

DCitizens Fostering Digital Civics Research and Innovation in Lisbon

DELIVERABLE 4.2: Case-Study Portfolio

DCitizens has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe Framework Programme, project call HORIZON-WIDERA-2021-ACCESS-03, grant agreement 101079116

D4.2: Case-Study Portfolio

Project Information

Grant Agreement	101079116
Title	Fostering Digital Civics Research and Innovation in Lisbon
Acronym	DCitizens
Funding Scheme	Twinning
Start date	01/12/2022
Duration	36 months
Call	HORIZON-WIDERA-2021-ACCESS-03
Website	https://dcitizens.eu/

Deliverable Information

ID	D4.2
Title	Case-study portfolio
WP	WP4
WP Leader	IST-ID
Contributing Partners	IST-ID, USi
Nature	Report
Authors	Hugo Nicolau (IST-ID)
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Reviewers	Clara Cardoso (USi), Dina Dionisio (IST-ID)
Deadline	M17 (30/04/2024)

Dissemination Level

PU	Public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
PP	Restricted to other programme participants	<input type="checkbox"/>
RE	Restricted to a group specified by the consortium	<input type="checkbox"/>
CO	Confidential, only for members of the consortium	<input type="checkbox"/>

Document Log

Version	Date	Author	Description of Change
0.1	02/04/2024	Hugo Nicolau	First release with document structure
1.0	19/04/2024	Hugo Nicolau	Full draft completed
1.1	22/04/2024	Clara Cardoso	Document review
1.2	26/04/2024	Hugo Nicolau	Integration of all comments and suggestions
2.0	29/04/2024	Dina Dionisio and Hugo Nicolau	Full document review; Final version
3.0	26/06/2024	Hugo Nicolau	Changes requested in midterm review: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Improved description of both case studies by adding four new subsections (framing, methodological approach, research actions, and expected outcomes)
3.1	07/08/2024	Hugo Nicolau	Quality control

Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

This deliverable is part of WP4 – Commissioning Digital Civics Research in Lisbon –, which consists of the joint research project between Twinning partners. The goal of WP4 is to apply the knowledge, expertise, and supporting technologies of the Twinning partners through short-term Digital Civics case studies. One of the major tasks (T4.1) of WP4 consists of establishing a Case Study Commissioning Framework to engage with local communities. DCitizens runs annual civics events and publishes a call for Case Study proposals, allowing citizens and community-based organisations to collaborate with academic partners in tackling real-world challenges.

The document illustrates the two case studies supported in the first call for proposals. The first is a collaboration with the Intercultural European Club and Aga Khan Foundation to grow a community of practice in supporting a neighbourhood walk-in service – “Balcão do Bairro” – that serves marginalised individuals. The second case study is a joint project with the Portuguese Council for Refugees that aims to empower citizens to support the resettlement and inclusion of refugees through a community sponsorship program. In both case studies, DCitizens is exploring the potential of digital technologies to achieve the partners’ goals.

The deliverable is organised in four sections: 1) Introduction to the relational research model of DCitizens, 2) the importance of the Civics Events in such relational model, 3) Case study 1 - Empowering Marginalised Communities through a Network of Neighbourhood Walk-in Services, and 4) Case-study 2 - *Infrastructuring* a Community Sponsorship Program for Refugees in Portugal.

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1 Introduction

DCitizens builds on relational models of research; that is, the delivery of services and technologies is not based on a transaction between producer (e.g., University), and consumer (e.g., citizen). Instead, it takes as a starting point the potential of technology to support citizen-focused needs and assets. DCitizens aims to empower citizens and non-state actors to take a more active role in shaping innovation and research agendas, making decisions about service provision, and playing a more central role in making such provisions sustainable and resilient. The project's vision is to create a Civic University that truly serves its local communities.

To this end, DCitizens deployed a Case Study Commissioning Framework informed by real-world community challenges (Work Package 4). The project publishes an annual call for Case Study proposals from community-based organisations or citizens in Lisbon. We then select some case studies through a participative process; for the selected case studies, the consortium engages in a one-year project to leverage digital technologies to achieve the communities' goals. Key to each case study is the concept of co-creation, which is founded on trusted relationships between all project stakeholders.

The Case Study Commissioning Framework and resulting project create a foundational platform for collaboration between the DCitizens consortium with real-world research projects. Moreover, it allows DCitizens to build capacity in Lisbon beyond the project's duration by creating a sustainable partner network and infrastructure for the processes and practices of conducting Digital Civics projects.

2 Civic Engagement Events

Alongside the annual call for Case Study proposals, DCitizens organises a civic event aiming to build relationships with Lisbon's local communities and bring industry, local government, and NGOs to work with researchers. These events are organised as round-table discussions around citizen-driven needs and goals. Each roundtable works on a tentative project proposal to tackle a specific community-based challenge that can serve as the foundation for a submission in the DCitizens' annual call.

The [2023 civic event](#) took place on the 25th of January. It included four round-table discussions for a full day. We invited participants from academia, industry, local government, and NGOs (14 institutions and 36 participants). Afterwards, we published the [annual call for Case Study proposals](#). The two case studies supported by DCitizens emerged from two of the roundtables in the civic event. These case studies are fully described in the following sections.

