Engagement Technology For All

Best Practices for Using Technology in
Engaging Underrepresented Communities in Planning

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Contents

Introduction

Over the last decade, decision-makers of all sorts, from corporate to governmental, have been increasingly looking to technology to help them make better decisions. Both day-to-day operational decisions and long-term strategic decisions require information, and technology has been seen as a way to quickly and efficiently gather that information.

In the case of land use, transportation, and other community or urban planning decisions, technology has long been used to support decision-making. Typically, geographic information systems (GIS) or other technical methods for analyzing community form and function have helped decision-makers understand current conditions and model future options. In addition, technical tools have emerged to support the engagement of community members in decision-making processes more directly. Online surveys, mobile applications, interactive kiosks in public locations, and interactive public meetings have all changed how the public can (and expects to) interact with the decision-making processes in their communities.

OpenPlans, a non-profit focused on the intersection of planning, technology, and public engagement, has conducted a field scan of "civic technology" – tools used for service provision, civic engagement, and data analysis to inform decision making. They categorized civic technology into three groups:

» *Improving quality of and accountability in public service delivery* – Help city residents more effectively access and track responsiveness of public service delivery, facilitate resident engagement with government around service delivery issues, and streamline resident access to public services

» *Facilitating resident-driven improvements to neighborhood quality-of-life* – Enlist city residents to provide new data to support or inform government efforts, to organize community-based efforts based on that data, or to participate in the development of strategies and policies to address these issues more effectively, and

» *Deepening participation in public decision-making* – Developing more effective ways to collect meaningful resident input, especially from low-income people, and bring low- income people more deeply into public decision-making processes.[1]

This report focuses primarily on the third group, and explores ways in which technology has been used to engage typically un- or underrepresented groups in land use planning and decision-making processes. Low income people, as well as people of color, immigrants, people with limited English proficiency, and youth are often un- or underrepresented in these processes. Reasons for this lack of engagement, according to the scan, include limited city budgets and staff capacity, absence of awareness of opportunities to engage, limited language skills and reading comprehension, and previous negative experiences resulting in mistrust or hostility towards government. While technology is not a panacea for engaging these hard-to-reach populations,

1 - OpenPlans and Living Cities, 2012. Field Scan of Civic Technology.

it enhances the toolkit available to practitioners. The most effective outreach efforts typically combine high- and low-tech, online and face-to-face engagement techniques, drawing upon a suite of tools tailored to specific audiences and points in the decision-making process.

Here we discuss technical tools designed to provide people with opportunities to give input or feedback, and/or that make complex issues resonate with people's day-to-day concerns. We provide case studies of their development and application, and highlight key considerations for using these tools specifically to engage traditionally underrepresented groups.

Planning the Public Engagement Process

Before launching any public engagement process, it is important to have a good understanding of the stakeholders who will be impacted by or interested in the decision(s) under consideration. This understanding can be achieved by asking a number of questions, including (but not limited to):

- What is the geographic makeup of the area in question (e.g., What are the neighborhoods? Who are the large landowners or institutions? What are the physical and social boundaries?)
- What is the demographic makeup of the area (race, ethnicity, gender, age, household income, educational background, employment rates and sectors, etc.)?
- What have previous engagement efforts been like? What was successful? What was not successful?
- Who are the major connectors or influential people (business owners, church leaders, service providers, government representatives, elected officials, etc.)?
- Who has typically not participated in community events, plans, and decisions?
- Which outreach and engagement tools and methods will best resonate with and reach target populations?

Simple spreadsheets (see Appendix A, available at PlaceMatters.org, along with the full report) can provide the starting point for mapping out the geographic and demographic groups; organizations or individuals that represent or serve these groups; and specific contacts for conducting both baseline interviews and further outreach. Census data, combined with national research on topics such as mobile phone and internet use (e.g., from the Pew Research Center), can also shed light on the types of technologies that are most likely to reach target populations.

Social Network Analysis (SNA) is a more complex methodology for assessing existing networks. SNA first uses surveys to determine relationships among individuals and organizations. This information is then entered into analysis software, which maps the connections and conducts statistical analysis such as the density of connections. PlaceMatters has summarized a few of the

social network analysis tools (see Appendix B, available at PlaceMatters.org, along with the full report).

