The untapped potential of digital citizen engagement in Morocco: a data-driven approach to online participation.

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Aligning closely with trends in research impact, open government approaches are looking to incorporate public engagement and establish wider transparency as central operations. **Samuel Lee**, **Fabian Seiderer** *and* **Lida Bteddini** *share findings from a World Bank project on digital participation and open data in Morocco. They find that greater access and use of public sector data can result in increased civic participation and socio-economic benefits.*

As the demand for open government rises, it becomes even more critical to facilitate meaningful interactions between citizens and government- namely addressing the most relevant issues through methods that will result in greater levels of civic participation and ultimately positive impact. Parallel to rising expectations, governments have to meet this growing civic demand with capacity constraints and in tightening budget environments; in practical terms, this requires a focusing of efforts on citizen preference. In the MENA region, citizen engagement is particularly important as it was a core demand during the Arab Spring. A brief overview of the MENA region across a wide-set of governance indicators clearly indicates significant weaknesses, and particularly on issues of accountability, public engagement and transparency, when compared to world averages. According to Global Integrity's analysis to date, an assessment of several MENA countries reveals that, on average, countries perform substantially worse than comparable global averages in virtually every category.
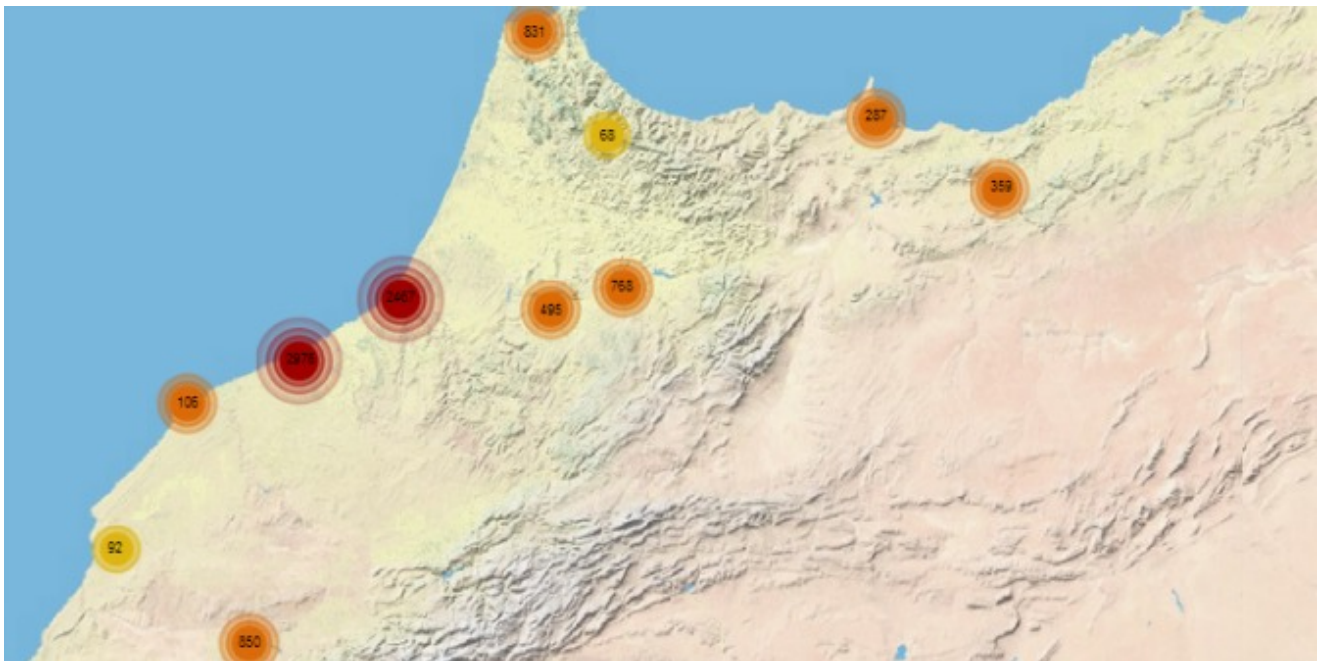

