

Citizen Engagement and Open Government Co-creation: The Cases of Brazil and the Dominican Republic

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Abstract

This paper describes and evaluates practical digital government initiatives of online deliberation and internet voting of the Open Government Partnership co-creation processes. In this inquiry, the case studies of e-participation and i-voting for open government policies in the Dominican Republic in 2014 and 2016 as well as in Brazil in 2016 and 2018 are compared. The objective of the study is to assess the impact of the digitally powered co-creation processes on open government in the Dominican Republic and Brazil regarding transparency, accountability, and participation. This inquiry applied manual qualitative content analysis of e-deliberation and i-voting tools, analysis of applied reports, and policy analysis of official documents. It was found that in the Dominican Republic and Brazil the digital co-creation process co-evolved together with the government-civil society collaboration over several policy-making cycles. Citizen e-crowdsourcing and i-voting at earlier stages elaborated at later in-person discussion and drafting by civil society and authorities in Brazil proved to be more empowering and efficient than just online voting for government-defined policy priorities in the Dominican Republic. Government approaches and practices of citizen engagement and process reporting affected the co-creation.

CCS Concepts

- Applied computing~Computers in other domains~Computing in government~Voting / election technologies
- Applied computing~Computers in other domains~Computing in government~E-government

Keywords

Citizen engagement, Co-creation, Open government, Brazil, Dominican Republic

1 Introduction

Back in 2011, in response to a popular call for greater civic participation in public affairs and in a search to make governments more transparent, responsive, accountable, and effective 78 countries signed the Open Government Declaration [20]. It acknowledged the value of public engagement in decision-making and policy formulation as well as committed to making policy formulation and decision-making more transparent, creating, and using channels to solicit public feedback, and deepening public participation in developing, monitoring, and evaluating government activities. As of early 2023, 73 countries and 106 local governments participated in the Open Government Partnership initiative (further-OGP) and thousands of civil society organizations (further-CSOs) have used the OGP platform to advance their issues and concerns resulting in over 4,000 policy commitments globally [16]. OGP-participating national governments commit to developing two-year national action plans (further-NAPs) co-creating them jointly with CSOs or lay citizens. NAPs contain nationwide reform programs of transparency, participation, and accountability augmented by technology and innovation, inscribed in milestones, and linked with responsible government ministries and partner CSOs.

Regarding digital government, this global initiative is notable since it explicitly encourages the use of new technologies in engaging citizens to co-create and implement open government policies. As the OGP National Handbook reads: "Governments embrace the importance of providing citizens with open access to technology, the role of new technologies in driving innovation, and the importance of increasing the capacity of citizens to use technology" [21]. To promote this, the initiative has accumulated 1,467 digital tools illustrated by 264 use cases [19]. Yet, these tools are mostly designed and utilized not for developing, but for implementing NAPs. Moreover, many of them (especially internet voting) lack usage analysis.

Therefore, this paper intends to examine several national instances of citizen e-engagement in the OGP co-creation process in greater detail. Aiming to explore potentially highly empowering e-participation processes, this inquiry targets the application of internet voting (further-i-voting) for OGP policy development. Here i-voting is understood as the use of computer and internet technologies at least for remote vote casting [14]. The rationale is threefold. First, i-voting might be capable of expanding inclusion to population groups in remote areas. Second, popular i-voting, even if designed consultative, may have the legitimate power of influencing the decision-making of public officials. Third, considering the high stakes of prioritizing draft policy commitments, it might be capable of generating a more intensive policy debate. This inquiry also analyzes other digital tools utilized for agenda setting and policy drafting within the same co-creation processes to discern possible connections between i-voting and other e-participation tools (e-deliberation, e-drafting, etc.) and see the broader picture of open government policy consultations.

