the platform](#)



The digital democracy toolbox

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