

# Civic monitoring of public policy: the case of the Monithon.it platform

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## ABSTRACT

European Policy can benefit from a more participatory approach during all phases of the policymaking process. Access to Open Government Data (OGD) on each individual project funded by the European Union (EU) can allow traditionally under-represented, informal organizations to exercise their voice in the use of public funding. In particular, the Monithon platform enables local communities to actively monitor the progress and the results of EU Cohesion Policy in Italy, based on the OGD from the national portal OpenCoesione.gov.it. The platform, also accessible through mobile devices, is a civic technology tool that, in some limited cases, has allowed local communities to communicate their feedback to local policy makers. We discuss implications from an Open Government Ecosystem perspective.

## Keywords

Open Government Data; citizen monitoring; civic technology; citizen participation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Institutions and policies of the European Union (EU) suffer from endemic problems of decreasing legitimacy and trust, with significant differences among member states [1].

In Italy, in particular, questions have been raised about the effectiveness of the European Cohesion Policy, the main EU policy in terms of budget, aimed at reducing socio-economic disparities among EU regions by fostering local development. While the economic literature has found mixed evidence on its impact on economic growth, according to a recent survey from Eurobarometer the majority of Italian citizens believes that Cohesion Policy has “no impact” or “negative impact” on socio-economic development. The perceived causes of these low levels of effectiveness can be mainly found in the policy implementation phase, as 41% of respondents believe that the policy “was not executed as expected”.

It has been argued that a more place-based and participatory approach in policy programming and implementation can help policymakers design development programs that are closer to the real needs of local communities [2]. In this view, citizens, program beneficiaries and local communities are considered as the experts of their local environments, willing to establish new connections with local administrators and policy makers, and to share their knowledge to improve policy effectiveness and, ultimately, democracy [3].

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This knowledge and expertise from the bottom-up can then be leveraged by regional and local authorities responsible for implementing EU funds on the ground in order to improve the quality of the interventions already in place or to select new projects and programs.

While the EU regulations require the authorities to include all relevant stakeholders in the main phases of the policy cycle, the participation of civil society organizations (CSOs), local NGOs and other informal organizations in actual policy decisions has been limited. Substantial input from stakeholders is usually considered only when it comes from established organizations already positioned within the “policy network” of EU policy, i.e. the network of public and private institutions interested in a particular policy domain and capable of influencing policy making [4]. In other words, the “usual suspects” often maintain influential positions in the complex, multi-level governance of EU funding, with limited opportunities for informal and underrepresented local institutions outside the policy network to substantially shaping the policymaking process [5].

We argue that access to new, publicly available information on policy implementation in the form of Open Government Data (OGD), combined with the use of civic technology tools to gather citizen input on policy progress and results can potentially enable informal organizations, local CSOs and individual citizens to enter the policy network and offer their knowledge and expertise to the policy makers responsible for the EU Cohesion Policy.

This position paper aims at sharing some preliminary reflections on how civic technology accessible via web or mobile applications can encourage citizen voice and facilitate the connection to policy makers responsible for Cohesion Policy.

In particular, through the case analysis of Monithon – a civic technology initiative that we developed with an informal group of Italian “civic hackers” – the paper aims at discussing the role of the civic technology tools in context of the broader Open Government Ecosystem of open data providers, local communities, intermediaries and policy makers.

## 2. TECHNOLOGY-POWERED CIVIC MONITORING OF PUBLIC POLICY

The idea of a more participatory democracy is conceived by many authors as complementary to traditional forms of representation. In particular, Schudson introduces a crucial move from “informed citizenship” to “monitorial citizenship” to justify the need for a strong, bottom-up oversight of the actions of the government and the other powerful actors by the citizens based on their specific knowledge, interests and abilities [6].

Civic monitoring of public policy can be defined as the systematic activity of control, verification and collection of evidence on the

progress and results of projects or programs funded by public resources. This activity, carried out by local communities, also includes the collection of feedback in terms of ideas and suggestions to improve the effectiveness of the policy.

