OpenBudgets.eu: Fighting Corruption with Fiscal Transparency

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Deliverable D7.2

Tool for influencing budget allocation

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Abstract: This document describes the participatory budgeting tool created for citizens to influence budget allocation as part of the OpenBudgets.eu project, as well as its development process.

History

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Executive Summary

Guided by the understanding of stakeholders' needs obtained in task 7.1, and documented in deliverable 7.1, 'Assessment Report', this deliverable describes the open source web application developed in order to match the stakeholders' user stories.

During the budget discussion phase (i.e. pre-approval), an initial analysis of existing tools and previous participatory experiences shows the need for a web platform where public administrations can create an online public budget consultation to gather citizens' comments and preferences over a concrete set of proposals. The web application has the following features:

- A user-friendly consultation builder, allowing public bodies to define a new consultation through the use of visual wizards.
- Online publishing of an interactive budget consultation form, as defined by the public body, where users can submit their budget preferences, suggestions and comments.
- Gathering and consolidation of citizens' responses, for further analysis and study by the public authority.
- Allow citizens to publish their feedback and/or proposed budget on their favourite social network, thus making it also visible to their network of peers.

After the budget has been approved, citizens need to be able to monitor its execution, and to provide feedback to the public administrations, either as comments or as a set of recommendations for the next budget period (e.g. NGO's could give feedback on what should the budget focus on for such organisations). That functionality, also incorporated in the application, is described in a separate deliverable, D7.3.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

PB	Participatory Budgeting
IT	Information Technologies

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

None included.

1 Introduction

The objective of WP7 is to facilitate and promote the engagement of citizens and other stakeholders in the pre and post budget decision-making process. To do so, stakeholders will be given means and tools to influence and give feedback on budget allocations. Public administrations will have the instruments to receive and effectively manage the feedback received, enabling greater degrees of active citizen involvement and participation.

In most cases budget preparation and approval is a closed-door process within administrations. Citizens and other stakeholders usually stay outside the process impeded by factors such as lack of resources to influence decisions, lack of understanding of the different budget concepts and line items, and ignorance of the approval process. On the other side, public administrations, especially at local and regional level, perceive participatory processes as high cost and difficult to manage experiments. Implementing tailor-made digital solutions in small and medium size cities/regions can be expensive and difficult to implement, particularly in an expenditure-reduction context.

This deliverable focuses on the tool created to address some of the problems identified by citizens and public administrations. The final aim is to enable real participatory experiences and decision-making processes, providing solutions that are easy to implement by all stakeholders involved, thus strengthening the democratic process. Three deliverables are closely related:

• D7.2 is a tool where citizens can express their budget allocation priorities during the budget approval process, along the lines and within the process defined by each administration concerned. This tool will fundamentally target municipalities.

• D7.3 is a tool where citizens can monitor budget transactions, auditing budget compromised vs. actual spending and giving feedback to the administrations.

• D7.4, the Educational resources for citizens, will provide online materials to understand i.e. the budget cycle, terms used or how to influence and monitor the budget.

Special attention will be given to:

• Ensuring transparency during the participation process, so every stakeholder can access information about the feedback sent and its effective impact in the decisions made.

• Increasing competences and capabilities, developing the necessary resources for the different participants to make informed decisions.

• Providing structured and valuable information to public administrations, avoiding fragmented or too broad feedback, which does not contribute to making decisions.

1.1 Solution approach

After having studied all the inputs gathered by our interviews and surveys we have steadily worked in the conceptualisation of a PB platform. The OpenBudgets PB platform is conceived to tackle the problem of a replicable and flexible PB process.

A significant variety of actors (e.g. administrations, citizens, social activists) are currently working on setting up digital and analogue participatory processes worldwide. The current situation is such that it prevents these actors from carrying out complete processes through just one platform, due to the increasing complexity of information, the diverse environments and the need of programming skills to visualize and communicate effectively budgetary information.

