Civic Technology to Enhance Citizens' Engagement in Jordan's Public Policy

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Executive Summary

The government of Jordan and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) continue to launch new digital tools to keep up with the globalised world and enhance citizens' engagement through the use of technology. However, the term "Civic Technology" is yet to be introduced into Jordan's public policy, and more efforts are needed to enhance citizens' civic engagement. A few of the main features of civic technology are already embedded within those digital tools presented by the government of Jordan. However, most are yet to be activated in a systematic manner. These features include providing the space for citizens to send feedback and complaints, check the accuracy of the information, and participate in e-decision-making processes. The activation of civic technology would also include drafting a clear roadmap to achieve its goals. This paper introduces the importance of including civic technology in public policies and gives recommendations on how the government could use it to enhance civic engagement.

The paper is based on desktop research and key informant interviews with experts in the field of digital transformation and e-governance as well as staff at the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship (MoDEE).

Moreover, a critical analysis of the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship strategy and implementation plan (2021 -2025) was done to identify the gaps that need to be addressed to engage citizens. Finally, the paper offers recommendations that include focusing on a more citizen-centric approach when drafting implementation plans, capacity development for employees, and developing a comprehensive communication plan to reach the target audience.

1 Introduction

Governments have utilised digital technology to meet citizens' needs and improve government accountability. Therefore, several governmental departments have introduced and implemented electronic services in their day-to-day transactions. All these electronic services involve the common goal of reducing costs, increasing efficiency and ensuring transparency.[1] When government agencies around the world began to implement ICT in their various processes and transactions in the last three decades, the well-known term "e-government" emerged. The reasons for adopting e-government are its speed, accountability, transparency, and its potential to improve the efficiency of public services and the relationship between government and citizens.[2]

Jordan has been no exception, with the government and other civil society organisations (CSOs) using technology to be closer to citizens and enhance service delivery in its different forms. The e-government initiative in Jordan was started in the year 2000 by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology.[3] Despite the fact that it has been more than twenty years since the launch of the Jordanian e-government strategy, it failed to increase the interaction between citizens and the government.[4] This has been confirmed by the United Nations, where the development of the e-government index of Jordan has dropped from 50 in 2010 to 100 in 2022.[5] For Jordan, the need to embrace e-government is articulated in the National Digital Transformation Strategy and Implementation Plan (2021 – 2025).[6]

[1] Jean Damascene Twizeyimana and Annika Andersson, "The Public Value of E-Government – A Literature Review." *Government Information Quarterly* 36, no. 2, 2019, 167–78, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2019.01.001.

[2] Ricardo Santa, Jason B. MacDonald, and Mario Ferrer. "The Role of Trust in e-Government Effectiveness, Operational Effectiveness and User Satisfaction: Lessons from Saudi Arabia in E-g2b." *Government Information Quarterly* 36, no. 1, 2019, 39–50. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2018.10.007.

[3] Wasfi Alrawabdeh, "E-Government Diffusion in Jordan: Employees' Perceptions Toward Electronic Government in Jordan." *American Journal of Applied Sciences* 14, no. 1, 2017, 124–33. https://doi.org/10.3844/ajassp.2017.124.133.

[4] Raed Kareem Kanaan, and Ra'ed Masa'deh. "Increasing Citizen Engagement and Participation through EGovernment in Jordan." *Modern Applied Science*, Oct. 29, 2018. https://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/mas/article/view/0/37276.

[5] "Country Information." United Nations. United Nations, 2020. https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Data/Country-Information/id/86-Jordan/dataYear/2022

[6] Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship. "Jordan Digital Transformation Strategy - Modee.gov.jo." *Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship,* 2021

The vision, as stated, is a "Digital environment that accelerates economic growth, supports entrepreneurship while enabling social and political stability."

New terms have emerged in this field, one of which is "Civic Technology", which refers to ICT tools that enhance the relationship between citizens and government. The continuous growth of the launch of civic technology organisations reached an annual growth rate of 20 per cent.

