



A Civic-Tech providing digital participatory tools to empower democracy

Theory of Change Narrative

prepared by Octree - Q1 2023

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Introduction

This document delineates VOCA [Theory of Change \(ToC\)](#) Narrative. It represents the status of VOCA in 2023, based on the experience acquired by Octree since 2018 with Decidim. The ToC was designed to reflect the 24 months scaling strategy of VOCA from its private launch in early 2023. The intention is to revisit this document periodically as VOCA continues to grow and evolve.

A Theory of Change: what for?

What is a Theory of Change:

The ToC is a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change can happen in a specific context. It is focused on mapping out or “filling in” what has been described as the “missing middle” between what a program or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired goals being achieved (more info here). The ToC defines long-term goals and then maps backward to identify necessary preconditions.

In the case of VOCA we have used the ToC as a methodology to lay out our strategy for the next 24 months, planning how we hope to achieve change.

How do we use it?

VOCA's ToC explains how VOCA's activities are intended to produce a series of results that contribute to achieving the final intended impacts. The ToC is not intended to provide a definitive strategy for all activities of VOCA - this is not possible, given the entrepreneurial nature of VOCA, meaning that it is not possible to define in advance exactly what might emerge out of the civic-tech ecosystem. Additionally, VOCA is an open-source and free digital platform that by design relies on its community and stakeholders to achieve its goals.

Instead, the ToC provides a conceptual framework within which this work is understood to take place; setting out the most important elements (vision, mission, goals, inputs, and activities) and how these will be activated to obtain specific outputs and unlock outcomes.

For which results?

The ToC also includes the Impact Metrics (available [here](#)) set out by VOCA to collect, and analyze whether we are achieving or not our change and mission. VOCA hopes that the data collected will also help us understand how we are making progress toward specific SDGs.

Project Context

Poly-crisis

A “global poly-crisis” is underway, the term provides a necessary and productive framework with which to understand and address major problems afflicting humanity today. A global poly-crisis occurs when crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade humanity’s prospects. These interacting crises produce harms greater than the sum of those the crises would produce in isolation, were their host systems not so deeply interconnected.

This poly-crisis is redefining the social contract between people and their leaders. We are witnessing the degradation of democratic institutions in many societies and the repeated chocs and increasingly tearing societies apart. Top-down solutions have more often than not led to absurdities, which increase the distrust between the people and their political leaders. We have collectively hoped for techno-solutionist answers that would keep us sheltered from engaging in the necessary social-ecological transformation of our society. While technology alone cannot provide solutions to our problems it can be used in fostering the emergence of social innovations.

We believe that Civic-techs can enhance the relationship between the people and their governments with solutions that enable more grounded social innovations. As democracies are more and more failing to engage with their constituents resulting in the growth of abstention as well as social contestation from all fringes of society, VOCA aims at bringing people and leaders closer by providing an open, simple, and sustainable digital participatory solution to decision making.

What are Civic Techs

History of civic tech

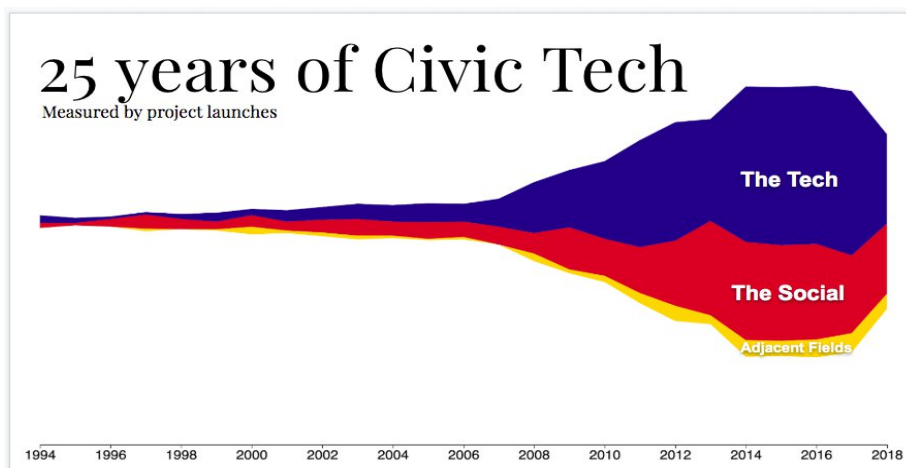


Figure 1: 25 years of of Civic Tech by Civic Tech Field Guide

Civic technology, or civic tech, enhances the relationship between the people and government with software for communications, decision-making, service delivery, and political process.