The current context in Morocco thus presents an important opportunity to push forward reforms in the area of public engagement and has illustrated the need for a reshaping of government-citizen relationships in response to demand for greater public participation in the development process. Morocco's evolving legal and regulatory framework on access to information and civic participation (including new constitutional rights to information, to be consulted and to motion and petition the government) and increased awareness and interest in citizen engagement offer an opportunity to leverage the promise of open government, open data, citizen engagement, and the internet. When these interests and tools align, greater access and use of public sector data can result in increased civic participation and socio-economic benefits. There is no singular path towards citizen-centric development, but open data and government can spur improvements in collective intelligence and knowledge (the World Development Indicators provide current and accurate global development data), more effectively designed public policies and programs (the

Consumer Financial Protection Bureau serves as single point of government accountability for consumer financial protection), greater compliance with policies and programs (New York City's "Don't Eat At…." app warns users of health code violations), and better oversight and reduction of waste (Nigeria Education Budget Tracker).

However, measuring citizen demand and preferences for e-government is a critical step, and many questions about creating meaningful online public engagement remain. What does public awareness of these new rights look like in Morocco? What is the public demand for participatory government? What preferences exist for topics of engagement as well as methods and frequency? What is the experience of citizens with existing online interaction methods with the government? How can new methods of collecting sentiment data help? And finally, how effective can socializing this data be in spurring new ideas and crowd-sourcing best practices on public engagement? Gauging the success of citizen engagement practices can be largely attributed to minimizing the 'expectations gap' between that of citizens and that of officials regarding the purpose and nature of such engagement, as well as its impact.
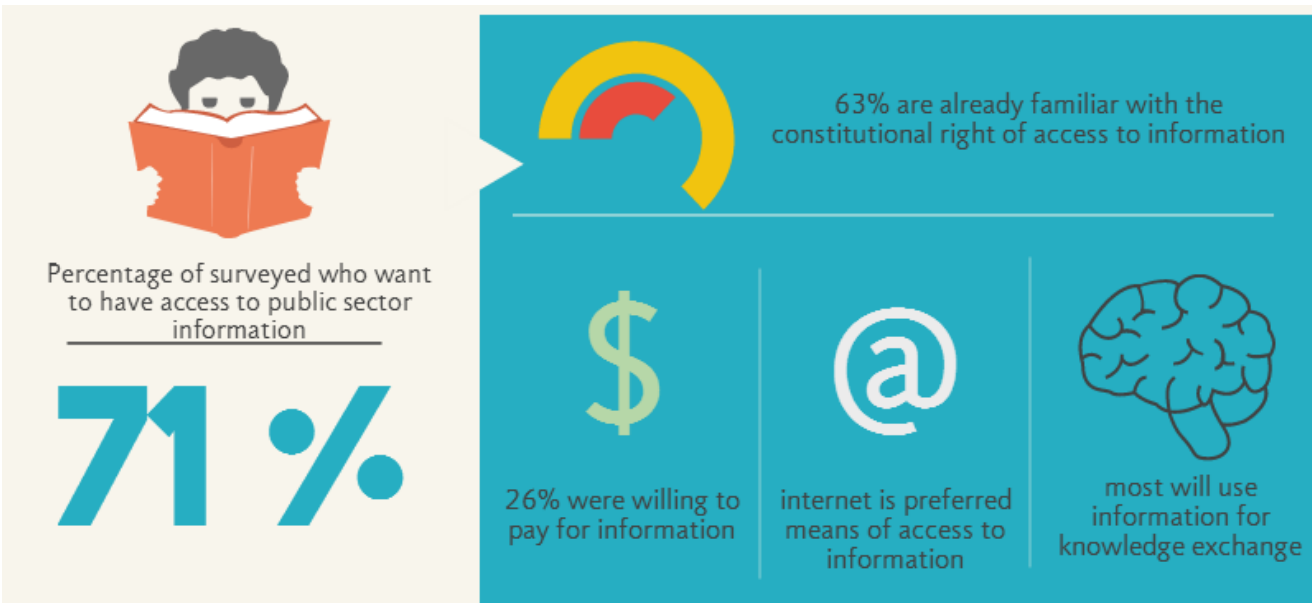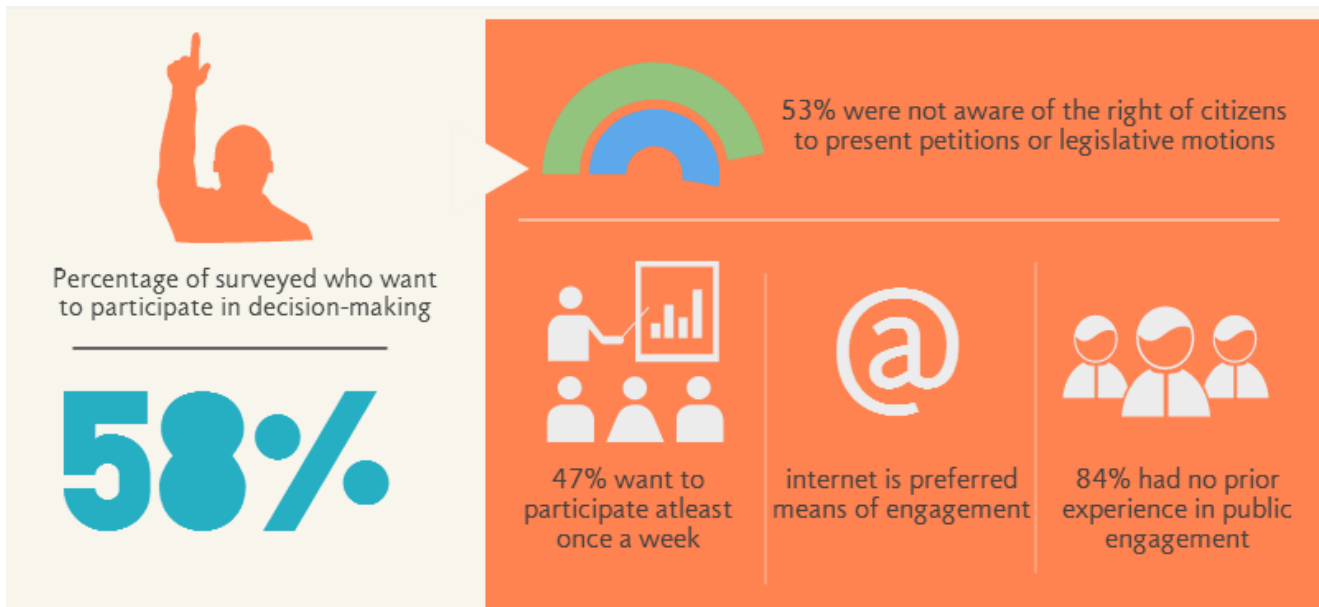
Do you hear the people click?

