

October 2020

CONCRETE SOLUTIONS, BEST PRACTICES, AND MAIN STANDARDS OF THE CIVIC TECH SECTOR

The **Association Civic Tech Europe** (ACTE) was founded in December 2019 to represent civic techs at the European level.

Civic tech actors are independent of any political or economic movement and rely on technological innovations to strengthen citizens' participation in democracy and forge new links between voters and institutions.

The main objective of ACTE is to contribute to **creating a mutually beneficial relationship** between its members and the European institutions.



INTRODUCTION

The world recently witnessed a surge of civic activism: global youth fighting to protect the climate, pro-democratic and pro-Europe grassroots movements in Central and Eastern Europe, or the significant increase in participation in the last European elections. Citizens expressed their wish to further their involvement, beyond the electoral process, in public decision-making processes. The Yellow-Vest movement in France or the Brexit campaign has also expressed the distrust and frustration of a part of the population with public authorities.

These contemporary phenomena illustrate a simple fact: more and more citizens in the EU are not satisfied with the functioning of liberal democracies. There is a demand for a renewal of liberal democratic practices, for a renewal of the power over your own destiny. A crucial question now is how to rethink the democratic system by giving citizens a greater voice in the democratic decision-making process.

In this context, the Conference on the Future of Europe was announced in 2019 by the newly appointed President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. The purpose of the Conference is to consult European citizens to shape future European policies widely. The **Association Civic Tech Europe** (ACTE) has warmly welcomed this “major pan-European democratic exercise” and believes that the necessity to reach out to citizens in between elections is crucial.

Within the scope of the Conference on the Future of Europe, European authorities will have the opportunity to understand the high potential of civic tech organizations to foster citizen’s engagement in European democracies. The added value of these technological innovations will be particularly clear at the EU level. Civic tech solutions could **become a new standard** in participatory democracy after the Conference, and inspire as many public authorities as possible to use these solutions to involve their constituents. The use of these innovative tools will reciprocally contribute to the emergence of an organized European civic tech sector competing on a global scale.

ACTE believes that European civic tech actors can solve many of the challenges that European Institutions are facing. This position paper will first dive into the rich and diverse solutions offered by its members. ACTE will then explore the main standards and best practices put in place by European civic tech organizations which demonstrate the robustness of these solutions.



In providing this paper, ACTE hopes to contribute to the European Union's efforts to get closer to the citizens, to include them in the Conference on the Future of Europe and, ultimately, the European project.

I. CONCRETE SOLUTIONS THE CIVIC TECH SECTOR CAN BRING TO THE EU INSTITUTIONS' CONCERNS

By developing innovative technological tools, the civic tech sector is participating in the development of citizens' participation and tries to improve the relationship between the voters and the public decision-makers on a large scale.

◆ Getting closer to the citizens

The civic tech sector can bring closer the European institutions to their citizens. By the extensive consultations organized by the civic tech platforms, the EU authorities can establish **a direct and instant dialogue** with the voters, by consulting the population on several policies they are working on. The citizens can, via the platforms or innovative technological tools, give their opinion on European concerns and answer questions asked by the institutions to bring together new initiatives at the EU level. Thereby, the decisions taken at this scale are not only single ones but include the population in the decision-making process. The policies are therefore adopted to take into consideration the citizens' opinions, by embracing both bottom-up and top-down approaches.

The civic tech platforms are also **a complementary solution** to the official visits organized in the member states by the European commissioners and the local representatives (EU Representations in member states, Europe Direct centers, ...). With the platforms, the link between citizens and the institutions is independent of external constraints (as the COVID-19) while strengthening this relationship. It can also empower the actions of civil society all around Europe, and connect NGOs, companies, media, and think tanks to citizens.

◆ Increasing the citizens' participation all around the Union

Civic tech organizations are developing innovative digital tools meaning that citizens can participate all around the European Union, in their diversity, **without geographical nor temporal constraints**. There is no need to be at a specific place nor at a particular time to be involved in



the decision-making process. The tools developed by the civic tech sector facilitate the renewal of participatory democracy. By connecting to a platform designed together by the authorities and the civic tech actors, the population can **get involved more easily**.

The platforms developed to increase the citizens' participation have been specifically designed to be **user friendly and inclusive**. There is no need to implement specific training or have specialized expertise to participate and get involved in the democratic process.

❖ **Ensuring the continuity of democracy**

One of the key drivers of the civic tech sector is to ensure the continuity of democracy. Democracy cannot only exist during the electoral periods (once every five years at the European level) when the election of representatives at the European Parliament happens. The citizens should be able to **express their opinions regularly on various topics** and on all the policies that European institutions are proposing and adopting. The European Commission already organizes consultations at the European level, but this format mainly targets stakeholders who are actively involved in the European decision-making process. However, the participation of voters could be more critical outside the elections to establish a more **permanent exchange with the citizens**. Including a more significant number of citizens in the democratic process will allow political decisions to integrate their collective requirements and experiences better.