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Civic Techs can be traced back to the 1990s, (see [here](#)), but the bulk of projects have been emerging in the 2010s, however, we see, since 2017 and 2018, a bit of a slowdown in the rate of new projects launched since. An optimistic interpretation is that this slowdown is occurring because the field (and its funders) are beginning to understand a bit more about what works, and fund those projects rather than create as many new experiments. It's also possible that there are fewer experiments because there existing projects are taking up that space.

Given that we have decided to help reinforce existing projects in order to consolidate the ecosystem rather than launch a new stand-alone Civic Tech idea, and solution.

Decidim

Launched in 2017, [Decidim](#) ("we decide" in Catalan) is a public commons, free and open, digital infrastructure for participatory democracy, maintained and developed by a community of users, it is also disseminated under terms that allow its use, copying, and modification by all. Its creation was driven by the Barcelona City Council, which wanted to have a digital infrastructure that would allow it to co-construct its actions with citizens at all territorial levels. But it also aims at empowering social processes as a platform for massive social coordination for collective action independently of public administrations. Anybody can copy, modify and install Decidim for their own needs, so Decidim is by no means reduced to public institutions. There are different ways in which participatory democracy infrastructures can boost social, economic, and political self-organization.

After only 6 years of existence, there are now 390 instances of Decidim installed in 30 countries, totaling over 900'00 users worldwide. The growth and deployment of the Decidim software are overlooked by the Decidim Association an NGO based in Barcelona, Spain. The best known and intensively used instance of Decidim, as a digital platform for participatory democracy, is www.decidim.barcelona, with more than 30,000 registered participants, more than 1.5 million page views, over 300,000 visitors, 35 participatory processes, 1,141 public meetings channeled through the platform and 13,297 proposals, out of which over 9,196 have already become public policies grouped into 5,485 results whose implementation level can be monitored by citizens.

All members and partners of the Decidim project must endorse and follow a [social contract](#) that defines a set of guiding principles. The social contract can be summarized as follows:

1. Free software and open content: Decidim will always remain free and open to collaboration, without legal or technical obstacles. It will always remain auditable, collaborative, transparent, appropriable, and trustworthy, all of which are fundamental for a democratic infrastructure.
2. Transparency, traceability, and integrity: the content of participation will always remain transparent, traceable, and integral. This means that all the content must be accessible and downloadable, and it should always be known what happens with each proposal
3. Equal opportunities, democratic quality, and inclusiveness: the platform must guarantee democratic quality, non-discrimination, and equal opportunities for each participant and proposals.



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4. Privacy with verification: participants must retain the privacy of their data combined with verification. Personal data should never be displayed, nor sold, or transferred to third parties.
5. Democratic commitment, responsibility, and collaboration: institutions using Decidim must commit to responding on time, be accountable for decisions taken through the platform, and openly collaborate on its improvement.