The benefit of SNA in the context of engagement is to better understand the networks that exist at the beginning of an engagement process. This understanding can help determine who the best "connectors" in a community are, and who might be most helpful in building trust and encouraging participation. In addition, SNA can be employed after an engagement or decision-making process to determine if changes in social networks have occurred. Improved community connection is frequently a benefit of engagement processes, but has generally been hard to measure. SNA can provide a method for doing so, although it does require survey responses both before and after a process.

Key considerations for using tools to plan for engagement of traditionally underrepresented groups:

» Conducting an initial assessment of stakeholders can be time consuming, but will help ensure that outreach efforts are effective at engaging the right people in the right ways.

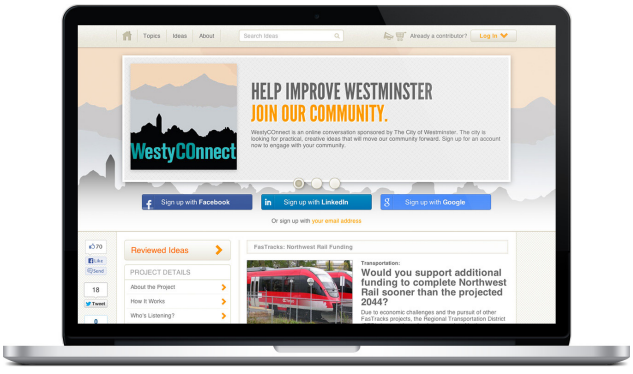
» While SNA can support a more sophisticated analysis of targeted stakeholder groups than simple spreadsheets, it requires the ability to use software tools, some of which are more user-friendly than others.

» Resources like PolicyLink's Community Engagement Guide for Sustainable Communities and the International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2's) Spectrum of Public Participation can also be useful at this stage for general engagement process planning.

» PlaceMatters provides direct assistance to communities at this stage of process planning as well.

Websites

The first technological tool that many planners rely upon for engagement is a website. While many planning processes create their own website, including forums and other means of interaction, there are also online tools that can create more specific interaction and engagement environments.



MindMixer, for example, is a widely adopted "ideation" platform, where users can submit ideas, and then support or comment on the ideas of others. Many of the projects that have used the tool are planning and design focused and MindMixer has continually added features to reflect this focus, including mapping of ideas. While users provide some information when they sign up, the lack of detail on user demographics makes it difficult to evaluate

whether tools like MindMixer have successfully engaged traditionally underrepresented groups.

Open Town Hall is another widely used online engagement tool for civic decision-making of many types. The tool allows users to provide direct comments to decision makers on a variety of topics, many of which are relevant to planning and land use. Peak Democracy, the tool's developer, has added a feature called "Demographic Insight" which allows the agency to easily see user demographics and sort input based on demographic criteria.

For example, Salt Lake City, is using the Open Town Hall tool (which they have branded as Open City Hall) and Demographic Insight feature to compare online users with the overall city population, and to target specific groups that may be lacking (e.g., religious groups other than Mormons). An additional benefit of Open Town Hall is that it meets various legal requirements in terms of free speech and records retention that most social media and other sites do not.

E-Democracy.org evaluated the use of online forums in predominantly low-income and immigrant neighborhoods in the Twin Cities and found the forums were well used by members of these groups as long as they trusted other individuals using the tool, and there was some culturally appropriate facilitation and "seeding" of the forum by E-Democracy.org staff.[2] Similarly, the Students Speak Out Minnesota GO! process successful engaged many youth via a CitiZing website, in part because there were seven student Commentators who were paid a small stipend to be a presence and encourage participation.[3]

A more detailed case study of the interactive website SpeakUpAustin is highlighted below.

Key considerations for using websites to engage traditionally underrepresented groups:

- Websites provide a convenient method for engaging residents, and it is increasingly easy to translate web content into users' native languages.
- Collecting basic demographic information about users of online tools can help practitioners and decision makers gauge the effectiveness of these tools at reaching target audiences and understand the appropriate role of online engagement in a larger engagement process.
- Personal invitations from trusted community members and seeding of online forums with culturally appropriate content can encourage participation of targeted groups.
- The most important factor in ensuring long-term success of an interactive website is responsiveness of agencies to the input gathered via this mechanism.

Case Study: SpeakUpAustin.org

SpeakUpAustin.org is an online portal created by Granicus for Austin area stakeholders to

2 - Inclusive Social Media Project Participatory Evaluation, E-Democracy.org, 2010.