To have a reasonable number of cases for comparison, this paper reviews four i-voting campaigns in two countries: in the Dominican Republic in 2014 and 2016 and in Brazil in 2016 and 2018. As a starting point, the relevant case is the use of i-voting for co-developing NAP in the Dominican Republic in 2014 [1]. This is the earliest documented application of i-voting for co-creating NAP among all OGP countries. It was repeated in 2016 [26]. Yet, this instance was introduced in a relatively small state. For a contrast sample, another case could be in a bigger country. Thereby, another point for comparison is the co-creation in Brazil that practiced i-voting to develop NAPs in 2016 [29] and 2018 [30]. These country cases and co-creation campaigns constitute the case study sample of this inquiry.

The next sections review literature on the OGP co-creation model, specify the case study methodology, examine the role of i-voting and e-deliberation in OGP co-creation in the two countries, compare the two cases, and provide a conclusion and discussion.

2 OGP Co-creation Model Literature Review

This paper applies the OGP framework of viewing open government. According to the OGP National Handbook, OGP national members should purposefully design the co-creation process so that it allows any interested stakeholders “to provide ideas and feedback, identify priorities, and propose commitments for the action plan” [21]. This guide also steers governments to intentionally seek input from underrepresented groups to define priorities via targeted awareness-raising and outreach to broaden the circle of engaged actors. In practice, the co-creation approach is promoted by OGP staff via guidelines, training, and events, as well as overseen by OGP’s Independent Reporting Mechanism (further-IRM) in its reports. NAP co-creation is supposed to be organized by a multistakeholder forum or platform (further-MSF) composed of government and civil society representatives and mandated to facilitate the development of NAPs, in particular by engaging non-government stakeholders. Yet, when MSF is not appointed, the national government is responsible for arranging the development of a NAP.

In general, NAP co-creation consists of four parts: planning, outreach, development, and feedback [21]. Awareness-raising activities open the way to input from the public. Afterward, the analysis of inputs, problem definition, solutions identification, commitments drafting, reasoned response, and finalization occurs [21]. It is worth noting that OGP recommends employing online tools for gathering initial public inputs (e-surveys) and for public comment on the first draft and revision of plans (e-consultations), while the interim analysis of ideas generated, identification of major themes, problem definition, solution identification, and prototyping as well as NAP finalization and submission to the government are advised to be performed offline by MSF together with experts and CSOs. This means that in this context other advanced digital solutions, such as e-deliberation, collaborative e-drafting, and i-voting are extra e-engagement formats. Indeed, as identified by an international survey of 29 OGP-participating countries, digital tools for the OGP NAP co-creation process were used scarcely: 21% used mobile contribution applications and only 4%-web discussion forums, online surveys, and consultation platforms [27].

Yet, e-deliberation can expand policy debate to a bigger audience outside offline workshops, collaborative e-drafting allows more persons to contribute to policy formulation, while public i-voting can enfranchise citizens with at least non-binding decision-making power. This approach of nudging governments to involve citizens in policymaking results in the overall empowerment of the public in the OGP-participating countries. It was discovered that over time, the percentage of OGP countries with a high level of public influence in designing NAPs (where MSFs provided feedback to participants on how their inputs had been considered) had increased more than twice: from 35% during 2013-2014 to 81% during 2018-2019 [11].

3 Case Study Methodology

With the objective to examine the role of e-participation formats, especially i-voting, in OGP co-creation in the Dominican Republic and Brazil, this inquiry applied several research methods. Specialized i-voting and e-deliberation tools (gobiernoabierto.do, Google Groups, and Google Forms in the Dominican Republic case as well as Participa.br and www.governoaberto.gov.br in the Brazilian case) were inspected using manual qualitative content analysis in the search of indications of government transparency, stakeholder deliberation, and i-voting impact on authorities, civil society, and their collaboration. Applied reports were inspected for evidence of e-deliberation and i-voting impact on open government. These publications included eight IRM reports written by independent researchers (four in Dominican Republic and four in Brazil), seven government-issued self-assessment reports (three in Dominican Republic and four in Brazil), and one government-issued report specifically on the co-creation process (in Brazil). Policy analysis of the co-creation process and reform commitments was applied to government- and MSF-issued official documentation. These were 10 government decrees adopting NAPs (five in Dominican Republic and five in Brazil) and nine information notes (in Brazil). A manual qualitative content analysis of official social media webpages of MSFs concerning the number of posts and the depth of related discussions was performed. One Twitter account (the only identified official social media covering OGP co-creation in the Dominican Republic) was reviewed.