Digital Commons and Free Software

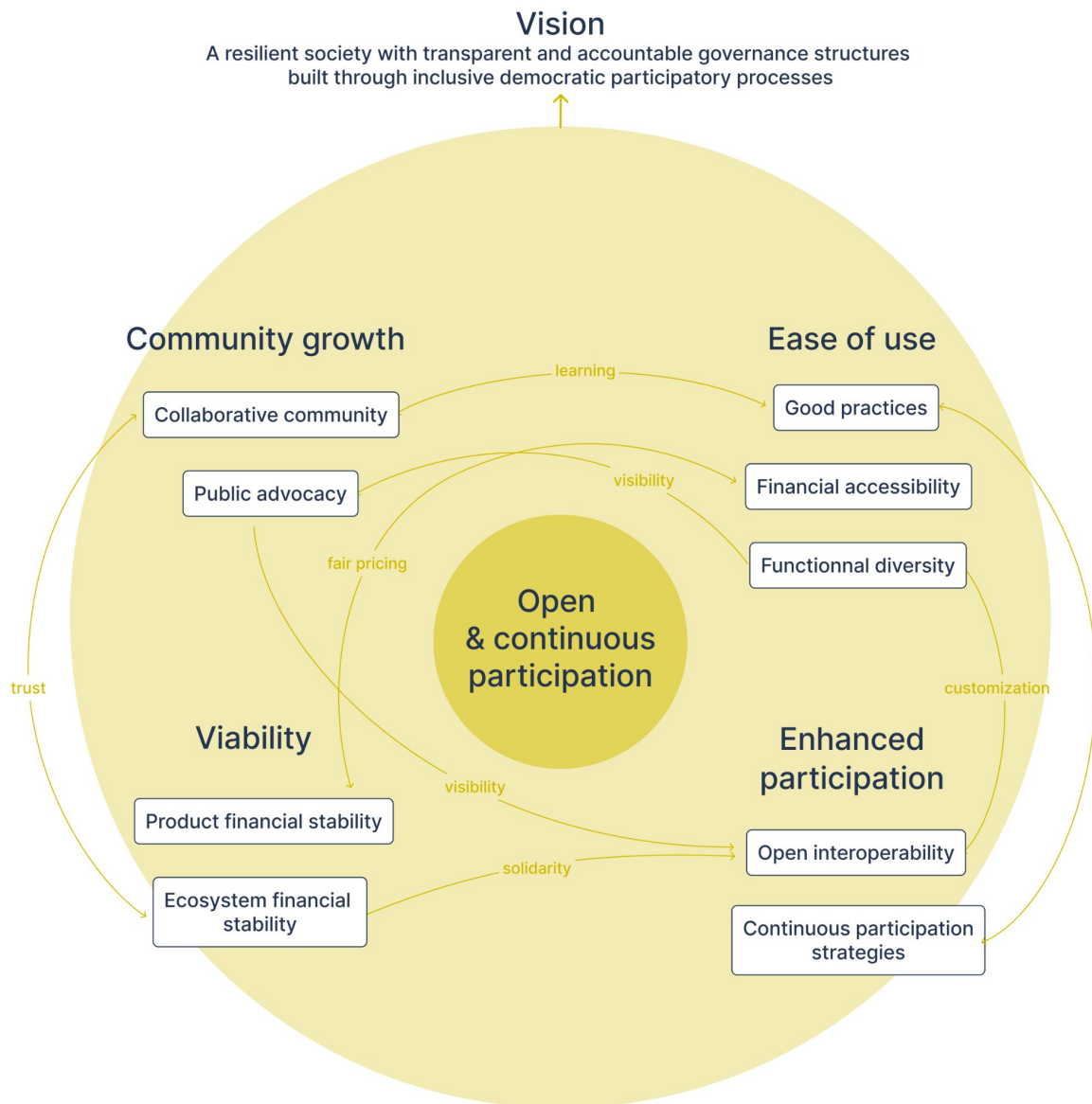
The [commons](#) is the cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society, including natural materials such as air, water, and a habitable Earth. These resources are held in common even when owned privately or publicly. The [digital commons](#) are a form of commons involving the distribution and communal ownership of informational resources and technology. Examples of the digital commons include [wikis](#), [open-source software](#), and [open-source licensing](#). The distinction between digital commons and other digital resources is that the community of people building them can intervene in the governing of their interaction processes and of their shared resources.

We base our work and inspiration in the [Free Software](#), in this case:

The word "free" in does not refer to price; it refers to freedom. First, the freedom to copy a program and redistribute it to your neighbors, so that they can use it as well as you. Second, the freedom to change a program, so that you can control it instead of it controlling you; for this, the source code must be made available to you.

When it comes to the use of Civic Techs, and especially in field of democracy and participation it is essential to us that the tools we bring about to the public are enshrined as digital commons as well as fueled by the values of the free software. Both Decidim and VOCA are advocates of these philosophies.

Theory of Change Diagram





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Hypothesis for Change

VOCA's theory of change is based on the assumption that societal change must emerge from the bottom up and that civic-techs provide democratic participation technologies, the tools for societies to initiate these changes. Therefore VOCA's hypothesis is that

by facilitating the ease of access to these tools to existing field professionals they will be empowered to provide better participation services at scale to address today's most pressing issues.

That said, the change pathways from outputs to outcomes are dependent on a combination of mutually reinforcing and sometimes overlapping activities categorized under our four main goals:

Community Growth

VOCA relies on its overall community to achieve change. We believe in collaboration over competition and an international network of local experts can make VOCA a success.

Ease of Use

VOCA ought to provide an inclusive and simple platform in order to achieve change. Given our assumption we believe that it is only if we are able to increase accessibility to civic-techs in the field of participatory democracy that we can achieve change.

Viability

VOCA's objective is to be financially viable, while we are hoping to get some funding to kick start the project and bring some stability to the team, we are building a tool that is to be self-sustaining and able to provide support to the overall ecosystem independently.

Enhanced Participation

VOCA is oriented towards continuous participation. We are firmly convinced that sustainability in participation can only be achieved by empowering citizens and leaders to learn together what strategies work best. We believe that by making VOCA interoperable with a range of tools we can provide a framework to understand and improve participation cycles.

To activate these four goals VOCA aims for activities which will lead to outputs, which in turn, will trigger the mechanics of change we need to achieve our vision.