Zuckerman [7] further develops these arguments in the context of civic media and civic technology. New technology-powered tools allow the collection of dispersed knowledge and expertise from citizens who are knowledgeable or skilled in particular areas. Interestingly, Zuckerman places the different forms of ICT-enabled citizen engagement in the continuum between “thin” and “thick” participation. While the former implies minimum effort (e.g. signing a petition), the latter can enable more sophisticated forms of engagement such as collective action or participatory budgeting. This idea is consistent with the notion of an “e-participation ladder”, where different types of citizens show different levels of engagement according to their time, interests, knowledge and skills [8]. An example of “thick” participation is “Promise Tracker”, an experimental project developed in Brazil by the Center for Civic Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The team “gathered community leaders and participatory councilors to identify pressing local issues, develop data collection surveys, gather information in the community and present collected data back to key stakeholders”<sup>1</sup>. On the opposite side of the spectrum, the same Center worked to create a prototype mobile application called “Action Path”. The app aims at leveraging “lightweight civics” with a crowdsourcing approach to lower the barriers for participation [9]. Action path relies on the dispersed knowledge and expertise of individual citizens – gathered through a location-based survey platform – to improve the quality of urban planning.

Both these examples show how technology can be potentially very effective in gathering useful information for policy makers with minimum or no collection costs. However, how these technologies are used in practice depends on the complex socio-technical characteristics of the context in which they are embedded. Open Government Ecosystems are socio-technical systems that can be useful to trace the dynamic relationships among different actors and among the same actors and technology. Users of civic monitoring technologies, in fact, are immersed in a complex web of relations with other relevant actors including – among others – public agencies, formal and informal institutions in the network of “policy influencers”, the media, local and national NGOs. These reciprocal influences are non-linear and dynamic in nature, including feedback loops, and heavily influenced by the characteristics of the specific socio-economic context [10] [11].

In the specific case of civic monitoring of public policy, we would like to focus on two main questions putting the use of civic technology in a broader context.

A first question is about how to obtain enough power and influence to channel the user-collected feedback on policy interventions to actual decision makers. The capacity to influence actual government decisions is critical in the assessment of ICT-powered tools for participation. Fox [12], for example, distinguishes between a “tactical” and a “strategic” approach. The first is focused on gathering and sharing information among users, and the second considers also the opportunity to influence “state capacity to respond to citizen voice”. According to Fox, both “voice” and “teeth” are necessary to achieve actual impact.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://promisetracker.org/>

A second, related question is about how different civil society actors interact with each other in the process of feedback creation, gathering and use. Different actors, in fact, can play different roles in the ecosystem, with some organizations acting as intermediaries (or *infomediaries*) between the citizens and the government [13]. For example, Fung et al. [14] have studied three cases of “social monitoring”, all based on the Ushahidi platform. Interestingly, they found that, while the citizens are the ones that created the information in the first place, the users of the platforms were mainly established NGOs, journalists and private companies, i.e. traditional users that were already part of the “policy network”.

### 3. MONITHON: A CIVIC MONITORING PLATFORM

This section takes into consideration Monithon, a civic technology tools used for the civic monitoring of EU Cohesion Policy in Italy.

#### 3.1 Open data for civic monitoring of EU Cohesion Policy

In 2012, the Italian government launched [OpenCoesione.gov.it](http://OpenCoesione.gov.it) (“Open Cohesion”), an open data portal publishing detailed information on each individual project financed by Cohesion Policy in Italy. The projects cover a wide range of public interventions, from the support of new businesses to the development of infrastructures in areas such as broadband or renewable energies. Currently, more than 960,000 projects worth 54.1 billion Euros are tracked on the portal, reporting data on the source of funding, financial progress, actors responsible for policy programming and implementation, project’s location and timing [11].

This high level of granularity allows local communities to follow the progress of the individual projects financed in their neighborhoods, with data updated every two months. This information, however, is not enough to find out whether the project is delivering its promises, since no data are published about, for example, underlying policy decisions, specific objectives and, more importantly, results.

#### 3.2 A tool for civic monitoring

Monithon, which means “civic monitoring marathon”, was created in 2013 during a hackathon organized by the Italian open data community called “Spaghetti Open Data”. Monithon’s goal is to encourage the civic monitoring of EU Cohesion Policy by local communities and policy beneficiaries, based on the open data available from the [OpenCoesione.gov.it](http://OpenCoesione.gov.it) portal. Monithon was founded as an informal group of citizens, composed of data journalists, activists, EU policy experts, “civic hackers”, developers and specialists in specific public policy fields such as cultural heritage.