Despite the relevance of PB processes, and the increasing demand for related tools, we were not able to find –after an extensive investigation into PB processes in Spain and Europe– any replicable tool in the market. We aim to solve the problem through the iterative development of a customisable tool, specifically designed for all stakeholders involved in a PB process, which will allow to submit, analyse, discuss, filter, visualize, campaign, communicate and receive feedback in a PB process.

Following recent studies on PB processes, we have identified tools that invite users to work over the whole local budget, both on the revenue and expenditure sides, versus tools which enable users to choose among a list of possible budget allocations and investments. We opted for the latter, due to its more widespread adoption across Europe.

The proposed PB tool targets small and medium municipalities, since larger European cities such as Madrid, Paris or Barcelona are already running their own platforms that include or might soon include a PB process feature. Consul application, in Madrid or the PB platform from Paris are good examples of capital cities trying to lead this participatory stream in Europe by developing their own IT solutions, hence shifting the target of the OBEU PB platform to small and medium municipalities.

2 Development process

2.1 Wireframes

Brainstorming sessions were organised to kick-start the project, in order to develop a tool which would address most of our stakeholder's requirements, leveraging the lessons learned during our interview and survey process and through the research of existing solutions.
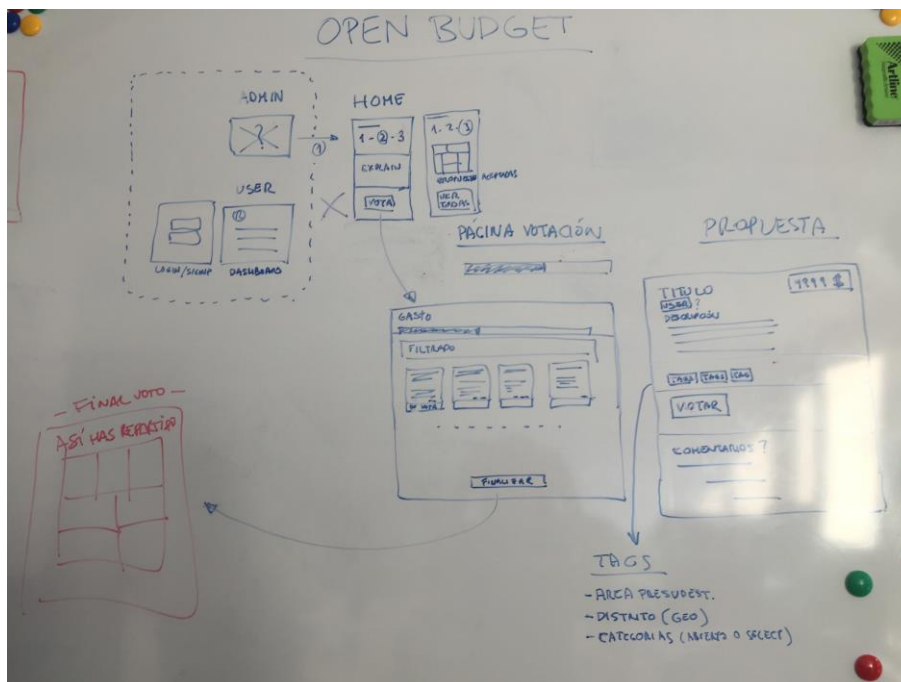