4 I-voting and E-deliberation in OGP Co-creation

4.1 Open Government Co-creation in the Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic is a case of a rapid change in the scope of citizen engagement in open government policymaking. Since its start in OGP in 2011, the country has developed five NAPs and accomplished three of them [18]. While developing the first NAP in 2012, the country's government held no specific consultations [22]. But in 2014 the government conducted offline consultative meetings with authorities, academia, and civil society in the regions, created an online platform to receive citizen proposals, and set up a voting system to prioritize draft commitments [1]. This introduction of consultation in both offline and online forms indicated noteworthy progress in the Dominican Republic government's approach to co-creation. As reported by the government, in 2016 citizens were also able to use an online platform to make suggestions to the third NAP or vote on existing proposals [26].

The 2014 information campaign about co-creating the second NAP of the Dominican Republic was mostly conducted within a narrow civil society circle. As reported by an IRM researcher, the public co-creation was formally launched in February 2014 by the government and promoted via the Twitter account @GobAbierto_RD and the email account info@gobiernoabierto.do [1]. Indeed, the search for "tweets" from the @GobAbierto_RD account identified 52 co-creation-related "tweets" from January-August 2014 [13]. These were mostly announcements and reports of co-creation events. However, those "tweets" received few "likes" and "retweets", most-none at all. The Open Government Network (further-OGN) Google Group records revealed 74 email threads during February-December 2014 including 19 during February-March 2014 [12]. Most of them were informative emails from the Dirección General de Ética e Integridad Gubernamental (further-DIGEIG) officials, including invitations for a webinar and calls for contributions, while others contained discussions. Thereby, public informing was performed mostly via Twitter and the Google Groups email list, being insufficient for wide dissemination. An IRM researcher also noted the challenge of the 2014 OGP awareness campaign in the Dominican Republic [1].

The 2014 digital co-creation of the Dominican Republic's second NAP was performed using the gobiernoabierto.do website and Google Forms. IRM researcher found that in 2014 the portal gobiernoabierto.do allow a user to make proposals for the second OGP NAP or vote for an existing proposal [1]. The researcher further explained that the prioritization of commitments for the NAP was carried out in consultation with CSOs who voted via the OGN Google Group administered by the DIGEIG. The gobiernoabierto.do website itself after over eight years of co-creation campaign was inaccessible. Yet, an internet archive search indeed found a cached gobiernoabierto.do webpage that promoted transparent, collaborative, and participative governance [24]. Furthermore, the OGN Google Group listed an email from May 20, 2014, that called to learn more about OGP and presented some voting results [3]. The link in the abovementioned Google Group email led to a gobiernoabierto.do sub-webpage. Its content, recovered from the internet archive demonstrated that the sub-webpage had presented draft commitments with responsible agencies and had allowed a user either to vote for the available commitments or propose a new one via a Google Form [23]. This means that gobiernoabierto.do serves as a focal point for providing information, crowdsourcing ideas, and i-voting. Yet, in practice, the collection of ideas and i-voting were implemented using Google Forms. The OGN Google Group was a civil society discussion channel, but a wider deliberation was lacking.