While local communities on the ground conduct the actual monitoring activities, a central staff of three volunteers based in Rome is responsible for the development and maintenance of [Monithon.it](http://Monithon.it), an interactive platform similar to Ushahidi, where users can upload so-called “civic monitoring reports”. The reports share a common methodology, composed of a questionnaire and guidelines for data collection and field investigation. The central staff is also responsible for the verification and approval of the reports before publication.

Civic monitoring activities can include desk analysis such as the examination of available information on the funded projects; the collection of evidence on how the projects are progressing

through videos and photos; interviews with government actors and/or project beneficiaries; qualitative or quantitative analysis of the results; assessment of the project in terms of its strength, weaknesses, threats and opportunities.

In almost three years of activity Monithon evolved from a prototype mainly used by the members of the Italian open data community to a recognized initiative in the context of EU funding in Italy. Monithon – in partnership with OpenCoesione – was awarded with the “Silver award” at the Open Government Partnership Awards in 2014. More than 5,000 people have been involved in its activities, most of them being high-school students participating in “A Scuola di OpenCoesione” (Open Cohesion School) – a program launched by OpenCoesione in 2013 using the tools and the methodology developed by Monithon [15].

However, the impact on policymaking is still limited. Although in some cases Monithon users succeed in actively collaborating with policy makers – all political leaders or administrators from local governments, and mainly in the context of the Open Cohesion School program – in many cases the feedback was shared only within the community and obtained little or no response from the government.

### 3.3 Features of the application

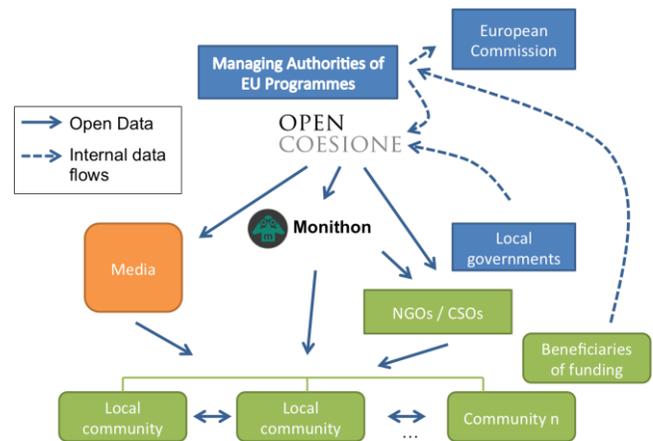
The web application, which from 2013 to 2014 was a Ushahidi deployment, from the end of 2014 has been based on the Django platform offering a set of functionalities to easily browse through the collected data. In order to minimize the errors in the data collection process, the application is connected with OpenCoesione.gov.it through a set of integration layers having the national Unique Project Code as primary key. Thanks to this feature, the user can select a project to monitor directly from the list of projects already included in the OpenCoesione portal, and updated every 2 months.

The collected information is structured through a set of report templates, which can vary depending on the projects’ type (e.g. large infrastructures vs. social innovation projects), reflecting the specific characteristics of each topic. Furthermore, for each report users can upload additional materials such as pictures or government documents, as well as links to videos, own visualizations, primary sources or news outlets. This can potentially enable a linked data analysis of the data collected on the individual projects, as an additional source for project evaluation.

The web application is also accessible via mobile device such as a smartphone or a tablet. However, a native mobile app, developed for different operating systems with a “mobile first” approach, could greatly facilitate the monitoring activities on the field. For example, it could help recognize previously geo-localized projects that are nearby the user’s location, as Action Path works. The development of such an app has been under way since the “EU Hackathon” 2015, when the Monithon team was selected by the European Commission to exchange knowledge and ideas with other similar initiatives from all around Europe.