The [2024 civic event](#) took place on the 27th of February. Similarly to the 2023 event, it included four round table discussions. We achieved a total of 50 participants and 23 institutions from local government, NGOs, academia, and self-advocacy groups.

Four institutions submitted projects to the [2024 Commissioning Call](#). We are currently in the selection process, following participative and transparent practices. Institutions will peer-review and rank each other's proposals. The DCitizens team will then select the winning proposal based on these reviews.

In the following section, we showcase (in a portfolio format) the two case studies supported by the 2023 Commissioning Call.

3 Case-Study 1: Empowering Marginalised Communities through a Network of Neighbourhood Walk-in Services

EMPOWERING MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES THROUGH A NETWORK OF NEIGHBOURHOOD WALK-IN SERVICES

GOAL

Support a community of practice in the creation, management, coordination, and impact assessment of a neighbourhood walk-in service – “Balcão do Bairro”

INSTITUTIONS

- Intercultural European Club
- Aga Khan Foundation
- Instituto Superior Técnico
- University of Northumbria
- University of Siegen
- Italian Institute of Technology

“Balcão do Bairro” is a community-based intervention in low socio-economic neighbourhoods in Lisbon. It provides personalised support to marginalised communities in accessing public services (e.g., social services, housing, education)



Balcão do Bairro

Following a participatory action research methodology to define challenges, gather data, analyse data, and co-design solutions with community partners

Web platform where people can meet, help each other, ask and answer questions, share resources, find people, connect locally, and participate in events

OUTCOME

A web platform to grow a community of practice of “Balcão do Bairro” and make collaborating easier between the network of neighbourhoods

3.1 Project Framing

Existing evidence suggests that sociodemographic variables, such as ethnicity, various forms of identity affiliation (e.g., religion, and language), social norms, and level of education, are more likely to influence citizens' ability to access to legally mandated public services. These variables function as a form of eligibility criteria either to enable or inhibit citizens from enjoying their social rights, particularly in socially disadvantaged communities.

People living in these communities often face multiple problems and depend on public services; however, they are least capable of dealing with the bureaucracies associated with the vast range of organizational procedures involved in providing these services. This pattern leads to a dysfunctional relationship between the state and citizens, impairing active citizenship, and responsive, fair, and accountable governance.

“Balcão do Bairro” (BB) is a grassroots project that aims to facilitate access to public services through a neighbourhood walk-in service. People working or volunteering in the walk-in service help citizens access their social rights via online tools and deal with the bureaucracies of government procedures. Help is cross-sectorial; that is, it is not focused on a single government branch. Instead, it offers holistic help can often crosscut multiple public services, e.g., social security, finances, housing, employment, and education.

The project started in the *Picheleira* neighbourhood, which is a historically disadvantage and low socio-economic neighbourhood in Lisbon. In 2023, BB received regional funds to scale its intervention to six other additional neighbourhoods in Lisbon, resulting in a network of walk-in services. Such scaling brought new challenges related to training of workers, knowledge documentation and sharing, coordination, governance, and impact assessment.

Against this backdrop, the Intercultural European Club and Aga Khan Foundation commissioned a project from the DCitizens yearly call to co-create a socio-technical infrastructure for the BB network.

3.2 Methodological Approach

Our work responds to a central research question: How can a socio-technical infrastructure contribute to a sustainable network of neighbourhood walk-in services?

Through a community-led project, we engaged in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) process. PAR is a design approach that actively involves community members in every stage of the design process to foster meaningful social change and empower participants. PAR acknowledge researchers as agents of change that engage in an iterative process that is responsive, action-oriented, and continuously evolving to meet the needs of the community. Projects typically go through multiple cycles of Planning, Action, Reflection, and Evaluation.

3.3 Research Actions Involved

The DCitizens research teams engaged in multiple tasks for this project:

- Ethnographic fieldwork in multiple locations of the BB network
- Interviews with workers, volunteers, and users of BB
- Three design workshops
- Development of a web platform to store and share knowledge within the BB network
- Development of a web app to collect, analyse, and disseminate the qualitative impact of BB in each neighbourhood
- Enhancement of the web platform with map and event features for the BB network

3.4 Expected Outcomes

We expect multiple outcomes from this project ranging from scientific contributions, prototypes, and social change:

- An opensource web platform to connect communities of practice (<https://community.dcitizens.eu/>)
- A scientific publication describing the needs, challenges, and opportunities for digital technologies in supporting the BB network
- A scientific publication around the BB network and the sustainability of long-term and open-ended deployment of digital technologies
- A socio-technical system to empower the BB network in supporting disadvantage neighbourhoods.