The benefits of collective intelligence are well-known. By involving the public in the decision-making process, the EU would benefit from a diversity of expertise and points of view, ultimately leading to more efficient and relevant public policies building on the input of thousands of people.

❖ **Increasing the trust between the population and the authorities**

By the use of civic tech platforms, the citizens feel **more implicated** in the public decision taken at the European level and are **more informed** about the policies implemented at this scale. This knowledge developed by voters allows them to understand better why European institutions have adopted specific decisions, how they have taken them, and to what extent the EU legislation is ensuring rights and benefits to the European population. The citizens need to feel and be more implicated in the decision-making process to **approve the public policies** adopted by their representatives. The public participation and consultations are solutions brought by the civic tech sector to increase the trust between the population and the institutions and create a stronger feeling of being European. Allowing voters to maintain oversight over the public



decision-making without replacing the representative democracy is crucial. Moreover, the **transparency** of the civic tech platforms and the publication of consultations' results reinforce this climate of confidence.

II. FUNDAMENTAL STANDARDS AND BEST PRACTICES TO HELP TO SOLVE THE EU INSTITUTIONS' TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

The civic tech sector can offer tools to European public authorities to bridge the gap between decision-makers and citizens. On top of this, civic tech organizations are the best-equipped actors to build and maintain tools that fulfill crucial requirements: flexibility, transparency, inclusion, and security.

◆ Offering flexibility to build solutions

The civic tech sector offers an approach that allows **excellent flexibility for public authorities**. Several characteristics of the industry enable civic technologies to complement public authorities thanks to this flexibility.

Civic tech entities propose tools that are ready to use. Instead of going through a lengthy process of internal research and development, public authorities can rely on the concrete and already tested expertise of civic tech organizations. Public authorities can, therefore, reach out to their citizens without any delays and act when necessary, without a high entry-level cost.

Civic technologies are also providing flexibility thanks to their complementarity. ACTE supports the interoperability of tools and data - on a project basis, civic techs need to be able to plug their devices. Complementary through interoperability and standardized data is key for the efficiency of civic tech solutions. ACTE believes that the cooperation of European civic techs allows them to offer even more flexible and customized solutions.

The flexibility of civic tech solutions lies in its diversity and its ability to innovate. The variety of civic techs' business models is the key to provide quick solutions that are citizen-centric at the right scale. This diversity supports the ability of the sector to innovate and apply the newest technologies to citizen participation continually. For example, e-voting systems already use blockchain technology. Artificial intelligence is already used for opinion and semantic analysis, thanks to machine and deep learning. The diversity of the business model of civic tech organizations also sustains their innovation drive: Software as a Service (SaaS) platforms can roll



out and allow for tools to be updated and improved regularly quickly and easily. Incidentally, their agility and ability to innovate was once again demonstrated during the covid-19 crisis: consultations were quickly launched to help manage the crisis better and to learn from citizens' feedback, new platforms were created and new tools were integrated on existing platforms to enable mutual assistance and solidarity between citizens for example.

❖ **Ensuring transparency and diversity**

Civic tech organizations support transparency in the functioning of their tools. The main reason for civic technologies to exist is to make processes reachable and understandable for citizens. Including them from political campaigning to collaborative decision-making increases the transparency of governments. For example, involving citizens on a large scale to open online debates naturally creates more clarity on the decision and makes the decision more legitimate. Furthermore, public authorities can rely on civic tech's citizen-centric tools to offer digital devices that are understandable for their population. Finally, civic tech platforms are usually designed with open data requirements in mind as civic tech organizations promote open data approaches.

Civic technologies consider that the quality of the representativeness achieved by their solutions is a crucial measurement of their efficiency. Civic techs are indeed developing tools that go beyond voting or participation: they allow citizens to get involved during the whole decision-making process, from the collection of ideas to checking their implementation and efficiency. The particularity of civic techs is to help with the efficiency of participation, which is a fundamental success-criterion for the sector. Civic techs are therefore using measuring tools to ensure that engagement is as diverse and inclusive as possible by constantly correcting and adapting their tools to local specificities. Civic tech solutions also integrate engagement tools to reach citizens from all backgrounds. One concern is usually for citizens who do not know how to use digital tools. ACTE members address digital illiteracy by strategizing how to reach these citizens: civic technologies can become the first opportunity for them to enter the digital world.