3 - Students Speak Out Minnesota GO! Findings. Students Speak Out and the Citizens League. August, 2011.

engage with the city in various ways. Users can answer surveys, suggest ideas and "like" ideas suggested by other users. One significant challenge of an online ideation tool like SpeakUpAustin is that many suggestions are not under the city's purview or are unrealistic. The City has implemented several of the top ideas, however, and sees significant benefit in being able to point to this responsiveness as a success. The City has also used SpeakUpAustin to collect ideas during face-to-face meetings and, generally speaking, ideas and issues that arise out of these forums are more targeted and easily implemented compared to ideas submitted directly via the website.

SpeakUpAustin has 2,700 registered users, and many more have taken surveys on the site anonymously. The City invited a cross-section of users to participate in a deliberative forum on a plastic bag ban, an idea submitted on SepakUpAustin. Approximately one third of the forum participants were Hispanic, closely approximating the overall Austin population, which is 35% Hispanic. The forum was broadcast on local cable, and remote participants could send in questions and comments via instant message, as well as respond to text-message-based surveys questions.

The City was also able to engage students by bringing the tool into the University of Texas classroom, and found that students had a different perspective and made different suggestions. Austin's experience highlights the need for targeted outreach to specific audiences, and the benefits of combining online with face-to-face engagement methods.

Social Media

In addition to online tools and specific website frameworks, social media has been increasingly used in planning processes, particularly to engage younger audiences, and there is good reason for this trend. Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project conducted surveys on social media use in the spring of 2013 and reported:

- Of all online users, 72% use social networking sites and 18% use Twitter.
- Hispanic and Black users used social media slightly more than white (non-Hispanic) users.
- More women than men use social media sites (74% compared to 62%).
- Users 18-29 had the highest rate of social media use (89%), and use drops off with each higher age group to 43% of those 65+.
- Use does not vary significantly with household income, or education level.
- Rural use of social media is slightly, but not significantly lower then urban and suburban users.
- 40% of cell phone owners use a social networking site on their phone, and 28% do so on a typical day.

» African-Americans and Latinos are more likely than whites to want the government to post more information on social media.[4]

These statistics suggest that social media can be an effective method for conducting outreach and gathering input from a variety of demographic groups. While young people are still the heaviest users of social media, its use is increasing in all age groups over time. Many people are familiar with how these tools work, and increasingly expect agencies to provide information and interactive options via social media. Incorporating social media into engagement efforts therefore offers the benefit of "meeting people where they are."

In addition to Twitter and Facebook, the most widely used social media tools, there are some tools that integrate with existing social media to be more targeted in their scope. #VizLou (summarized as a case study below), for example, uses Twitter in addition to a web platform to guide a discussion about the future of Louisville, KY, that focuses on youth voices.

Key considerations for using social media to engage typically underrepresented groups:

» Many agencies or organizations that serve low income communities and communities of color use social media because they understand that many of their constituents use these tools on a daily or at least regular basis.

» Not everyone wants to use their social media accounts for civic purposes, however, and it can take time and effort to cultivate a user base.

» Social media is typically most effective at driving interest and engagement when topics are at a neighborhood level (for example, if photos of a neighborhood are posted and discussed by local users)

» As with interactive websites, responsiveness of the public agency is key to the successful use of social media for outreach and engagement. Public comments made via social media can be unrealistic, unrelated to the topic at hand, or misleading and can lead to unrealistic expectations on the part of other users. Responding quickly to questions and comments, and posing very specific questions can help avoid these problems.

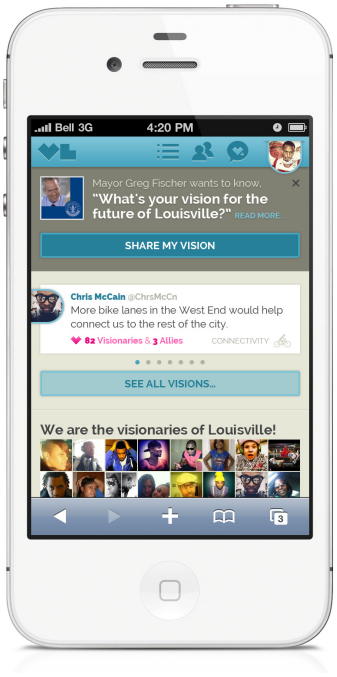
» It can be hard to evaluate the effectiveness of social media at reaching specific populations without collecting more information. Facebook does provide some information about the users that "like" or otherwise engage with sites, such as age, gender, and geographic location.