Activities and Inputs

In order for us to achieve the change we want to see we have identified inputs in time, work and capital that will allow VOCA to perform activities that we hope can start to trigger the change we want to bring about. Activities are the building bricks of the ToC, from them will emerge a set of output defined later.

In order to keep track of our activities we have sorted our activities under four categories:

Partnerships

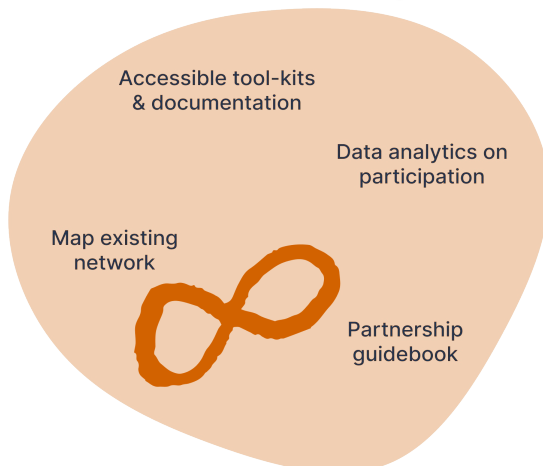
The activities in this category relate to the work that must be undertaken in developing strong relationships with all stakeholders of the project. One major aspect is to work on the global community of local experts and users of VOCA. In order to achieve change we must reach participants in specific context which requires local knowledge, therefore we must rely on collaboration. VOCA is a digital common and in this space we also include the essential community building on the developer side.

Partnerships and community



Financial and time Inputs: communication, internationalisation, community, management...

Capacity building



Financial and time inputs: knowledge, support, analytics platform...

Capacity building

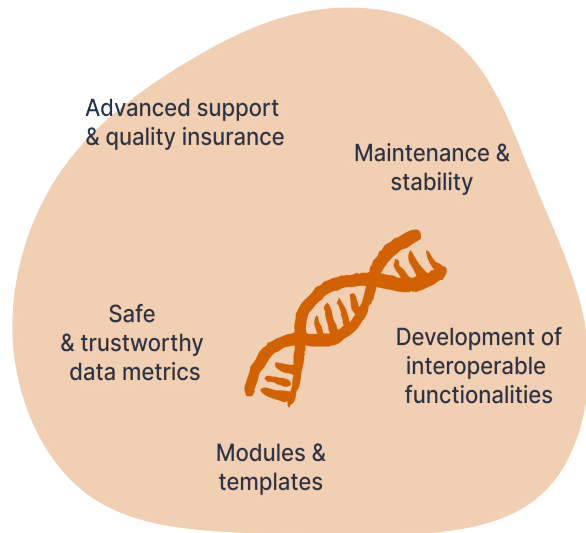
The activities in this category relate to the investment needed in capacity building, not only for VOCA but for participatory democracy and civic-tech ecosystem as a whole. In order to increase participation and enable local experts we have an ambitious plan to create appropriate documentations, tool-kits, tutorials and analytics. We believe in the need to build up the capacity and knowledge of users in order to strengthen participatory democracy.

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Product

VOCA is a technology product and a digital platform which requires maintenance, support and development in order to provide a simple and stable service to its users. We have the aim to conduct activities helping to make our product stronger through privacy and trust. We are building an interoperable, open and free software, which sits on a diversity of modules and templates available to its users through a market place.

Product



Financial and time inputs: interoperability, development, support...

Administration



Financial and time inputs: internationalisation, fundraising, community...

Administration

VOCA aims to be a financially viable product and therefore we are engaging in a set of activities to reach this objective swiftly and not to prevent our ability to scale the deployment of the platform. Achieving the change that we want necessitate investments and activities to build a solid legal and financial structure that enable us to provide stability to VOCA and support the ecosystem based on solidarity. We are building a donor community and a funding model that guarantees open-source.

Outputs and Outcomes

Outputs: The Missing Middle

Here we try to define the central piece of our ToC, that is the relationships between outputs from activities to outcomes and eventually our mission. As presented in our ToC Diagram (page 7) we have identified 4 main goals linked to a series of outcomes.

Each of these outcomes are achieved though a series of outputs (represented by the text in black in the diagram below) triggered by the activities we undertake (page 9, 10). The outputs presented in the diagram below are the building blocks of our ToC, they link our activities to the change we hope to bring about. The outputs are the “missing middle” which we are defining with the ToC.