Figure 1: Brainstorming process

Based on user stories and our understanding from existing PB processes and tools, as described in D7.1, we created a set of wireframes, which we refined talking to public workers from public administrations potentially interested in setting up a PB process. (Since the administrations were all from Spain, the wireframes were created in Spanish.)
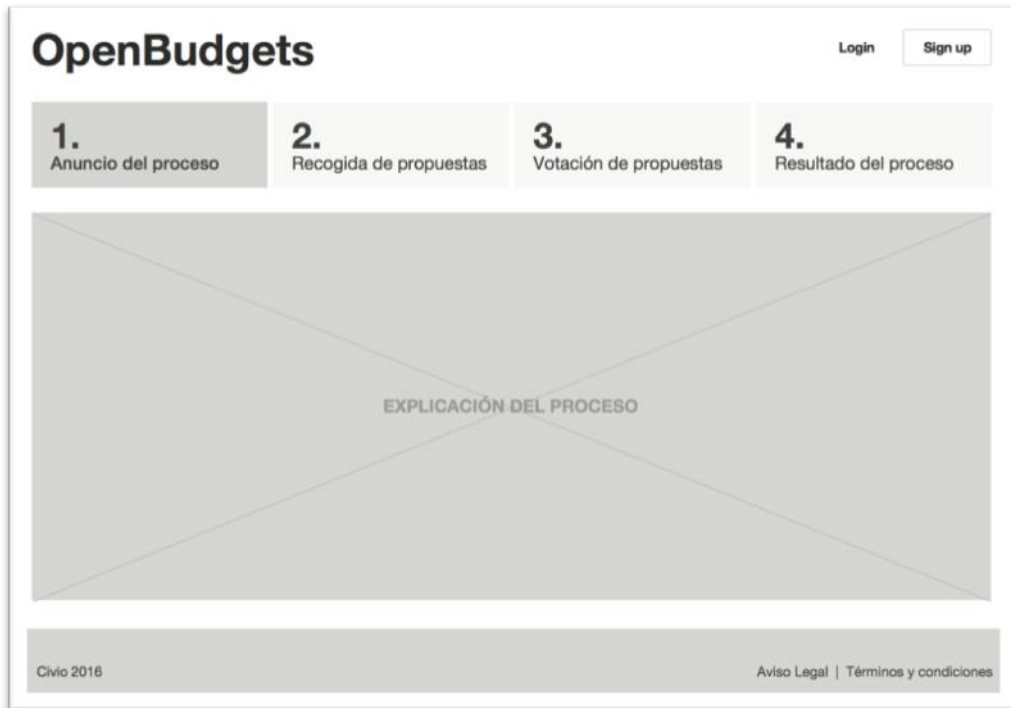
Figure 2: Wireframe of PB process start page

We believe a more visual approach will clearly differentiate our solution from existing solutions and gives further value to the platform. Therefore, we have included a small data visualization summary in the form of a treemap when users finalise their voting experience, helping them, in a very visual and accessible way, to better understand their chosen voting priorities.

Figure 3: Wireframe of accepted proposals page

Openbudgets.eu PB solution targets administrators and users without advanced technical skills and will be made available online (Software as a Service, SaaS), hence avoiding the need for users to download or install any special software. Users are able to upload

their own data (e.g. submitting or voting proposals, comments, feedback) and will be able to interact with data in a simple way. All in all, the application is intuitive and user cases are designed to require as few steps as possible.
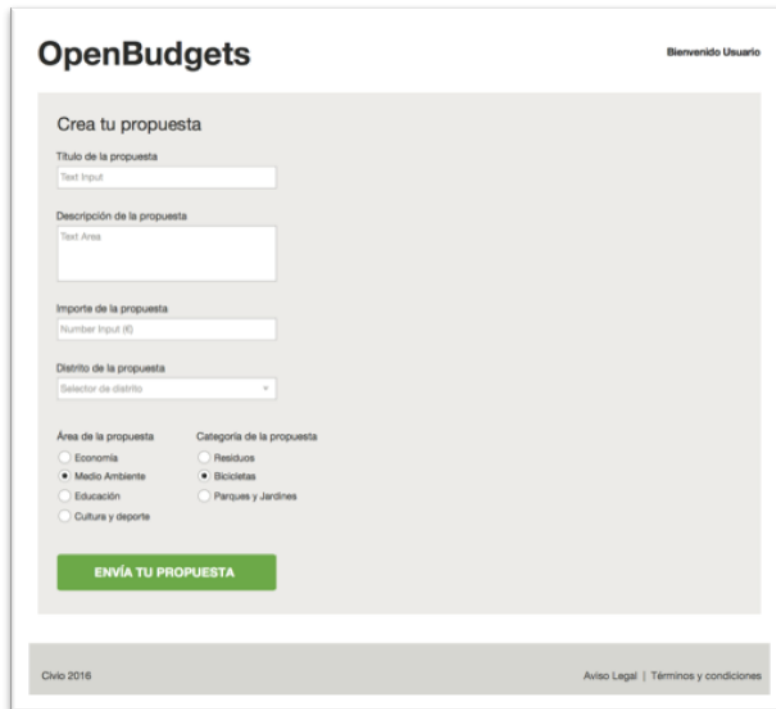