» Synthesizing input from social media can be also difficult, but this information can be particularly useful for early identification of emerging issues.

4 - Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Spring Tracking Survey, April 17-May19, 2013.

Case Study: #VizLou

#VizLou is a Twitter-based social media tool and website that invites youth ("Visionaries") in Louisville, KY, to engage around civic issues. #VizLou got its name from the the Vision Louisville process, which was the first use for the tool, and has also been taken up for related local discussions (e.g., this one by the local YMCA). The tool is also currently in testing in Fort Worth, Texas and Newark, New Jersey.



Users can sign into #VizLou via Twitter to provide ideas. Community leaders can become "Allies" who are posting inspirations and photos and then reading, supporting, and better defining vision elements in the Twitter feed and on the website. "Focus teams" in the Mayor's office are also reviewing the ideas posted through Twitter and the website, and will make specific recommendations.

OpenPlans and Living Cities, with support from the Knight, MacArthur and MetLife Foundations, developed #VizLou in partnership with members of the intended user base. The development team first convened a group of people who provide services to low-income youth to ask what young people might be expected to care about, and about their access to and use of technology. The team also conducted focus groups with low-income youth and discovered 1) contrary to stereotypes about low-income young people, they do in fact care about their neighborhoods and want to improve them, 2) they are skeptical of the government, but will suspend this skepticism in the face of positive government action, 3) many are using powerful technology (e.g., smartphones, tablets), and 4) some would use their existing social networks to make a difference.

The team then asked youth to use and provide feedback on a paper prototype of the tool. The tool was then used to gather input in seven topic areas over the summer of 2013 for the Vision Louisville process. Over 70 Visionaries, including children as young as three, contributed ideas.

The engagement of the intended user group in the development of the tool was key to the success of the #VizLou experiment. This understanding of the target population led to the decision to not develop a new smartphone app, but leverage existing social media already used by low-income youth.

The tool behind #VizLou is available more broadly as "Hatch" as part of OpenPlans' toolkit, and the source code is posted online.

Mobile Engagement

The penetration of mobile phones into many demographic groups means that these devices provide access to populations that have previously not been engaged via online or other technological means. The Pew Research Center[5] reports that as of May 2013:

5 - Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, Spring Survey, March 15-April 3, 2013.

- 91% of American adults have a cell phone
- 56% of American adults have a smartphone
- 28% of cell owners own an Android; 25% own an iPhone; 4% own a Blackberry

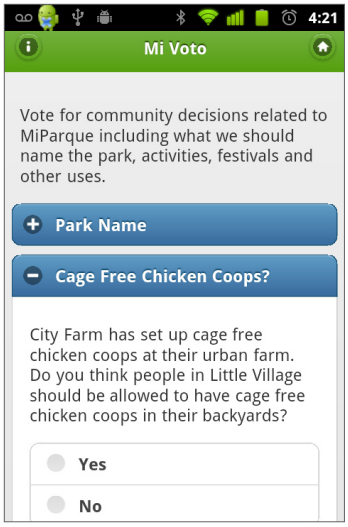
Those groups that are less likely to own a mobile device are rural populations (85%), older populations (65+, 75%), and those less educated (less than high school, 83%) and with lower incomes (less than $30,000, 86%). However, the penetration of mobile devices into each of these groups is still quite high.

Due to this widespread use of mobile phones and the increased use of phones for activities other than calls, mobile technology has become a centerpiece of civic technology. Civic hack-a-thons are occurring across the country, where developers are creating civically oriented mobile applications.

For example, Mi Parque, a bi-lingual mobile smartphone application, gathers input about a 23-acre park being developed over a former Superfund site in Little Village in Chicago. The application was created by an all-women team including Motorola and students and faculty affiliated with the Open Youth Networks from Columbia University, mentored by engineers from several tech companies. Knowing that most of the youth in the Little Village community use Facebook, the team designed the application to integrate with both Facebook and SMS. In addition to collecting input, the application notifies users about news, alerts, maps, and volunteer opportunities.