Insight into the questions above would be helpful in setting a data-driven approach and strategy for online civic participation, and often this type of sentiment data is collected through public consultations. To help measure citizen demand for government information and e-government, an innovative internet survey technology was used to poll a random sampling of internet users in Morocco on the awareness of new legislation, demand for information and for participation, and specific preferences for online engagement. Nano-survey technology intercepts faulty URLs entered by a web user in their browser. When this web traffic is detected, a brief survey is presented to the user. This technology provides the opportunity to collect sentiment data from a random sample of internet users at a rapid rate in a selected country, even geo-tagging responses at a sub-national level.

Click through for interactive Morocco Citizen Engagement Nano Survey Response Map

From March 21 through April 10, 2014 a nano-survey was "live" in both French and Arabic . In total 54,441 randomly sampled internet users across Morocco were exposed to the survey with 15,020 participating and providing at least partial responses. 3,942 participants provided complete responses to the 9 primary questions in the survey (all raw response data has been made available in open data format). It is important to note that while the methodology and technology used are extremely powerful, a key limitation of this methodology is that it only measures the sentiment of internet users.
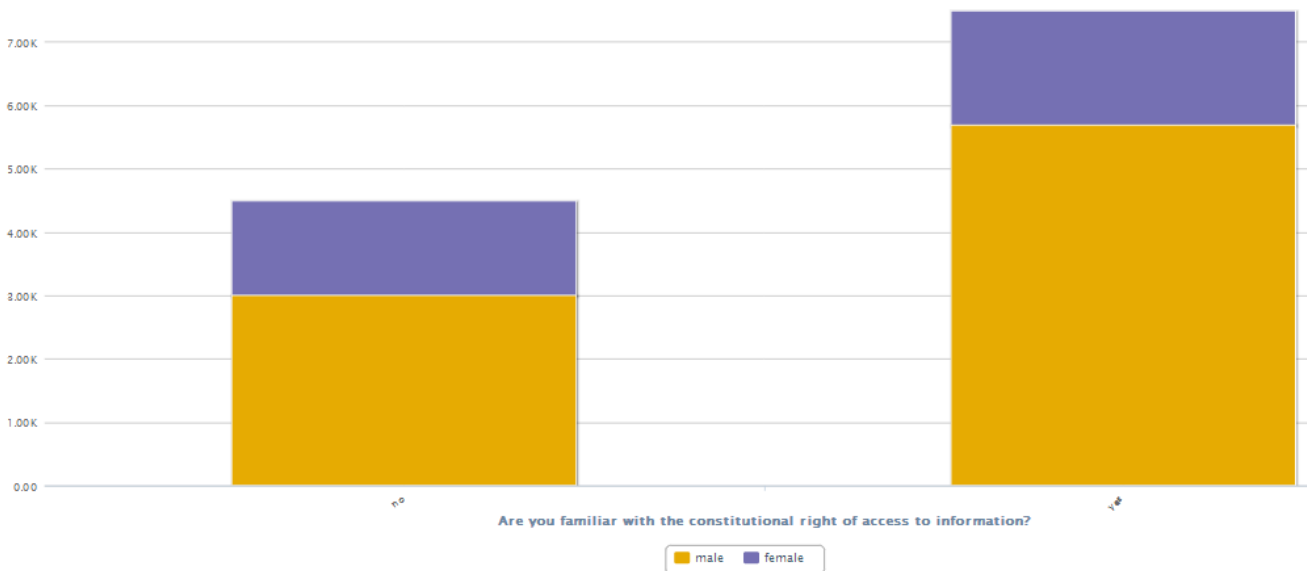
WHO PARTICIPATED?

18-34   35-54   55 and over

age

71 %   29%

Casablanca 100%