The role of digital channels for citizen engagement in the 2014 OGP co-creation process in the Dominican Republic was ambivalent. As reported by an IRM researcher, the government received 60 proposals through the gobiernoabierto.do webpage and considered the commitments with the most votes [1]. He further elaborated that although some participants submitted new proposals, the majority voted for the commitments already made by the government. This signals that the design of conducting the i-voting in parallel with e-crowdsourcing nudged many website users to vote for the listed draft policies instead of suggesting new ones. Furthermore, the researcher mentioned the problem of the digital divide in the country and referred to an opinion poll conducted in September 2014 among 74 CSOs, which discovered that over 74% of organizations were unaware of the OGP initiative [1]. The cited survey also illuminated a set of respondent-voiced challenges, such as mistrust in the open government model of government transparency and accountability and the concern for the integration of the governing body of civil society organizations in the Dominican Republic. Overall, the challenges with the Dominican Republic's approach to the 2014 e-consultation and i-voting results were participation exclusiveness and results opacity linked with civil society distrust. Potentially, the public was able to contribute to open government policy making, but the capable and aware public circle was narrow. Moreover, it is unclear how many people voted, what was the resulting distribution of votes, and who made the final decision of transferring the i-voting results into the official NAP. Such insufficient inclusion, transparency, and accountability impelled civil society's critical perception of the Dominican Republic's open governance model.

The 2016 communication campaign in the Dominican Republic used similar channels as in 2014, with somewhat broader outreach, yet with similar results. According to an IRM researcher, the call to citizens and civil society was broad: invitations for public consultations via email, Twitter, and through the OGN Google Group of more than 300 members, many of whom are CSO members [10]. Indeed, a social media search identified 63 "tweets" during January-April 2016, yet with few interactions (up to four "likes" and up to four "retweets"), most with no interactions at all [13]. During January-April 2016, the OGN Google Group listed 19 OGP-related email threads, sharing open government information, announcing webinars, and inviting offline and online consultations [12]. The 2016 awareness-raising campaign had more "tweets", but fewer email threads. It does not provide evidence

of reaching out to numerous stakeholders. The 300 recipients of emails, most of whom were civic activists, indicate the communication focus on CSOs interested in OGP themes.

The format of digital engagement of the public in open government co-creation in the Dominican Republic in 2016 looked similar to the 2014 one. According to the government-issued assessment report, the consultation process was carried out during March-April 2016, with multiple channels (including social networks, emails, and an online consultation at the gobiernoabierto.do portal) used to generate greater citizen participation and collaboration [26]. The government noted that the portal gobiernoabierto.do provided general information on OGP and the government commitment, and also had an application allowing users to submit proposals for the third OGP NAP or vote for an existing proposal. An Internet archive of the website revealed a similar, yet visually slightly different structure of the online portal as it was in 2014 [25]. Presumably, the i-voting format remained the same. Online deliberation remained a challenge too. As reported by the IRM researcher, apart from digital communication channels, the government did not establish a permanent forum for dialogue [10].

The 2016 process of the digital co-creation of the third Dominican Republic NAP demonstrated limited results. Of all inputs collected via offline and online channels, few resulted in the NAP. The government reported that 272 proposals were reduced to 11 commitments [26]. One reason could be the irrelevance of most proposals. According to an IRM researcher, many proposals from the consultation process were not aligned with OGP themes [10]. Also, the researcher evaluated that the level of public influence on the development of the NAP reached the “consult” level, meaning that the public had the opportunity to perform contributions.

4.2 Open Government Co-creation in Brazil

Brazil experienced a gradual headway in the establishment of the collaborative and digital policymaking of OGP NAPs. Since co-founding the OGP initiative in 2011, the country has developed five NAPs and implemented four of them [17]. In 2011, the first NAP was drawn up by the government, and public consultation was limited to offline meetings with a group of CSOs from one region already working on open government issues [9]. In 2013, the development of the second NAP comprised wide in-person and online civil society consultations (online being a priority), but the last stage marked a disagreement between the government and many CSOs due to failed expectations and insufficient government explanation of the participation model and decision making for the final NAP draft, up to a diverging number of draft commitments reported by civil society and the government [28]. But during the 2016 co-creation of the third NAP, the government and CSOs co-led the development of the NAP through a collaborative process, where the public was able to prioritize themes through online polling and discuss proposals directly with the government at co-creation workshops [29]. The fourth NAP development was an iterative consultation process that maintained parity between the government and civil society and incorporated online consultations and voting for open government themes [30]. This indicates an evolution of civic engagement in open government co-creation in Brazil: from government-led and narrow in-person consultations to balanced government-civil society offline and online consultations.