Key considerations for using mobile technology to engage typically underrepresented groups:

- Understanding how targeted groups use their mobile devices is critical when developing or building upon mobile applications for civic engagement.
- As an increasing number of mobile applications are developed for outreach and engagement in the civic realm, communities can learn from each others' work and may be able to use or modify existing applications to meet their needs. Organizations such as Code for America and the associated local "Brigades" provide a venue for this kind of learning and sharing.



Hands-on Technology

In addition to online, mobile, and software tools, there are some hardware tools that are best used in face-to-face settings. iPads and other tablets, for example, have been increasingly used to conduct in-person surveys. While surveys are frequently conducted at places like fairs, grocery stores, etc., the use of tablets allows for interactive components of surveys and websites. The San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) successfully deployed iPads in the hands of social work students to survey hard-to-reach populations. Students who gathered the most

surveys won the iPad. The Houston Galveston Area Council case study below describes another example of the effective use of iPads in the field to reach traditionally underrepresented groups.

Touchscreens and touchtables are another type of hardware that allows users to interact with digital content in an intuitive way. For example, young students who attended the Imagine Central Arkansas kickoff were able to use a touchtable to place comments on a digital map. The activity was similar to drawing with a marker on a paper map, and therefore was less foreign and intimidating than a traditional
computer mapping interface might have been.

Key considerations for using hands-on technology to engage typically underrepresented groups:

» Tools that allow for collection of input in a digital format, rather than on paper maps or surveys, can make synthesis of the input significantly easier by eliminating the need for data entry.

» iPads or other tablets can be mounted in stand-alone kiosks to collect input in heavily trafficked areas such as libraries, airports, transit stations, and parks. People are more likely to use the kiosks, however, if staff are present to engage passersby. Security of the hardware may also be an issue in these areas.

Case Study: Houston-Galveston Area Council

As part of their Sustainable Communities Initiative grant, the Houston Galveston Area Council (HGAC) developed a survey about several scenario options. To reach areas and groups they felt were not well represented in previous outreach efforts, they purchased and used five iPads to conduct surveys at workforce centers, senior centers, community centers, and a predominantly African-American university. The survey was designed so that users responded primarily via "buttons" rather than providing text input, and was translated into six languages. In addition, HGAC spent significant time and effort on the content of the survey, making sure that language was precise and simple, and had the survey reviewed by a survey expert at Rice University. The survey gathered enough responses from various demographic groups to allow for statistical comparisons across groups.

While the use of the iPads was helpful in engaging more residents, security concerns meant that HGAC staff members were required to conduct many of the surveys, which did not help improve their efficiency or reduce staff workload as much as hoped. However, one benefit of having staff in many locations was that relationships were built between the agency and local businesses and organizations.

The surveys were also available on kiosks that were set up in libraries and other secure locations.

The success of the kiosks was less than anticipated, however, because they did not generate much interest if staff was not present handing out postcards and encouraging kiosk use.

Games

Increasingly, the public expects engagement to be entertaining, and practitioners in civic technology and planning have responded by developing a number of tools that function much like games. Incorporating these types of tools into outreach efforts can offer a number of benefits. The visual nature of games can help make the complexity of information often involved in planning and land use decisions more accessible by bridging gaps in knowledge and language. Furthermore, the interactivity of games can help participants better understand the connections between planning decisions and the outcomes they care about, the trade-offs inherent in these decisions, and the perspectives of other participants.

Some of the tools in this category function as online or "video" games," such as the online Community PlanIt game developed by the Engagement Game Lab at Emerson College. In this game, users are given challenges to complete and trivia questions to answer, and then are able to choose which real-world causes in their city they would like to support. The causes with the highest levels of support receive real project funding. The case study below describes another game the Engagement Game Lab developed that specifically targeted both Chinese- and English-speaking residents of Boston's Chinatown. Other tools, such as the Built Game highlighted in the second case study below, are more low-tech games that can be incorporated into public meetings.

Key considerations for using games to engage traditionally underrepresented groups:

- Visual representations of information can cross language and cultural barriers, but not all groups are familiar with certain "standard" representations and symbols. Visuals should therefor be tested with target groups.

- Providing ways for people to interact with online information, such as slider bars and interactive maps, is typically much more effective at encouraging people to explore the information than static presentations.

- Allowing people to explore alternative future scenarios can be a powerful way to communicate options and demonstrate linkages and tradeoffs. To be most effective, scenarios should be developed with input from diverse groups, so they reflect the concerns and interests of all participants.

