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Digital participatory tools for urban experimentation and co-design: experiences from cities and Living Labs in Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Urban areas are expanding, yet many cities operate with limited citizen involvement, leading to misalignment between public needs and local projects. Participatory approaches offer ways to engage residents meaningfully, but their success depends on and under-investigated factors. Municipalities and Living Labs play a role in democracy, although digital participatory platforms remain implemented and explored.

The paper examines how Swiss municipalities adapt digital tools and identifies key enablers and barriers to their effective use. It investigates the role of local authorities in fostering community life, collaboration and co-creation. Current findings show that the effectiveness of digital participatory tools depends primarily on institutional contexts, governance cultures and available resources rather than on the technologies themselves.

Interviews reveal disparities in how participation is defined and implemented, limited knowledge transfer, persistent barriers such as administrative silos and unequal digital access. The research contributes to understanding digital participation and citizen-led innovation, compares existing tools, and supports their further dissemination.

MAIN CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

Urbanization is increasing worldwide, with more than half of the global population living in urban areas. Despite this trend, many municipalities still develop local projects with limited citizen involvement, resulting in solutions that may not reflect residents' needs and priorities. Digital participatory tools offer new opportunities to support citizen engagement, co-creation, and bottom-up innovation. However, the effectiveness of these tools remains underexplored, particularly within the context of Swiss municipalities and Urban Living Labs.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study aims to address the gaps associated with the adaptation of digital participatory tools in various contexts by analysing:

what lessons can be learned from the experiences of Swiss municipalities regarding the adaptation of digital participatory tools to improve citizen engagement in local projects? and what are the key factors for success and the obstacles to the use and adaptation of digital participatory tools at local authority level?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining four complementary methods:



Literature review to identify existing knowledge on participation, digital participatory tools, and local governance.



Benchmarking analysis of digital participatory platforms used in Switzerland and Europe.



Semi-structured interviews with representatives of Swiss municipalities and stakeholders involved in participatory processes.



Use-case analysis to document practical experiences and applications.

Qualitative interview data were analyzed using Atlas.ti through thematic coding, allowing the identification of recurring patterns, success factors, challenges, and governance models. Comparative analysis was then used to identify similarities, differences, and opportunities for knowledge transfer across municipalities.

RESULTS

The benchmarking of digital participatory platforms reveals a diverse landscape of tools with varying objectives and functionalities.

Most platforms primarily provide information, while only a limited number support idea submission, interaction between participants, or voting mechanisms.

The analysis of semi-structured interviews indicates that the adoption and effectiveness of digital participatory tools are strongly influenced by institutional contexts, governance cultures, and available resources.

Municipalities demonstrate different levels of maturity in participatory governance, ranging from strategic and integrated approaches to more ad hoc initiatives.

Key barriers identified include limited financial and human resources, administrative silos, dependence on political support, challenges in mobilizing citizens, and inequalities in digital access.

KEY FINDINGS

The success of digital participatory tools depends more on governance structures, participatory culture, and institutional capacity than on technology itself.

Most digital platforms remain focused on information and consultation rather than genuine co-creation and collaborative decision-making.

Digital participatory tools should be considered as components of broader socio-institutional ecosystems rather than as stand-alone technological solutions.

Significant differences exist among municipalities in the understanding and implementation of participation.

Resource constraints, organizational fragmentation, and digital inequalities remain major obstacles to effective participation.

Greater knowledge sharing and collaboration between municipalities could enhance the dissemination of successful participatory practices.

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