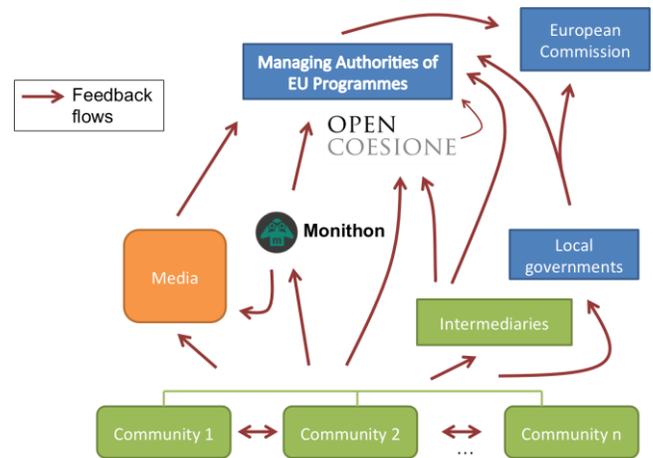
### 3.4 Monithon in the Cohesion Policy Open Government Ecosystem

Figure 1 and 2 represent the position of Monithon in the Open Government ecosystem of EU Cohesion Policy in Italy. The flows in the figures can be either real or just potential.



**Figure 1 - Internal and open data flows among actors in EU Cohesion Policy implementation in Italy**

Figure 1 shows the flows of data on funded projects (dotted lines) from the recipients (“beneficiaries” in the EU jargon) and local governments (responsible for policy implementation) to the managing authorities of EU programmes, which are responsible for the programming phase. The data are then released as open data through OpenCoesione, and used by the communities either directly or through intermediaries such as the media, local NGOs or the Monithon.it web application.



**Figure 2 - Feedback flows in civic monitoring of EU Cohesion Policy**

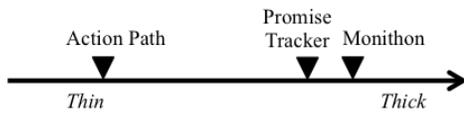
The feedback is then collected from local communities, and channeled to EU funds’ authorities – again – through a complex network of intermediaries, including OpenCoesione and local governments. Finally, feedback data can also reach the European Commission.

## 4. DISCUSSION

This section discusses the main questions raised in section 2 based on the evidence from the Monithon case.

### 4.1 Thin or thick participation?

Currently, Monithon can be interpreted as a tool for “thick” forms of participation [12]. Civic monitoring implies what Monithon users call “slow hacking”, a long process of study, analysis, learning, gathering and processing information from different sources.



**Figure 3 - Monithon compared to two MIT platforms**

This does not mean that more “lightweight” forms of participation are not possible in the future. Future app development goes in this direction, with citizens encouraged to use their smartphones to geo-localize the projects and upload real-time photos and videos that will then be integrated in a complete civic monitoring report.

## 4.2 Who is using Monithon and how is it interacting with other CSOs?

A preliminary analysis of Monithon users shows that most of the groups engaged in civic monitoring are informal and traditionally unrepresented organizations in the EU policy network. About 60% of the reports are investigations from high schools supported by the “Europe Direct Centers” of the European Commission and by local NGOs. Other communities are created ad-hoc for citizen monitoring purposes, and are composed of local “teams” with different knowledge and skills. These communities, for example, are active in Turin and in the Basilicata region. Some reports are developed with the active support of national NGOs that were able to engage local activists on the ground. This is the case of Action Aid Italy or the main Italian anti-mafia association called Libera.

Unlike the Ushahidi deployments studied by Fung et al [14], Monithon users are not different from the people that have collected the data in the first place. Local communities use their own reports to directly connect to local policy makers demanding change or offering collaboration.

## 4.3 How far are we from influencing policymaking?

Evidence from the case analysis suggests that a “tactical” approach still prevails among the Monithon communities. Most of the connections to other actors in the ecosystem are created with the open data provider and other civil society actors. In particular, the strong partnership with OpenCoesione appears to be a good strategy to obtain legitimacy and reputation in the policy network. In addition, the alliances already established with other NGOs at the national and local level can be potentially leveraged to obtain more power and influence towards the most established actors in the EU policy network.

Still, there are a few documented cases of actual collaboration between Monithon users and local governments implementing EU policy, while managing authorities responsible for the programming phase are almost never involved.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The Monithon case showed how civic technology tools, like all kinds of technology, need to be placed in the complex network of relations and dynamic influences characterizing socio-technical systems. In particular, the information flows from the government in the form of OGD can greatly influence the capacity of local communities to meaningfully engage with EU public policy. Even more importantly, the feedback collected from the bottom-up through civic technology needs to be properly channeled to actual decisionmakers through the same complex network. A better

understanding of this ecosystem can benefit not only the Monithon users – mostly informal communities outside the policy network of the “usual suspects”, and struggling to make their voice heard – but also the government in designing more participatory and effective public policies.

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