❖ **Guaranteeing a high level of security of technological tools**

Civic tech organizations are tech experts committed to the security of their tools. Regarding data protection, ACTE gathers the European civic tech sector that supports and actively implements the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This commitment to data protection is vital to create reliable and trustworthy businesses: civic technologies only develop tools that are safe to use. Data protection and privacy are an evident commitment when defending



democratic processes. ACTE is committed to making sure that the civic tech sector can become a trusted third party between citizens and their representatives in the European Union.

Civic technologies are also creating safeguards to prevent various online threats, depending on their tools. These threats can be the dissemination of fake news or the influence of trolls. These safeguards rely on the strong technical expertise that public authorities, especially at the local level, would not be able to develop internally. For example, human moderation, combined with automated keyword detection can ensure that disinformation does not flood collaborative platforms.

The European civic tech sector works every day to keep the highest cybersecurity standards on their tools. ACTE intends to accompany and structure the industry and its efforts to develop best practices and face new challenges. The dialogue with European institutions is crucial for the civic tech sector to anticipate threats better.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS TO DEVELOP THE CIVIC TECH SECTOR IN EUROPE

- Create a legal framework for the civic tech sector to ease the use of these technologies by European, national, and local institutions
- Recognize the use of new digital tools as part of the solution to reconnect citizens and institutions
- Support the development of the civic tech sector through specific fundings in order to scale-up at the European level



ANNEX - CASE STUDIES OF ACTE'S MEMBERS

◆ **Fluicity**

As a civic tech pioneer based in Paris and Bruxelles, Fluicity's mission is to massively engage citizens in public decisions and recreate trust between citizens and institutions. Since 2015, Fluicity is actively involved in this mission organizing large scale consultations for clients such as :

the European commission who needed to let young people speak on their expectations prior to the 2019 European elections,

the French Government as they needed to collect citizens doleances for the French prior to the Grand Débat National

the Wallonia Region who is currently building a new "Recovery Program" based on a digital debate with the civil society

Fluicity focuses on meeting the needs of various institutions regarding user experience, security and GDPR compliance.

◆ **Make.org**

The best way to reach a strong appropriation and inclusiveness of the consultations is to involve as many European citizens as possible in the process, millions of Europeans in all the Member States. The stake is to make sure that citizens are included in their diversity, to avoid any bias and ensure everyone feels adequately represented. Make.org organizes massive consultations ensuring inclusiveness of all categories of the population: in terms of country of origin, gender, age, socio-professional category. With accessibility: to all populations with disabilities or with low possibilities of mobility. And well-balanced: giving a complementary role of all stakeholders: citizens, civil society experts, EP, and the Member States representatives.



❖ Civocracy

At a time of new expectations for citizens, agile and citizen-centered participation is now seen as vital for European public action. That's why the involvement of citizens in policy-making is becoming more and more automatic.

To make this happen, solutions such as Civocracy enable to solve challenges with a European dimension thanks to the collective intelligence of citizens and stakeholders from all over the Union.

Developing a sense of common ownership means working together on issues that affect us all. One of the solutions available on our multilingual tool to address this issue is: **bottom-up**. This form of participation offered by Civocracy empowers the citizen and gives them a sense of responsibility to become an actor in European public policies.

❖ Quorum (Quorum.co)

“If we want to involve citizens at scale, we need to mobilize the ones that usually don't participate”. At Quorum, we believe that digital technologies are vital in encouraging citizens to participate in the movement that they wouldn't usually join.

Quorum's tools and technologies help engage citizens and communities to keep them active. Quorum offers its customers the ability to use data and digital technologies to meet their supporters through the most suitable channels (on the field, by message, or by calling)

Quorum powers hundreds of NGOs, campaigns, political movements, unions, elected officials, and local authorities in 10+ countries to use technology and data to build a field and citizen-centric campaigns.

More than 2M of citizens have been mobilized in the last two years.



❖ Cap Collectif

Public participation at all levels can increase trust between citizens and their representatives, and more importantly lead to smarter decisions being made. People are more likely to support policies that were designed collaboratively with them. At Cap Collectif, we believe that digital tools can not only enable massive participation, but also be a strong lever to change the way governments and institutions work (“it’s not about collecting ideas, comments and likes”). Our technology helps decision-making processes be more open, transparent and inclusive.

From pioneer collaborative law-making experimentation « Parliament & Citizens » to the « Great National Debate » organised by French President Emmanuel Macron in 2019, we have worked with more than 200 decision-makers - including local authorities, national government offices, NGOs, trade unions, private companies and public interest groups - and our online platform has allowed more than 2 million people to get involved in 800 projects.

ANNEX - ACTE'S MEMBERS

 **fluicity**

**MAKE.
ORG**

QUORUM

Civocracy 

novoville

 **Cap Collectif**

 **itipo**

bluenove
opening organizations:

we.

 **TECTONICA**