This is an indication of how civic technology could help citizens participate more actively in a democratic society, including data access, visualisation, citizens' feedback, voting, public decision-making, and community forums.[7]

However, the term "Civic Technology" is yet to be introduced into Jordan's public policy despite the fact that few features are already embedded within tools presented by the government. The features include providing the space for citizens to send feedback, file complaints, check the accuracy of the information, and participate in e-decision-making.

In this paper, we ask,

Can civic technology projects help governments use technology to enhance citizens' civic engagement?

Therefore, this paper aims to introduce the importance of including civic technology in public policy while giving recommendations on how the government can use it to enhance civic engagement. However, one conclusion is clear; Jordan needs to put more effort into enhancing citizens' civic engagement through technology.

The following sections of this paper will discuss the methodology used to collect and analyse data, highlight a civic technology application, and present an analysis of the MoDEE strategy and implementation plan. The paper will also discuss international implementations of civic technologies, including any lessons learned that Jordan can implement, and finally, introduce some recommendations to enhance the digital transformation strategy further.

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https://www.modee.gov.jo/EBV4.0/Root_Storage/EN/1/Jordan_Digital_Transformation_Strategy_2020_English_Unofficial_Translation.pdf.

[7] Erhardt Graeff, "Evaluating Civic Technology Design for Citizen Empowerment," *MIT Media Lab*, 2018, https://www.media.mit.edu/publications/erhardt-dissertation/.

2 Methodology

This paper is based on desktop research and three key informant interviews that were conducted in May 2022 with two experts from the digital transformation and e-governance field and a representative from the Policies and Strategies Directorate at the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship.

The approach followed virtual semi-structured interviews where the main themes focused on the role of the interviewees in this field. The interview commenced with the interviewer explaining what civic technology is, how they think this could be activated and implemented in Jordan, and highlighted its importance in citizens' civic engagement. Moreover, international implementations of civic technologies were discussed and how Jordan can learn from them. Finally, it focused on how civic technology could be part of the implementation plan and strategy of the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship.

Ahead of the interviews, participants were informed that their information would be completely anonymous. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted approximately 30 minutes each.

3 Civic Technology in Practice

In a 2018 study conducted on how people in governments experienced civic technology in the United States, respondents reacted positively to the experience. For each tool they studied, the main goal of increasing the two-way interaction between citizens and government was realised, even if it was not achieved consistently across all users.[8] Moreover, there was an indirect achievement of what Janowski (2015) identified as the fourth stage of e-government: government and citizens using their digital relationships to improve policy.[9] It was also mentioned that the process of

[8] Emily Shaw, "Skipping Ahead to the Good Part: The Role of Civic Technology in Achieving the Promise of e-Government," JeDEM, 2018, https://www.jedem.org/index.php/jedem/article/view/455.

[9] Tomasz Janowski, "Digital Government Evolution: From Transformation to Contextualization." Government Information Quarterly. JAI, Jul. 21, 2015, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0740624X15000775.

creating and implementing civic technology tools gave citizens a path to policy influence.

Many of these civic technology tools in the study demonstrated how technology development and policy development could be linked by integrating technology within the policy-making process of the government. The development of these tools affects the public's ability to influence policy and becomes an important part of a wider policy-making process. This co-development of policy and technology tools indicates a commitment to make technology a part of supporting the improvement and development of the service delivery of governments.[10] This could suggest that if the government of Jordan can utilise more features of civic technology in the e-services, citizens will be actively engaged in civic engagement activities such as bottom-up approaches to policy-making.

Finally, it was concluded that without funding outreach for civic technology, extensive access to official online services would most probably benefit people who already use and visit government websites, and in turn, electronic services will only reach those who are already comfortable with using technology.[11] Therefore, the government of Jordan needs to plan for supportive funding techniques because the support for the tools and the added public value provided by such digital services might disappear. It would end up further empowering citizens who already have access while others would fall behind.