Fes-Dar-Dblbegh 26%
Kenitra 11%
Marrakech 30%
Meknes 15%
Nador 11%
Oujda-Angad 11%
Rabat 59%
Tanger-Assilah 22%

Percentage of surveyed who want to have access to public sector information

71 %

63% are already familiar with the constitutional right of access to information

$ 26% were willing to pay for information

@ internet is preferred means of access to information

most will use information for knowledge exchange

As the above infographic shows, the data collected offered many interesting insights, and a number of initial findings follow:

There is a high demand for public information and citizen engagement in Morocco.

- 71% of respondents want to access information from the government of Morocco (n=10,922), with 26% even willing to pay for information (n=5,499), on average 808 dirham per year (n=1,352).
- 58% of respondents want to participate in the government's decision making.

Source: Familiarity with Right to Access Information by Gender

A majority of Moroccans are aware of their new Constitutional rights of access to information and civic participation, and there are opportunities to address demand, capacity, and supply "gaps."

- 63% of respondents are aware of the right to access to information (n=11,986) and 47% of the relatively newer rights to petition and motion (n=4,271).
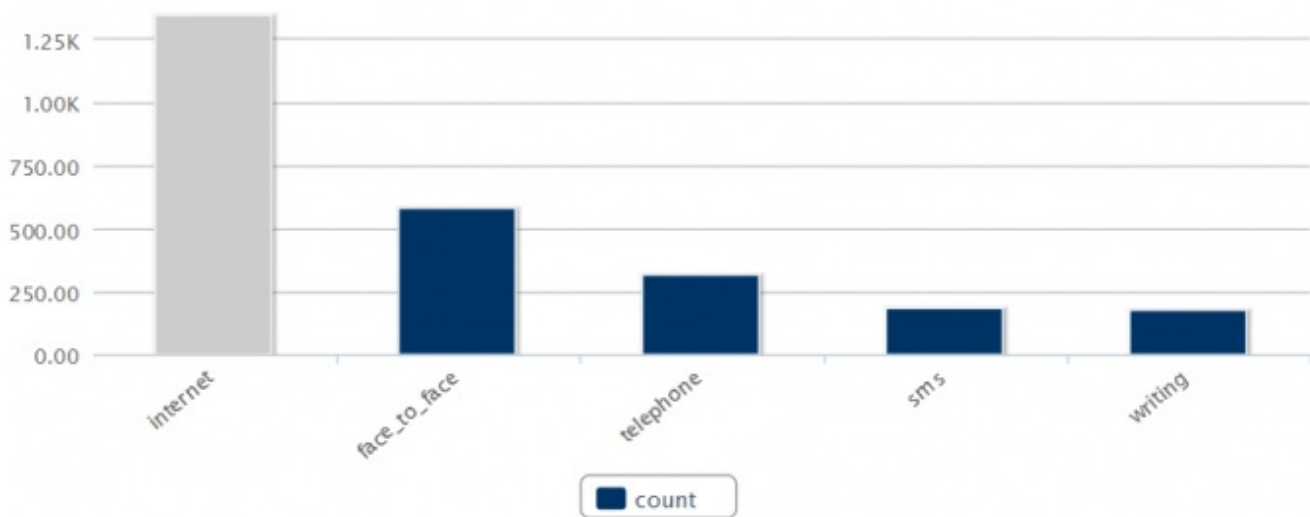
- Looking at a subset of respondents who want access to information and to participate in government, 22% are not aware of their right to access to information (n=6,851) and 40.2% are not aware of their rights to petition and motion (n=3,055). This represents a gap that should be reduced as citizen demand is met over time.