The 2016 co-creation of Brazil’s third NAP was performed online at the agenda-setting stage. According to an IRM researcher, the civil society hosted a public consultation through the participa.br website, where the public suggested themes of importance, the Civil Society Working Group (further-CS-WG) structured the themes, and the public engaged in polling that determined five final civil society proposals [29]. The research also specified that a total of 678 online votes were received. The particular webpage of the reported i-voting was not found on the participa.br website [5]. Still, the abovementioned procedure and the number of votes were confirmed by a government self-assessment report, which clarified that the voting lasted for 14 days [6]. This reported information reflects a very grassroots and democratic design of the digitally enabled agenda setting for the third Brazilian NAP. Yet, the criteria and procedures of structuring themes as well as the process and detailed results of i-voting are underreported indicating a lack of transparency on this matter.

The digital format of the 2016 e-crowdsourcing and consultative i-voting for draft themes of Brazil’s third NAP had a positive impact on open government in the country. As found by the IRM researcher, the 10 themes (five from the government and five from civil society), together with the three structuring themes and an Open Parliament proposal, were used to ignite co-creation workshops [29]. The researcher further narrated that at the beginning of the process, the consultation methodology and rules were published online, later the government’s Executive Group of the CIGA (further-GE-CIGA) invitations and the civil society’s CS-WG email lists promoted civil society engagement attracting 105 attendees (48 of the government and 57 of civil society, including academia and business). As specified in the government self-assessment report, the 27 co-creation workshops were carried out jointly by the GE-CIGA and the CS-WG from April through October 2016 [6]. The content analysis of the government website revealed that the meeting photos and summaries were published online at the governoaberto.cgu.gov.br website [8]. As assessed by an IRM researcher, the use of participa.br and the civil society-led prioritization process was effective in expanding the diversity of organizations involved in OGP [29]. He further concluded that the level of public input into the development of Brazil’s third NAP reached the “collaborate” level, meaning that there was iterative dialogue and the public helped set the agenda. Of six possible levels, this is the second-highest possible.

In 2018, the development of the fourth NAP in Brazil resumed the co-creation model of the third NAP, but with greater transparency and reportedly wider outreach and participation rate. According to the governmental website, the elaboration of the fourth Brazilian NAP was defined by the GE-CIGA and the CS-WG and it overall replicated the methodology of the third NAP [4]. As identified by the IRM researcher, aiming to increase the outreach to civil society actors, the GE-CIGA and the CS-WG used multiple

means, including email lists, the Open Government website, the Comptroller-General's Office of the Union's institutional page, Facebook, and Twitter, resulting in an open and participative process [30]. A government report informed about the following online procedures and their outcomes: during the first phase (between April 4 through April 22, 2018) citizens submitted 92 thematic policy proposals via the www.governoaberto.cgu.gov.br website, then two government agencies and the CS-WG clustered the proposals into 29 specific thematic groups; during the second phase (April 27, 2018-May 6, 2018) these 29 thematic groups were put for multiple-choice online voting (any user identified by a tax ID could vote for up to five groups) at the www.governoaberto.cgu.gov.br website [7]. As further particularized by the government report, 2,002 votes were received, and based on them, the four top-rated topics were selected. The comprehensive information on NAP development published by the government reflects its effort to ensure transparency and accountability. Yet, this information was insufficient to compare the number of persons engaged in i-voting in 2016 and 2018.