- Exchanges among participants in group exercises can lead to more learning than individual exercises. Responses to opinion questions often differ between people who have participated in small group discussions, compared to people who simply responded to the survey without discussing the topic with others.

Case Study: Participatory Chinatown

Participatory Chinatown is a video game the Boston Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) developed in partnership with Emerson's Engagement Game Labs. The development

team worked with the Asian Community Development Corporation and Chinatown youth to create characters that reflect the diversity of Chinatown residents. The characters then move through a virtual version of Chinatown and complete tasks like finding a job, housing, or places to socialize that are specific to their character's needs. The tasks are sometimes made more difficult due to income level, language skills or other challenges.

The game was available in both Chinese and English, and was launched at a live workshop, where facilitators could assist with the technology. Those residents with the least game experience (primarily older adults) found the game to be most meaningful. The interface was also intuitive and recognizable as a virtual representation of participants' neighborhoods. The results were shared with the 2010 Chinatown Master Planning Committee for inclusion in that plan.

While most planning agencies will not have the resources to create a similar tool, the interface and concept are useful for considering how to engage those for whom games are appealing. Tools such as augmented reality on mobile devices may also make games similar to Participatory Chinatown more easily developed, less expensive, and integrated into real world spaces.

Case Study: New River Valley Livability Initiative Built Game

As part of a regional planning process, the New River Valley Planning District Commission worked with Sojourn Theater to modify their Built game, previously used in more urban settings, to the predominantly rural New River Valley region. The game used square and rectangular pieces of various sizes to represent land uses. Individuals placed their "home" piece in the middle of a long strip that was their individual game board and placed other land uses along that strip in relation to their home. Individuals then combined with others and redid the exercise several times, each time with more peoples' homes and land use pieces on an ever larger board. Determining where to place land uses in groups became more complicated, involved negotiations among participants and in depth conversations about tradeoffs.

The Built game did not use sophisticated technology. It did, however, use tools that were intuitive and conveyed complex information without being too complex themselves. Much of the educational component was completed via conversation with other participants and with trained facilitators. The conversations were rich and helped participants better understand the complexity of planning, and the connectedness of their region. This success was, at least in part, due to the tool being tailored for the rural audience and remaining low tech. It could, however, be made into a digital game with some general performance indicators, for audiences where this would be more appropriate.

Tracking Progress—Indicators and Open Data

One of the most successful ways to encourage continued engagement and build trust in typically underrepresented groups is to show responsiveness of decision-makers to the input received. Plans increasingly contain metrics and concrete goals. Indicator tracking has, therefore, become

important in demonstrating progress toward, or achievement of, plan goals, as well as general responsiveness.

Some indicator projects use online tracking tools, and others release regular status reports. For example, the Boston Metropolitan Area Planning Council has created the Metro Boston Indicators Project, which will regularly release data on indicators related to their MetroFuture plan. Their State of Equity website includes text reports, as well as graphs and maps that help visually convey the status of various indicators related to equity. Similarly, the Mile High Connects partnership in Denver created an online version of their regional Equity Atlas. This tool will help users explore the data collected and interact with maps of equity-related information.

Another example of indicator tracking is the Greater Portland Pulse, a partnership between Portland State University's Institute of Portland Metropolitan Studies, Metro, and various other organizations interested in tracking indicators. GPP tracks indicators across a variety of topics and provides a portal into various datasets, graphs and maps via their website. The site also includes a data visualization tool called Weave (Web-based Analysis and Visualization Environment), which allows users to download and customize data visualizations and graphs.

A related issue is the opening of public data for civic use. There are many organizations and agencies that are advocating for "open data." Many governments and agencies are responding by offering large datasets as downloadable raw data, interactive maps and graphs, or both. Tools such as Weave are also helping to make this data more accessible. These datasets can help organizations engage specific groups by better understanding community attributes, and can help in tracking change and monitoring indicators directly.

Key considerations for using indicators and open data with traditionally underrepresented groups:

» Involving target populations in developing indicators will help ensure the outcomes that community members care most about are being tracked and monitored.

» Public agencies should consider partnering with community-based organizations to ensure that indicators are presented and distributed in a manner that is accessible to target populations.