Outcomes: The Change

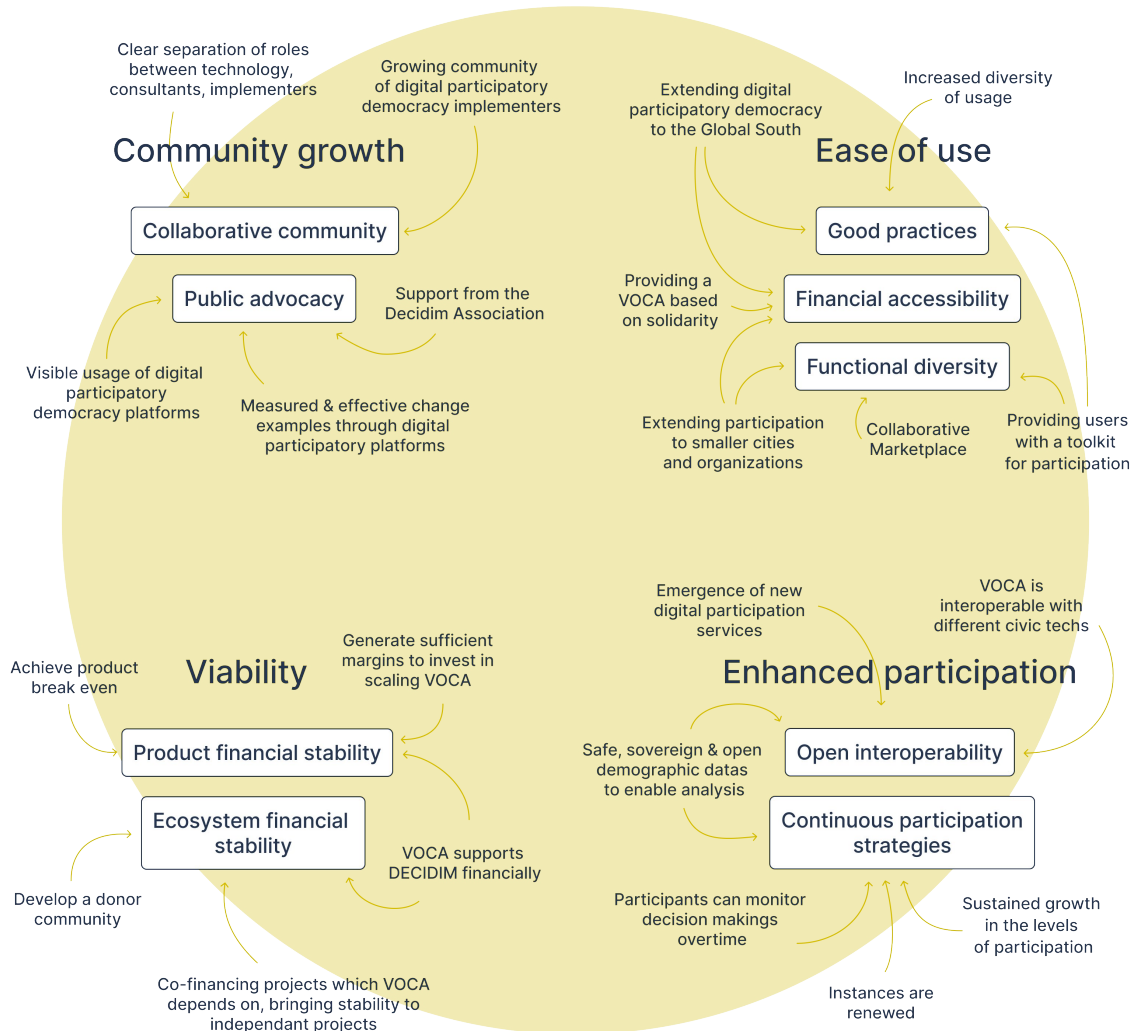
The Outcomes are represented by the white boxes are the first sign of change. We believe that if we experience these outcomes it means that our hypothesis for change is correct and that we are on path to achieve our mission and reach our vision. For example the outcome “collaborative community” is linked to the outputs on the clear separation of roles, and the growing community. It is our hypothesis that if we see a collaborative community on VOCA we are achieving our goal on Community Growth because the collaboration will foster growth, and if the community grows we are achieving our mission and on route towards our vision of a more resilient society based on transparent and accountable governance through inclusive digital participatory democracy processes.

Measuring Change through Outputs

The outputs are the essential element in allowing us to measure change. We have identified several metrics (available [here](#)).related to individual outputs that we will track and report on yearly to monitor change. We hope that this impact monitoring scheme can help us in amend and modify this ToC accordingly depending on the results we see.

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Outputs and Outcomes



Still curious?

If this document has spiked your interest, we are always looking to increase our network and build new partnerships. Please feel free to book a demo of voca [here](#) or reach out directly to our partnership team: guillaume@octree.ch