The 2018 co-creation process in Brazil, augmented by digital means, empowered the civil society to influence the open government agenda, prioritize, and co-draft OGP policies reflected in the fourth NAP. According to the government, the most voted policies were discussed and fully formulated at co-creation workshops, adopted by the government, and thus became official government commitments number 8, 9, 10, and 11 in the final fourth NAP [15]. The document also reported that in total, 105 people, jointly approved by the GE-CIGA and the CS-WG, representing 88 institutions (39 CSOs, 39 federal public administration bodies, and 10 state and municipal public administration bodies) participated in the co-creation workshops. IRM report additionally clarified that the 22 workshops (two per each of draft 11 commitments) with an equal representation of government and civil society were held between May-August 2018 [30]. Furthermore, the level of public influence on the content of the fourth NAP remained at the high "collaborate" level. This evidence indicates a clear and direct impact of e-crowdsourcing and i-voting, strengthened by offline deliberation and policy drafting, on open government policies in Brazil. Besides, the publication of an exhaustive co-creation report with a description of the consultation procedure, the distribution of votes for each thematic group, the consultation outcome, and the rationale demonstrate solid government transparency and accountability on this issue.

5 Key Comparison of the Dominican Republic and Brazil cases

Both Dominican Republic and Brazil have revealed similar patterns of advancing from in-person, narrow, and government-led to hybrid online and offline, wide, and collaborative consultations for developing open government policies. Yet, they also demonstrated multiple differences. The outreach campaigns of the Dominican Republic government resulted in a more exclusive circle of civil society participants, while the Brazilian government engaged a wider range of stakeholders. The Dominican Republic's government insufficiently recorded and reported on the NAP development process leading to lower transparency, whereas Brazil's government documented and publicized the NAP drafting procedures resulting in greater public transparency. The Dominican Republic established e-consultations in earlier years and used simpler digital policy-making tools, while Brazil introduced online consultations later and applied more advanced policy-making e-instruments. Design-wise, Dominican Republic's i-voting was implemented at a later consultative decision-making stage of policy making leaving almost no space for discussion with civil society, while Brazilian e-crowdsourcing contributed to agenda setting and i-voting facilitated the prioritization of themes for further deliberation and drafting at the policy formulation stage. Overall, due to its design and delivery the Brazilian co-creation process was more participatory and impactful than the Dominican one.

6 Conclusion and Discussion

The study showed that government approaches and practices affect co-creation transparency, accountability, and participation. Conceptually, since this inquiry examined the impact of e-deliberation and i-voting on co-creation by citizens, CSOs, and government, it resonates with the Gov2.0 Cube model of the interactions between citizens, community, and government [2]. The principal difference is that this study focuses on transparency, participation, and accountability, while the Gov2.0 Cube concentrates on the exchange, additive, and synergy categories. As this depends on research optics, future studies may explore all these and other co-creation dimensions. Practically, the varying effects of digital instruments on open government are associated with the levels of public influence on NAP development. This study found that the Dominican Republic showed some disconnect between the civil society's inputs and the government's final policies versus the Brazilian case of a direct public influence on open government policymaking. These are linked to a broader Dominican Republic's government distancing and the Brazilian government's engaging co-creation approaches reflected in the "consult" versus "collaborate" levels of public influence respectively. This accords with the survey of 29 OGP-participating countries that revealed that a higher percentage (75%) of public officials in countries with higher levels of public influence on the co-creation process (compared to 50% in countries with lower levels of public influence) admitted that co-creation improved NAP content [27]. To achieve greater co-creation transparency, participation, and accountability, it is recommended to introduce advanced e-deliberation and i-voting tools, perform wider outreach, conduct online and offline consultations at the early stages of policymaking, as well as document and communicate results.

Acknowledgements

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. The author would like to express gratitude to anonymous reviewers whose feedback helped improve the paper.

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