» Traditionally underrepresented groups and the community-based organizations that serve or represent them may require technical assistance to effectively use open data sets. Providing this technical assistance will help enable organizations and their constituents to engage more effectively in planning and decision-making processes, by providing more informed input and more clearly communicating their concerns and interests.

General Best Practices

Many resources are available that highlight best practices for civic engagement in general, including guides, studies, and training opportunities provided by PolicyLink, National League of Cities, IAP2, and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation. A smaller number of resources highlight best practices in technical tool development, including guides for hosting hack-a-thons and OpenPlans' Field Scan of Civic Technology. The points summarized below are more narrowly focused on best practices in the use of technology in engaging typically underrepresented populations, especially communities of color, youth, and low income communities, that emerged from PlaceMatters' interviews, case studies, and research.

Many practitioners that PlaceMatters interviewed work closely with low-income communities and communities of color, but have not used technological tools themselves or seen others use them effectively in engaging their communities. These best practices are aimed at communities or organizations that are interested in effectively integrating tools into their engagement, understanding that the generally accepted best practice in engaging underrepresented communities is still face-to-face relationship building.

Key considerations for developing new tools or customizing existing tools to engage traditionally underrepresented groups:

- Members of the target population should provide input on tool development, to ensure the tool will be accessible to and used by the community.
- For underrepresented communities in particular, new tools or add-ons should be built based upon tools and technology these communities are already using.
- Focus on visual communication. Graphics, short videos, and images are often a more effective means of communicating and engaging underrepresented groups that have a variety of language and educational backgrounds.
- Civic technology should be developed with how agencies are going to use the data in mind (e.g., the tool should include some analytics that make synthesis easier).
- Tools that track demographics of users can help practitioners evaluate the effectiveness of the tool in reaching target populations, and demonstrate the value of the tools to public decision-makers, who may be skeptical of the tool's efficacy and reach.
- Tool developers can also work to advocate for opening data, which provides the framework for new applications and can inspire the creation of new tools by developers both within and outside of public agencies.

Key considerations for using tools to engage traditionally underrepresented groups:

- Regardless of the outreach method used, the most critical determinant of success (real and perceived) is whether the input gathered is reflected in decisions,

actions, and outcomes. Quick implementation of on-the-ground changes, even small ones, can demonstrate the responsiveness of public agencies to community input and needs.

» Multiple tools can be combined into a toolkit that takes advantage of each tool's strengths (e.g., Twitter is not a good tool for dialogue, but is well-suited for brainstorming), and technological tools are often best used in conjunction with other, low-tech outreach strategies.

» The most effective examples of tool use take advantage of social networks, community groups, and trusted advocates that exist in the real world, and use the tools to support, rather than replace, face-to-face interaction.

» Institutional changes can help public agencies more effectively incorporate and leverage technology. The offices of the New Urban Mechanics in both Boston and Philadelphia, the Mayor's Office of Innovation in San Francisco, and similar offices and staff positions at other municipalities reflect the new value local governments are placing on innovation. While these offices use technology, they also focus on collaboration, leverage existing efforts and tools, and responding swiftly to problems with appropriate and targeted solutions.

Conclusions and Next Steps

As the case studies in this report demonstrate, communities are using technology to effectively engage typically underrepresented groups. Based on the experiences of these communities, PlaceMatters has identified some of the factors that seem critical for successfully selecting and deploying the best suite of tools for engaging targeted groups. Rigorous evaluation of these efforts has been limited, however. In some cases, communities need to collect additional data to more accurately determine who is participating, and to meaningfully compare the costs and benefits associated with different tools or outreach methods. For example, better information on demographics and cost per participant associated with hosting public meetings versus engaging residents through online or mobile technologies can help communities use limited resources more efficiently, and to target more expensive outreach methods to specific groups that may be difficult to engage otherwise. Partnerships with academia could help address this need for additional data collection and analysis.

Open Plans and Living Cities also identified the need for a more robust tool or application marketplace. While PlaceMatters and Code for America both host lists of available tools for civic engagement, there is still insufficient information sharing among agencies, tool providers, developers, and potential users. Consequently, several tools exist that have similar functions and technologies but the communities using these tools are not learning from each other's successes and challenges. A better network of the various players involved in civic technology would improve the ability of tools to meet engagement needs, including outreach to traditionally underrepresented groups.

References and Resources

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Other Resources

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    - www.commons.codeforamerica.org

Practitioner and Academic Contributors/Resources

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