- There is room for improvement in the practical availability of public information, as 71% of respondents indicated public information is relatively hard to access. (n=6,741)

Nearly half of respondents plan to use public information for knowledge and capacity building and service or market creation.

- 85% surveyed indicated interest in a specific type of government information, with government spending (12%), legal (12%), commercial tenders (11%), and meteorological (10%) data the highest preferences (n=7,465).

- The purpose of accessing this information shows a heavy lean towards knowledge and capacity building (37%) and service or market creation (16%) (n=5,703).

Moroccans on the web confirm their willingness to engage frequently with government, preferably online.

- The frequency of preferred interaction suggested a significant appetite for citizen engagement programs. 47% would like to interact once a week and 26% once a month (n=2,451).

- As expected when polling internet users, a 51% of respondents prefer the internet. 22% prefer face to face interaction, 12% by telephone, and 7% for both SMS and in writing (n=2,616).

Source: Interaction Engagement Preference

The demand for information and participation is high, but a gender gap is visible.

- While there is high aggregate demand for information and awareness of the right to access to information as noted above, a gender gap does exist- 45% women aren't aware of their right to access to information (n=3,295) compared to 34.5% of men (n=8,691). A similar gap exists for awareness of the right to petition and motion- 60% of women are not aware of their rights (n=1,483) compared to 50% of men (n=4,238).

- Overall, only 29% of the survey respondents were women (n=15,020), which may reflect a broader gender gap in those accessing the internet.

What's next?

At the policy level: tapping this potential demand before it turns into frustration, through the adoption and effective implementation of access to information and citizen engagement policies (organic law on petition and on legislative motions) foreseen by the 2011 constitution.

At the operational level:maximizing the potential of e-government and fully utilizing the new information technologies to foster broad, inclusive and transparent citizen engagement, while taking into account the digital divide in the country. As mentioned earlier, it is important to view these results through the noted bias in methodology. While the technology used is extremely powerful and the information collected useful, a key limitation is that it only measures the sentiment of internet users. Given the importance of reaching and interacting with citizen on both sides of the digital divide and literacy, offline methods and SMS polling would be a useful complement for comparative analysis. However, moving forward, this data can serve as a useful benchmark as e-government continues to evolve in Morocco. The periodic iteration of this type of polling would be particularly effective in measuring the usage and impact of e-government initiatives.

The World Bank Governance Global Practice (GGP) program in Morocco (*Hakama*, which means governance in Arabic) supports these efforts and aims at maximizing the window of opportunity for transformational reforms offered by the Arab Spring and the subsequent Constitution adopted in 2011. The First Transparency and Accountability Development Policy Loan series and technical assistance program supports the concretization of the Open governance principles and rights introduced in the Constitution, in response to the citizen's demands. It focuses on an integrated package of reforms (i) strengthening accountability and performance in the management of public resources and the delivery of public services, such as performance budgeting and procurement (ii) fostering open governance and a more participatory democracy, through new policies on citizen's access to information, public petitions and participation, in line with the Bank's strategic priorities.

In the rightful spirit of open access, the research team also invites readers and researchers to analyze the raw data, incorporate it into their own work, and share new lessons and findings. The team also welcomes insights, examples, and best practices of public consultations. Open data offers an opportunity to truly put the "social" back in social science, and you can access the data referenced above in open format for use and re-use using this link: Morocco Citizen Engagement Nano-Survey Data.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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