Figure 4: Wireframe of proposal creation page

The voting module of the tool is designed to easily guide and support all kinds of users when picking up their favourite proposals. Civio's experience in visualization has led the design of this module to generate a manageable interface for citizens from all ages.
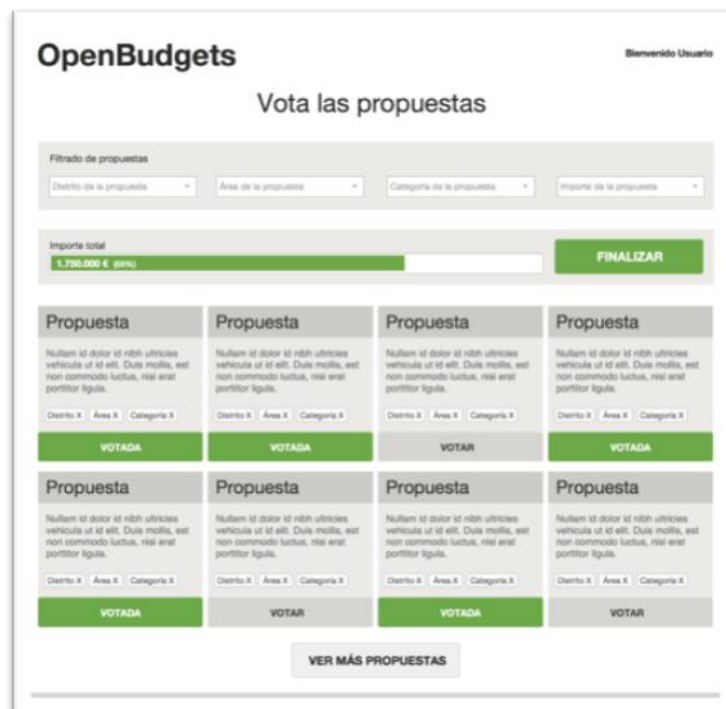

Figure 5: Wireframe of proposal selection page

Once proposals have been submitted, the users of the platform will have the opportunity to interact with the proposal writer and the municipality, building a community around the proposed actions and bringing people in the municipality together around different subjects. The aim is to create a real forum to create, discuss, interact and reach an agreement on public expenditure priorities.
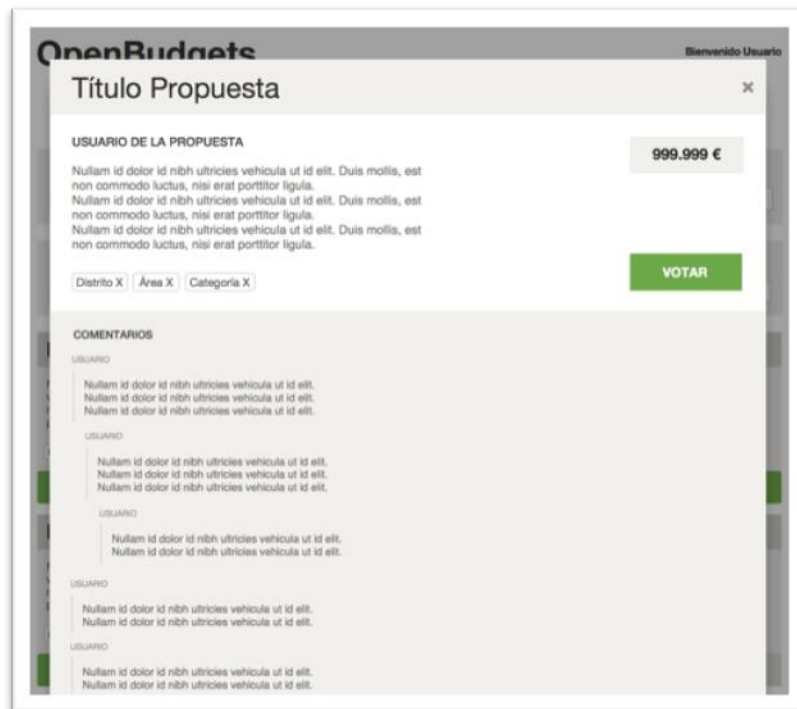