4 Case Study 2: *Infrastructuring* a Community Sponsorship Program for Refugees in Portugal

INFRASTRUCTURING A COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM FOR REFUGEES IN PORTUGAL

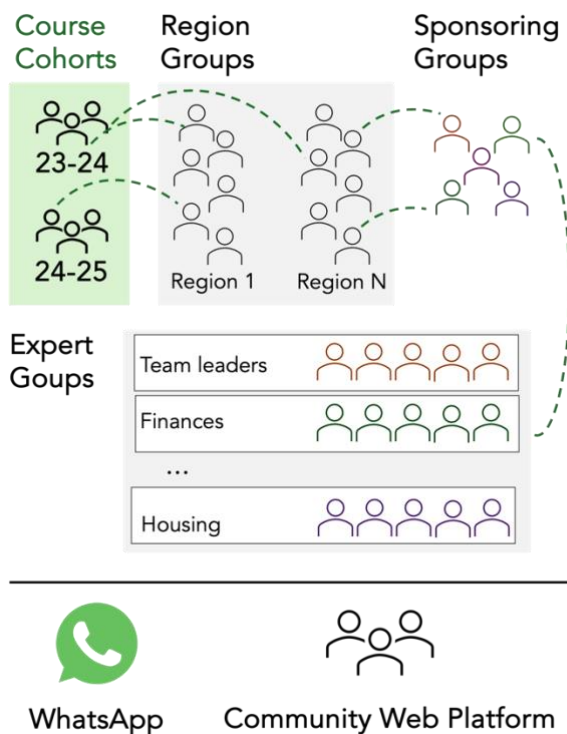
GOAL

Empowering citizens to support the reception and inclusion of refugees in a community through a sponsorship program

INSTITUTIONS

- Portuguese Council for Refugees
- Instituto Superior Técnico
- University of Northumbria
- University of Siegen
- Italian Institute of Technology

Community sponsorship is a community-based approach to the worsening global humanitarian crisis of refugees. It allows citizens to be involved in resettlement efforts.



Engaging with the Portuguese Council for Refugees towards a socio-technical change to improve the community sponsoring program

"Unplatforming" mainstream services (e.g., WhatsApp) and leverage them as design materials. Re-imagining the socio-technical components of the community sponsoring program.

OUTCOME

A socio-technical infrastructure to facilitate the coordination and collective action towards increased adherence and sustainability of community sponsoring in Portugal

4.1 Project Framing

According to the United Nations, over 103 million people are forcibly displaced in what is now the most significant humanitarian emergency since WWII. Refugees are subjected to the Triple Trauma Paradigm: persecution, exile, and resettlement. Resettlement is the most traumatic phase of the three, as adapting to a new country and culture can be difficult, resulting in social isolation and marginalization.

Community sponsorship programs are one of the most successful resettlement approaches where refugees are directly paired/sponsored by community groups to make them active citizens in society. Sponsoring groups provide refugees with a safe home, financial support, language and cultural learning, access to education, and employment. Indeed, community groups are key to the success of sponsorship programs.

ComUnidade is the Portuguese community sponsorship program coordinated by the Portuguese Council for Refugees (CPR). Sponsorship programs often leverage established communities (e.g., through religious institutions, and diasporas) to facilitate the creation of sponsorship groups. In ComUnidade, the goal is to create new sponsorship groups from the bottom-up. Citizens go through an online asynchronous training program prior to becoming part of a sponsoring group. Although hundreds of people have finished the online training, there is only one sponsorship group in Portugal.

CPR reached the DCitizens consortium to enhance adherence to their program, particularly to devise new ways of fostering collective actions in forming sponsorship groups during (and after) online training.

4.2 Methodological Approach

We aim to answer an overarching research question: How can *infrastructuring* contribute to a sustainable online sponsorship program and foster the creation of sponsorship groups?

For this project, we draw on the concept of *infrastructuring*, i.e., a design that goes beyond project-based work and is situated, long-term, open-ended and committed to implementation. It understands digital technologies not as static 'infrastructure' but as relational, practical, and processual.

As a result of our research actions, we also adopted an *Unplatforming* approach, where we appropriate a mainstream service (WhatsApp) as a material to design to engage individuals in online collective action. Particularly, we design the morphology (group structure, size, and membership), role (group role, region role), externalization (maps, status), and process (training, guided activities) proprieties of WhatsApp.

4.3 Research Actions Involved

- Interviews over time with coordinators from CPR
- Two design workshops

- Roundtable discussions to co-create the socio-technical system
- Setup of WhatsApp and its material properties
- Deployment of the socio-technical system in a real-world environment

4.4 Expected Outcomes

- A scientific publication describing the needs, challenges, and opportunities for digital technologies in supporting ComUnidade
- A scientific publication around *infrastructuring* a sustainable and effective system to support ComUnidade increasing sponsorship groups
- A socio-technical system to empower CPR in running the ComUnidade

5 Conclusion

DCitizens is establishing a Case Study Commissioning Framework that results in research and innovation projects grounded on Lisbon's local needs and interests. The project complies with the Grant Agreement by organising annual commissioning calls and civic events. In the first year, we supported two projects and expect to support one in 2024. The consortium has used these projects as collaboration platforms to conduct joint research. The results will be used to publish novel contributions in the field of Digital Civics. Furthermore, they will inform the Digital Civics Research and Innovation Agenda for the city of Lisbon in the final year (Deliverable 4.3).