4 Jordan's National Digital Transformation Strategy and Implementation Plan (2021-2025)

Jordan's National Digital Transformation Strategy and Implementation Plan sets out the main milestones the ministry aims to achieve over the next five years. The government of Jordan is keen to involve all citizens and empower them to access the needed services at a lower cost by digitising the public sector. The focus remains on

[10] Emily Shaw, "Skipping Ahead to the Good Part: The Role of Civic Technology in Achieving the Promise of e-Government," JeDEM, 2018, https://www.jedem.org/index.php/jedem/article/view/455.
[11] Ibid.

building the skills required for the future, creating more jobs, and promoting entrepreneurship and e-participation.[12]

The government of Jordan realises that the success of digital initiatives depends primarily on the rapid use of such technologies by citizens. The government also believes that adopting emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, cloud platforms, the internet of things, and other emerging technologies, has become one of the foundations of the digital transformation process. The government also recognises the importance of digital technologies in pushing the process of providing more efficient public services.[13]

In order to achieve the objectives of this strategy, there is a need to develop the skills and knowledge of public sector employees and citizens, especially the digital skills which will support the digital transformation process. Therefore, implementing well-thought-out measures to manage change is a prerequisite for the success of this strategy.

The Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship supports the digital transformation process, adopts the concepts of the digital economy, and facilitates the development of the entrepreneurial system in Jordan. This is done by working on eleven basic pillars. One of which is e-Participation; this pillar entails the contributions of citizens in submitting suggestions and observations and expressing opinions using technology that can improve decision-making and policy-making processes.[14]

E-participation will also have a great impact on achieving governmental goals and enhancing transparency and accountability. **When the government provides platforms where citizens can openly engage in two-way communication, the government can be held accountable, and citizens' trust increases which in turn would result in more civic engagement in local affairs.** That is why the

[12] Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship. "Jordan Digital Transformation Strategy - Modee.gov.jo." *Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship,* 2021 https://www.modee.gov.jo/EBV4.0/Root_Storage/EN/1/Jordan_Digital_Transformation_Strategy_2020_English_Unofficial_Translation.pdf.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

government has provided various electronic communication channels, such as the following platforms:[15]

- "Bekhedmetkom" (at your service)
- "Radakom Yehemena" (your feedback is important to us)
- "Qayyem Tajrebtak" (evaluate your experience)
- The national call centre (065008080)
- The SMS platform

This is all in order to enable all segments of the community to express their opinions and make suggestions. This helps improve the quality of government services provision and raise the level of citizen satisfaction. Focusing on e-participation would also enhance civic engagement by increasing trust in the government.

However, even with the existence of such communication channels, the implementation plan does not clearly indicate how these channels will reach their audience. It does not also explain how citizens' input will be utilised in the decision-making processes.

In the plan, there is a need to improve the two-way flow of information between the government and citizens, increase public participation, and establish partnerships and cooperation between the public and private sectors in designing and implementing digital transformation programs. This also means engaging citizens in the design of these tools instead of only including them in providing feedback.[16]

5 Recommendations

After a critical analysis of the ministry's implementation plan and strategy, the following are the recommendations concluded in order to enhance citizen's engagement through technology:

- Building the capacity of the public sector employees and revisiting hiring practices at the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship; this includes drafting the needed technical skills for the enactment of these digital

[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

technologies and ensuring that staff members are equipped with such skills. These skills would include digital skills, data analytics, and communication. This would equip the public sector employees with the required skills to better respond to citizen's needs and in turn, increase the satisfaction of provided services.

- Embedding civic technology features within existing structures; this means that even though introducing the term itself is important, it is also important to map out the existing features and update them to be more inclusive. These features would entail including citizens in the design of online platforms and creating two-way communication between the government and citizens. A method to follow could entail creating partnerships with civil society organisations where a bottom-up approach would take place in designing online platforms. This can be included within a strategic plan and implemented by the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship.
- Easing the administrative procedures for partners from the private sector and non-governmental organisations; this would ensure a more bottom-up approach in responding to citizens' needs and addressing their issues by involving CSOs. This would be done by collaboration between the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation and the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship.
- Developing a comprehensive communication plan to reach the targeted audience. This is one of the most important action points as citizens are not fully aware of the importance of adding their input through the available platforms. This means that they are not fully activated, and more awareness campaigns should take place to ensure that citizens are capable to be part of decision-making and policy-making processes. The communication plan can be developed by the relevant department at the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship and incorporate roles for civil society organisations.

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