Figure 6: Wireframe of a proposal detailed page

2.2 Technology used

The OBEU PB tool is a responsive web application built with Ruby On Rails 5 using Bootstrap 4 as the CSS framework of choice, mixed with some of the visualization components of the D3.js JavaScript library and backed by Postgres 9.x in the data layer.

The OBEU PB tool has been conceived as a multi-tenant, on-demand, highly-modular application in the form of software as a service (SaaS), suitable for the requirements of a wide range of municipalities and easily connected with their existing systems.

2.3 Reuse

The development process is open and the code is hosted in a public GitHub repository (https://github.com/openbudgets/participatory-budgeting) with GNU Affero v3 license. Both project issues and public code contributions are managed within the GitHub repository with the built-in tools 'Issues' and 'Pull requests'.

3 Tool description

3.1 Homepage

Welcomes the user and shows the different steps of a PB process. Depending on the current stage of the process, users will access different functionalities, e.g., process description and awareness raising, voting, monitoring process.

The Administrator of the web is able to open/close any section, and to modify the contents displayed in each of them.

3.2 Log in

We use a password-less system, inspired by Medium, to simplify the user experience, avoiding users the need to create and store passwords.

We currently only ask for the user name, but the application is designed to be easily extended during the pilot phase in order to implement custom authentication mechanisms, e.g. validating against local census, if needed.

3.3 Voting

The voting page has been designed for simplicity and speed as an "All in one page", which gets updated dynamically based on user choices for a better user experience. It also features different mechanisms to organise the page according to the users' needs: the page has several ways of filtering proposals (e.g. by district, by amount or by the tags associated to the proposal).

The validation of the voting process is automatic. Voter's chosen options are validated both at the browser's and server's sides, so it is impossible for a user to allocate more budget than given by the municipality.

3.4 Results page

The user can see a visualization of the proposals she selected, together with the details of all of them. The treemap displayed by the platform enable users to understand where they have allocated the available budget, creating visual awareness of the decisions taken.

3.5 Monitoring

Once the voting process has finalised, users will be able to follow up on the proposals they have voted for. During the implementation of the proposals, users will be able to place questions and comments that will be received by the local representatives responsible of implementing the proposal. For further detail, please see deliverable D7.3.

Every proposal will have a different degree of completion. Statuses might vary depending on various factors, e.g. licenses needed to begin with the work, local departments involved and coordination, budget-lines approval, etc.

3.6 Admin

The Admin side of the tool will be restricted to the persons dedicated to control and govern the PB tool. Public administrators can, among other tasks, create different proposals and categories, or add several tags to better identify proposals.

4 Conclusion

Task T7.2's aim is to create an open-source tool for every public administration to use when consulting their citizens about how to allocate the budget.

The implementation of the tool in different environments and municipalities with different requirements is the next step. The application will be tested in 3 Spanish pilots, sharing best practices and lessons learnt across municipalities, and improving the tool for it to be replicable in bigger municipalities. We will incorporate the feedback gathered from these small municipalities and evolve the MVP as needed.

As a result, public administrations 1) will be able identify and publish the services/activities/issues they would like to consult with citizens and stakeholders 2) citizens and other stakeholders will be able to set their priorities and see their contributions in real time 3) public administrations will have access to participation rates,

citizens' responses and suggestions, in order to identify trends and patterns 4) citizens will be able to monitor budget execution and provide feedback. Implementation and dissemination activities will include workshops, trainings, technical advice and follow up. Dissemination activities will target stakeholders identified in Task 7.1 and will promote engagement and participation

5 References

There are no sources in the current document.